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## The Substance Argument of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Michael Morris

In Morris (2008) I presented in outline a new interpretation of the famous 'substance argument' in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922). The account I presented there gave a distinctive view of Wittgenstein's main concerns in the argument, but did not explain in detail how the argument works: how its steps are to be found in the text, and how it concludes. I remain convinced that the interpretation I proposed correctly identifies the main concerns which lie behind the argument. I return to the argument here in order to elaborate in fuller detail the relation between those concerns and the actual course of the text.

# The Substance Argument of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

## A Fixed-Form Interpretation

Michael Morris

### 1. Introduction

In Morris (2008) I presented in outline a new interpretation of the famous 'substance argument' in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922). The account I presented there gave a distinctive view of Wittgenstein's main concerns in the argument, but did not explain in detail how the argument works: how its steps are to be found in the text, and how it concludes. I remain convinced that the interpretation I proposed correctly identifies the main concerns which lie behind the argument. I return to the argument here in order to elaborate in fuller detail the relation between those concerns and the actual course of the text.

For reasons which will emerge shortly, I call any interpretation which shares my view of the main concerns of the substance argument a *fixed-form interpretation*. My aim here is just to present the idea of a fixed-form interpretation in enough detail for it to be considered properly as a way of approaching this famously puzzling piece of text: I will present the general motivation for adopting a fixed-form interpretation; I will offer a detailed breakdown of the argument as it might go on such an interpretation; and I will provide a way of tying that breakdown of the argument to the actual words of the text. I will also meet a particular kind of interpretative objection which a fixed-form interpretation is likely to face. But I will not consider in detail any interpretation of the argument which has a radically different view of its main aim: I considered several of the more

prominent alternatives in the Appendix in Morris (2008), and the objections I made there still seem to me to be good.

### 2. The Idea of a Fixed-Form Interpretation

The substance argument is presented in these two brief remarks:<sup>1</sup>

2.0211 If [A] the world had no substance, then [B] whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

2.0212 [C] It would then be impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

I have here marked the three crucial sentences in this argument [A], [B], and [C].

The key to the substance argument must be to understand what the point of claiming that the world has substance might be. This will also give us an understanding of sentence [A]. The notion of substance is introduced in the first of a sequence of remarks which are comments on 2.02. The key sequence here consists of those comments on 2.02 which are given four-digit remark numbers. (We need to recall here that sequences of remarks are to be traced in line with Wittgenstein's explanation of his numbering system (Wittgenstein 1922, 31n), rather than just by looking at what comes next in the printed text.) Here they are, headed by 2.02 itself:

2.02 The object is simple.

2.021 Objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound.

2.022 It is clear that however different from the real one an imagined world may be, it must have something—a form—in common with the real world.

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<sup>1</sup>I continue to use here the Ogden translation.

- 2.023 This fixed form consists of the objects.
- 2.024 Substance exists independently of what is the case.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.025 It is form and content.
- 2.026 Only if there are objects can there be a fixed form of the world.
- 2.027 The fixed, the existent and the object are one.

When this sequence of remarks is laid out like this, I think it is clear that the point of the notion of substance is bound up with the following *fixed-form* claim:<sup>3</sup>

(FF) There must be a fixed form which is common to all possible worlds.

And substance itself—what is formed by the objects—is brought in because form is held to depend on objects (2.026); that might be expressed in this claim:

(FO) There can only be a fixed form common to all possible worlds if there are objects common to all possible worlds.

(FO)—that is, 2.026—provides us with a reason, given (FF), for believing 2.02, that objects are simple. The reason is that compound objects would not be common to all possible worlds: to think of something as compound is to make intelligible its

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin Mulligan has pointed out in conversation that ‘exist’ is a controversial translation of ‘bestehen’ in this context.

<sup>3</sup>The notion of substance of course has an ancient history, tracing back through various translations to Aristotle. Wittgenstein’s use is uniform with Kant’s: in the First Analogy in Kant (1997), Kant effectively defines substance (‘der Substanz’, as in the *Tractatus*) as ‘that which persists’ (Kant 1997, A182/B224), and the First Analogy is an argument that there must be such a thing. Note that in the *Tractatus*, ‘substance’ is used as something like a mass term, for something ‘formed by objects’; Wittgenstein does not speak of substances.

being uncompounded, leaving just its component parts, and therefore to make intelligible worlds in which that compound thing does not exist. Are we to suppose that 2.026 provides us with a different reason for 2.02 from the one offered explicitly in 2.021—that objects form the substance of the world? It seems implausible: the natural interpretation is surely that the core reason is just the same; it is only that it is put differently in the different places.

If that is right, then the overall point of the larger passage to which the substance argument belongs must be to argue for the conjunction of (FF) and (FO), that there are objects which sustain a fixed form common to all possible worlds. But we have seen that (FO) is claimed in 2.026. So it is natural to think that the point of the substance argument itself—the particular passage consisting of 2.0211 and 2.0212—is just to argue for (FF). (I take (FO) to depend on different considerations, and to need another kind of justification.<sup>4</sup>)

An interpretation of the substance argument which takes it to have this point is what I call a *fixed-form* interpretation. The really hard challenge for any fixed-form interpretation is to work out in detail how 2.0211 and 2.0212 could contain an argument for (FF). I will turn to that in a moment, but first I will note that if you understand the sequence of four-digit-numbered remarks 2.021–2.027 as revealing the point of the substance argument, you will not think its point is given by a remark which precedes the argument in the text:

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<sup>4</sup>In Morris (2008, 48) I suggest that it can be traced back to problems with Russell’s account of form; there is some counterpart to 2.026, expressed at the level of language, at Wittgenstein (1979, 23):

The logical form of the proposition must already be given by the forms of its component parts.

2.0201 Every statement about complexes can be analysed into a statement about their constituent parts, and into those propositions which completely describe the complexes.

If you understand the sequence of four-digit-numbered remarks 2.021–2.027 as I do, you will regard 2.0201 as a distraction from the point of the substance argument—as indeed its number suggests, given the principle of Wittgenstein’s numbering system. What is the point of 2.0201, then? Surely just this: to explain how ‘complexes’ can in a way be spoken of, even if what has just been asserted in 2.02—that all objects are simple—is true, and (as will turn out when we get on to the theory of language) all names are names of objects. That is exactly what 2.0201 seems to be doing anyway: 2.0201 is most naturally read, not as being part of the argument which follows, but simply as explaining how there can be expressions which look like names, but which do not name simple objects. (There are, in any case, serious difficulties with the obvious ways of trying to understand the substance argument as one whose point is given by 2.0201, as I argue in Morris 2008, Appendix.)

How then, can we understand 2.0211 and 2.0212 on a fixed-form interpretation? A key remark here is the very next one after our sequence of four-digit-numbered remarks:

2.0271 The object is the fixed, the existent; the configuration is the changing, the variable.

In the context of this stretch of text, ‘fixed’ does not mean constant across *time*; instead it means constant across possible worlds. Correspondingly, ‘changing’ and ‘variable’ do not mean changing and variable in time, but changing and variable across possible worlds. Objects are what is constant across all possible worlds; possible worlds differ from one another only in how those objects are configured. And of course, even if the actual configurations of objects vary from world to world, the

possibilities of combination are written into the objects themselves:

2.0123 If I know an object, then I also know all the possibilities of its occurrence in atomic facts.  
(Every such possibility must lie in the nature of the object.)

A new possibility cannot subsequently be found.

Indeed, this is the point of the notion of form, as Wittgenstein uses it—as he explains immediately before claiming that objects are simple:

2.0141 The possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts is the form of the object.

Two things become clear from this. First, there is a point which we might understand as the rationale for (FO) (that is, 2.026), given Wittgenstein’s understanding of form:

(PO) Every possibility is a possible combination of objects.

And secondly, it is clear that the fixed-form claim (FF) means just this:

(NP) Every possibility is a necessary possibility.

That is, if something is possible, it is not contingent that it is possible. (PO) and (NP) can be used to provide the basis of a fixed-form interpretation of the substance argument and the passage which surrounds it.

### 3. Interpreting the Key Propositions

There are three key propositions in the substance argument proper. Reformulated to the present tense and the indicative, they are:

[A] The world has no substance;

[B] Whether a proposition has sense depends on whether another proposition is true;

[C] It is impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

The argument is supposed to work by *reductio*: [C] is absurd; that shows [B] to be false; and that shows [A] to be false.

The fixed-form interpretation of the point of the substance argument proper—the short passage consisting of 2.0211 and 2.0212—takes it to be designed to show that (NP) is true. So [A] should be the negation of (NP). So let us take its core to be given by this reformulation:

[A\*] It is not the case that every possibility is a necessary possibility.

That is: at least some possibilities are contingent possibilities—they might not have been possible.

There is a remark in Wittgenstein (1979, 14) which now seems relevant:

A statement cannot be concerned with the logical structure of the world, for in order for a statement to be possible at all, in order for a proposition to be CAPABLE of making SENSE, the world must already have just the logical structure that it has. The logic of the world is prior to all truth and falsehood.

This looks as if it links something like the denial of [A] of our argument—‘The logic of the world is prior to all truth and falsehood’—with something like [C] of our argument—‘in order for a statement to be possible at all’. What we need is to supply the intermediate step—what [B] of our argument is supposed to provide, according to the fixed-form interpretation.

If [B] is to have any bearing on the question whether some possibilities are contingent, it must itself have something to do with contingency. A simple reformulation then suggests itself:

[B†] Whether a proposition has sense *is contingent* upon whether another proposition is true.<sup>5</sup>

There might be an immediate worry about this reformulation. [B†] is meant to capture the meaning of [B], and [B] is something which Wittgenstein wants to deny, in the course of arguing against [A] by *reductio*. But we might think that [B†] was just obviously true; and in particular, that it was just obvious that propositions have sense only contingently. After all, it looks as if it is contingent that any objects at all are assigned to a given set of names as their meanings; and it looks (at least in advance of the full working out of the *Tractatus*<sup>6</sup>) as if there could be a proposition which stated that *these* objects have been assigned to *these* names as their meanings.

The first thing to note is that if this worry were genuine, its central core would apply equally to the original [B]: an assignment of objects to names does have to be made, and it looks—at first sight, at least—as if such an assignment can always be described. In the light of that, I suggest that ‘has sense’ here is given a slightly unusual, restricted interpretation: having sense should be taken to be *being syntactically possible*, so that a proposition’s having sense is its being a possible combination of symbols. Although this understanding of ‘sense’ (German ‘Sinn’) is eccentric—and eccentric, of course, in the *Tractatus* as much as elsewhere—it may be justified by something Wittgenstein wrote to Ogden about the translation of 3.326 (Wittgenstein 1973, 59).

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<sup>5</sup>One of the chief defects of the presentation in Morris (2008) was that I did not make clear there that this is how I was understanding sentence [B] of the argument. Both Richard Gaskin and Leo Cheung made the otherwise reasonable assumption that (1) in the text was an instance of [B]. Kevin Mulligan has questioned whether [B†] really introduces the issue of contingency more obviously than [B] itself does. This is largely an issue of the natural ways of reading [B] and [B†]: I here stipulate that [B†] is to be read as explicitly involving the issue of contingency, whether or not [B] does.

<sup>6</sup>And in fact, I think, anyway: I do not myself think that specific statements of which objects are assigned to which names are ruled out in the *Tractatus*.

Here is the remark itself, in Ogden's translation:

3.326 In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant [*sinnvollen*] use.

And here is Wittgenstein's comment to Ogden:

I think 'significant' is alright here. The meaning of this prop is: that in order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must look at how this sign is *used* significantly in propositions. I.e., we must observe how the sign is used in accordance with the laws of logical syntax. Thus 'significant' here means as much as 'syntactically correct'.

That is exactly how I suggest we understand the notion of having sense in 2.0211. It is clear that on Wittgenstein's view a proposition can have sense, on this understanding of 'sense', even if no meaning has been assigned to its constituent names. This is how Wittgenstein insists that we should understand the rogue proposition 'Socrates is identical', in 5.4733:

"Socrates is identical" means nothing because there is no property which is called "identical". The proposition is senseless because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself impermissible.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, here in 5.4733, as elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein uses 'sense' ('Sinn') itself and its cognates in such a way that having sense is a matter of objects being assigned to names, and 'sense' does not here have the narrow syntactical meaning which I am suggesting it has in 2.0211. But this is not in itself an argument against interpreting 'sense' in that narrow syntactical way in 2.0211, since, as we have seen, Wittgenstein himself interprets the term in just that narrow way in his understanding of 3.326.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Of course, the translation of 'unsinnig' as *senseless* here is famously controversial. Nothing in my argument depends on the point, however.

<sup>8</sup>I think it is in general a mistake to think of Wittgenstein as using words

If we understand having sense in 2.0211 in the way suggested, and accept that a proposition can have sense, on this understanding of the notion, even when meaning has not been assigned to its constituent names, the obvious worry about [B+] lapses: it is not just obvious that propositions have sense contingently. Even so, the exact implications of the idea of one proposition's sense being *contingent upon* another proposition's truth are not easy to spell out. It looks plausible to reformulate [B+] as involving a conjunctive condition, as follows:

[B\*] A proposition *P* is such that (i) *P* has sense only if another proposition is true; and (ii) that other proposition is contingent.

The importance of both conjuncts of [B\*] is worth emphasizing. Some might be tempted to read [B] ('Whether a proposition has sense depends on whether another proposition is true') as meaning no more than is expressed by (i), the first conjunct of [B\*], but this would break the connection between the argument and issues of contingency, and so would prevent [B] contributing to an argument of the kind which the fixed-form interpretation finds in 2.0211–2.0212.<sup>9</sup> One more point about the formulation of [B\*] should be noted: strictly speaking, it can be read either as a universal generalization ('Every proposition *P*') or as an existential generalization ('Some proposition *P*'). The ambiguity is more explicit in [B\*] than in [B] itself, but it can be read in

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in the *Tractatus* as if they were technical terms, always with the same clearly defined meaning: I think this ignores the literary and pedagogical character of the work. But that is a larger issue than can be pursued here.

<sup>9</sup>I emphasize this point here, because it was not emphasized enough in Morris (2008). Some have assumed, in effect, that the first conjunct, (i), of [B\*] on its own would express what is meant by [B]. Applying this assumption to the interpretation of the argument presented in Morris (2008) quickly makes a nonsense of that interpretation. I hope that once it is clear that I take [B] to be captured by the whole of [B\*], and not just by its first conjunct, people will not dismiss the interpretation so quickly.

[B] too. (I suspect Wittgenstein would have thought that if the existential generalization were true, the universal generalization would be true too: that is, all propositions are alike in this respect.) I have left the ambiguity in the formulation, but what the argument needs is the existential form: [B\*] is a spelling out of the consequences of [A]; since [A] is itself the negation of a universal generalization, it is itself equivalent to an existential generalization. I will therefore be treating [B\*] as an existential generalization from now on.

So much for the understanding we need of [A] and [B] for a fixed-form interpretation of the argument. Finally, we might consider the unusual form of [C] of our argument. It differs from the formulation in the *Notebooks* passage I have quoted precisely in introducing the notion of a picture, a *Bild*. The picture theory has not yet been stated at this point in the *Tractatus*, but just as the whole shape of the metaphysics of the 1s and early 2s is determined by the picture theory, so it is natural to take the use of the notion of a picture in 2.0212 as an anticipatory reference to that theory: indeed, there is no other explanation of the introduction of the notion of a picture here. We should then expect the argument for point [C] to make essential use of the picture theory, and it will be a desideratum of any interpretation that it represents the argument as doing that.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. The Core of the Argument

Bearing all that in mind, we can offer the beginning of a reconstruction of a line of argument which looks broadly Wittgensteinian in spirit, and which promises to get us to (NP) by means of a *reductio* which is at least close to what we find in 2.0211–2.0212.

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<sup>10</sup>I noted in Morris (2008) that a number of alternative interpretations of the substance argument fail to meet this desideratum.

For [A\*] we need to imagine a possibility which might be thought to be only contingently possible. (PO) tells us that this will be a possible combination of objects. Let us choose one, arbitrarily—*abcde*. According to the picture theory of the *Tractatus*, this is just what might be represented by an elementary sentence. So we can write it down using an elementary sentence:

(P1) *abcde*.

The picture theory of the *Tractatus* requires two things to be true for an elementary sentence to have sense (in the ordinary sense of ‘sense’, rather than the restricted notion I am reading into 2.0211):

- (a) Its elements (names) must be correlated with objects;
- (b) It must be possible for the objects correlated with the elements of the sentence to be combined in the same way as the elements of the sentence are combined.

Of these two conditions, it is (b) that particularly concerns us here, since it is this which is relevant to the issue of whether the symbols in a sentence form a syntactically possible combination. (Indeed, given the way we are understanding the notion of sense which is relevant to the argument of 2.0211–2.0212, the importance of (a) is just that it takes us to a particular, arbitrarily chosen, combinatorial possibility in reality.)

Both condition (a) and condition (b) were presumed to be met when we set up our example and wrote down the sentence (P1). And if they were met, then this sentence must be true:

(P2) It is possible that *abcde*.

But that commitment of the picture theory I have just formulated as requiring (b) to be true seems to require this to be true:

(1) (P1) has sense only if (P2) is true.<sup>11</sup>

Recall that on the interpretation of ‘has sense’ which we adopted in the last section, (1) means: (P1) is a syntactically possible combination of symbols only if (P2) is true. That is to say, ‘*abcde*’ is a possible combination of symbols only if the correlative combination of objects, *that abcde*, is a possible combination of objects. Of course, that *that abcde* is the correlative combination of objects requires (P1) to have sense in something like the ordinary interpretation of ‘sense’. But given that *that abcde* is the correlative combination of objects, (1) is still true even if ‘has sense’ is interpreted in the narrowly syntactic way. And that (1) is true on this narrow syntactic interpretation seems an immediate consequence of the core assumption of the picture theory, that the form of language is the same as the form of reality—or, in other words, that the possible combinations of names are the same as the possible combinations of objects.

In order to test [A\*] (‘It is not the case that every possibility is a necessary possibility’), we needed an example of a possibility that we might take to be a contingent possibility, and we arbitrarily chose the possibility represented in (P1) for that purpose. So suppose, for *reductio*, that that possibility is indeed a contingent possibility. That means that this is true:

(2) (P2) is contingent.

If we put (1) and (2) together, we get this:

[B\*1] (1) (P1) has sense only if (P2) is true; and (2) (P2) is contingent.

And [B\*1], of course, is an instance of [B\*]. That is, we have found a proposition—(P1)—whose having sense is *contingent upon* whether another proposition—(P2)—is true, on the inter-

<sup>11</sup>Note that I do not take (1) to be an expression of (an instance of) [B] in 2.0211. It is rather an expression just of [B\*i] (1).

pretation of ‘contingent upon’ which is enshrined in [B\*]. (And, of course, this in turn was the interpretation of ‘depends on’ in [B] which is needed for a fixed-form interpretation of the whole argument.)

If that is right, we have here a line of reasoning which explains the link between [A\*] and [B\*], and hence—assuming that the fixed-form interpretation is broadly right—the link between [A] and [B]. On supposing some possibility to be contingent, we have been led to a sentence whose having sense is contingent upon another sentence’s being true. That is, we have explained how Wittgenstein might, on the basis of the picture theory, have written 2.0211.

And we can now make at least the first move in showing how [B\*i] itself might be seen to be problematic, if we accept the picture theory. The picture theory commits us to (1), and two further considerations of a generally Wittgensteinian character imply that if (1) is true, (P2) cannot be contingent. The first further consideration is a reflection on the semantics of embedded sentences. If we actually look at (P2) we see that the sentence ‘*abcde*’ occurs within it—and in its own right, and not merely quoted. So it seems clear that (P2) cannot have sense if this integral part of it has no sense. That is, it seems we have to accept this:

(3) (P2) has sense only if (P1) has sense.

The reasoning here is exactly in line with the objection Wittgenstein makes to Russell’s theory of judgement:

5.5422 The correct explanation of the form of the proposition “A judges *p*” must show that it is impossible to judge a nonsense. (Russell’s theory does not satisfy this condition.)

But from (1) and (3), we can derive this:

(4) (P2) has sense only if (P2) is true.

At this point the second further consideration comes into play. This is the following plausible-seeming principle about contingency:

(CP) If a sentence is contingent, it cannot only have sense if it is true.

(CP) is, in fact, questionable. There is an obvious class of *a priori* truths which consists of sentences which cannot have sense without being true;<sup>12</sup> it is therefore natural to think that (CP) is only plausible if there cannot be contingent *a priori* truths—something we now generally doubt. But it used to be widely accepted that there cannot be contingent *a priori* truths, and there is some reason to think that Wittgenstein himself accepted that at the time of the *Tractatus*. Of course, if we accept (CP), then it follows from (4) that (P2) cannot be contingent. Since the possibility in question—that *abcde*—was arbitrarily chosen, this means that no possibility can be a contingent possibility. And that, of course, is what we wanted to show, according to the fixed-form interpretation.

## 5. The Conclusion of the Argument

What we have, then, is a line of argument which takes us from Wittgensteinian premises to the conclusion that no possibility can be a contingent possibility. (This is, in effect, an expanded

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<sup>12</sup>It is arguable that there are sentences which are not *a priori* which can only have sense if they are true. Suppose we think (i) that proper names only have sense if their referents exist, and (ii) that some proper names refer to things whose existence we cannot know *a priori*. If we accept both (i) and (ii), and 'N' is a proper name of the relevant kind, then we will have to accept that 'N exists' is a sentence which can only have sense if it is true, but will not be *a priori*. This does not affect the point of the text, however, since the obvious examples of sentences which can only have sense if they are true are *a priori*, and it is in any case unclear that Wittgenstein would have accepted both (i) and (ii). (I am grateful to Corine Besson for raising this issue.)

and clarified version of what is to be found in Morris 2008.) What is not so clear (what was left unclear in Morris 2008) is exactly how this relates to the text of 2.0211–2.0212. In particular, it is not clear exactly how it is that the *reductio* is turned by means of this claim:

[C] It is impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

To begin with, it may be helpful to summarize the key points of the last section. What we found there is that the following claims form an inconsistent set:

- (1) (P1) has sense only if (P2) is true.
- (2) (P2) is contingent.
- (3) (P2) has sense only if (P1) has sense.
- (CP) If a sentence is contingent, it cannot only have sense if it is true.

(1) follows from the picture theory. (3) and (CP) follow from considerations which it is independently plausible to attribute to Wittgenstein. (2) is, in effect, an arbitrarily chosen instance of:

[A\*] It is not the case that every possibility is a necessary possibility,

since [A\*] is equivalent to:

[A\*\*] At least one possibility is a contingent possibility.

In the spirit of the fixed-form interpretation which the surrounding text strongly suggests, [A\*]—that is, in effect, [A\*\*]—is the heart of this key proposition:

[A] The world has no substance.

(1) and (2) together form an instance of:

[B\*] A proposition *P* is such that (i) if *P* has sense only if another proposition is true; and (ii) that other proposition is contingent.

And this is the fixed-form interpretation's version of this key proposition:

[B] Whether a proposition has sense depends on whether another proposition is true.

(2) is what needs to be rejected in the *reductio*.

To bring [C] to bear on this, we need to hold (3) and (CP) constant and beyond question, as things which follow from quite general considerations to which Wittgenstein seems to be committed. Given that (1), (2), (3), and (CP) form an inconsistent set, this means that we can only accept (2) if we reject (1). But (1) follows straightforwardly from the picture theory, so rejecting (1) means rejecting the picture theory. What we need to do is make that fact the core of the problem which [C] raises. The simplest thing would just be to take [C] as pointing out that the hypothesis that some possibilities are contingent possibilities is incompatible with the picture theory. This would make [C], in effect, equivalent to this:

[C\*1] The picture theory is false.

And that would mean that what is taken to be obviously objectionable in [C] is not—or not directly—the impossibility of saying anything, but the rejection of the picture theory.

That seems to me not a very plausible reading of [C], but we can take the same materials in a different way to give us something which fits the text better. Understanding [C] as [C\*1] involves recognizing that, with background assumptions held constant, the idea that some possibilities are contingent is incompatible with the picture theory, and deciding in favour of the picture theory. We might see this as setting one philosoph-

ical theory against another, and that might seem to give us a rather weak way of rejecting the idea of contingent possibilities. But things would only seem this way to Wittgenstein if he thought of the picture theory as we think of it—as a *theory*. But what if he did not think of it as a theory at all? What if he did not think of it as just one explanation among others of the possibility of representing the world, but the obvious necessary truth of what is required for representation? In that case, bearing in mind that '*abcde*' was chosen quite arbitrarily, he will be committed to this:

(P) If sentences are to be capable of picturing reality at all, then (1) is true.

Against this background, the rejection of (1) would lead us to deny that sentences can picture reality at all. And that would then be precisely what is claimed by [C]. In effect, [C] would mean this:

[C\*2] It is impossible for sentences to picture reality at all.

And that really does seem close to what [C] actually says.

Moreover, I think it is clear that Wittgenstein did not think of the picture theory as a theory. At least, it seems clear that he did not think of his conception of *pictures*—*Bilder*—as a theory: he seems to have thought that it was obvious that this is how pictures or models work; if he thought the *Tractatus* involved a theory at all, the theory was just that sentences work in the way that pictures or models obviously work.

## 6. A Challenge

Here is the position, then. By adopting the general approach of a fixed-form interpretation, we are able to make reasonable sense of the link between [A] and [B], and therefore of 2.0211. And we have just seen how [C] can be understood, within a fixed-

form interpretation, as providing the decisive step for a *reductio*. What I want to look at now is a worry that people might have about the argument I have, in effect, attributed to Wittgenstein.

The worry is that some of the moves which have to be attributed to Wittgenstein on any fixed-form interpretation are likely to seem out of character with Wittgenstein, as he appears in the *Tractatus*. Chief among these will be this step which was key to the working out of the core of the argument:

(1) (P1) has sense only if (P2) is true.

The problem is that it may well seem wholly un-Wittgensteinian to count (P2)—‘It is possible that *abcde*’—as a *proposition* which might be *true*.<sup>13</sup> But any fixed-form interpretation is likely to have to do something like that.

I think the worry seems particularly pressing here because one difficulty—that of (P2) being a proposition which might be true—is taken out of context. So let us put it into context: this will enable us to turn the worry into a precise challenge to my interpretation, which we can then deal with.

The difficulty over (P2) arises from the fact that it seems to say something about possibility, and it seems to be the view of the *Tractatus* that there can be no true propositions about possibility. (Whether this is all or merely part of the difficulty with the idea of philosophical propositions is something which can be set on one side here.) As we have seen, Wittgenstein thinks of possibility and necessity in terms of form, so the problem with the idea of true propositions about possibility can be traced back to the difficulty of saying anything about form.

The difficulty is presented in its most general version, for the case of pictures or models in general, in the following passage:

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<sup>13</sup>This point has been made both by Michael Potter in his (2009), and by Leo Cheung in correspondence. It was also pressed by José Zalabardo at the workshop in Fribourg at which I presented an earlier version of this paper.

2.172 The picture, however, cannot depict its form of depiction; it shows it forth.

2.173 The picture presents its object from without (its standpoint is its form of representation), therefore the picture presents its object rightly or falsely.

2.174 But the picture cannot place itself outside of its form of representation.

This passage contains hints towards an argument for the conclusion that no picture can depict its own form.<sup>14</sup> The same argument is then applied to the case of propositions in the following passage:

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.

To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world.

The key to the argument, in both the general and the particular version, is the idea of a picture occupying a place ‘outside’ what it represents. I have suggested (Morris 2008, 133) that what it is for a picture to occupy a place ‘outside’ what it represents is for its being a picture to be independent of whether it represents things correctly or incorrectly. This means that it cannot represent its own form, and also, because pictures have to have the same form as any reality they can represent, that it cannot represent the form of reality. It follows from this that there can be no such picture as this:

(P2) It is possible that *abcde*.

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<sup>14</sup>I offer an account of this argument in Morris (2008, 131–35).

According to the account I have offered, however, the picture theory of language is committed to this:

(1) (P<sub>1</sub>) has sense only if (P<sub>2</sub>) is true.

And (P<sub>1</sub>) was just an arbitrarily chosen elementary proposition ('*abcde*'). So it looks as if the picture theory will not be able to allow that any elementary proposition has sense.

What we see from this is that, given the background assumptions which I have claimed are in play here, there is a tension between the following two claims:

(X) Some elementary propositions have sense; and

(Y) There can be no such picture as (P<sub>2</sub>).<sup>15</sup>

Wittgenstein is clearly committed to (X); and we have just seen that he is committed to (Y). So the suggestion is that if it follows from the commitments which I attribute to Wittgenstein that (X) and (Y) are in tension, I must be wrong in attributing those commitments to Wittgenstein.

I think this argument depends on a kind of selective delay in implementing the consequences of Wittgenstein's views. (Y) seems to be in tension with (X), because if we accept both (Y) and (1)—'(P<sub>1</sub>) has sense only if (P<sub>2</sub>) is true'—it seems that we have to give up (X). That is, if we accept that both (Y) and (1) are true, we have to give up (X). But look again at (1). Its first clause is this:

(1a) (P<sub>1</sub>) has sense.

And as I have insisted, 'has sense' here means *is syntactically possible*. But that means that (1a) is about form in exactly the same way as (P<sub>2</sub>) is. In the case of (1a) it is the form of a

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<sup>15</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting this tension as a way of bringing out what seems problematic about the idea that (P<sub>2</sub>) could be a proposition which might be true.

proposition, while in the case of (P<sub>2</sub>) it is the form of reality; but of course it is the central claim of the picture theory that it is the same form in both cases.

What that means is that any argument which shows that there can be no such picture as (P<sub>2</sub>) must also show that there can be no such picture as (1a). If there can be no such picture as (1a), it is hard to see how (1) as a whole can be true. So it looks as if the very considerations which lead us to think—(Y)—that (P<sub>2</sub>) cannot be a proposition which might be true ought also to lead us to think that (1) cannot be a proposition which might be true. It is hard then to see how we can coherently insist that both (Y) and (1) are true. So it is hard to see how a challenge to the proposed interpretation can be made on this score.

Of course, once one begins to pull on this thread, the whole thing unravels. If (P<sub>2</sub>) and (1a) are both about form, then so surely is (X). And then, given that (Y) too is modal, so surely is (Y)—and the argument for (Y) explicitly concerns form anyway. Does this itself perhaps threaten the interpretation I have offered here?

I think not, but it is clear that some quite general issues about the interpretation of the *Tractatus* are in play here. It is famously an important claim of the work that the sentences within it are nonsense (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.54). This leads obviously to the question of how closely we should look at those sentences—at least the sentences other than those which claim that the sentences of the work are nonsense. A certain style of interpretation seems to encourage us not to look closely at them at all.<sup>16</sup> I take a different view: I think the work as a whole presents itself as having a broadly coherent rational structure—at least until its central claims are applied to itself. Part of that sense of the rationality of the work derives, I think, from the fact that arguments are hinted at all through the text. Our key passage,

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<sup>16</sup>This seems to be where the 'new' or 'resolute' reading of the *Tractatus* leads: see, e.g., Diamond (1991) and Conant (2000).

2.0211–2.0212, clearly hints at an argument. We have just seen another argument hinted at in 2.172–2.174, and again at 4.12.

It is striking, though, that there are really only hints of arguments in the text. There are two quite mundane explanations of that. First, I suspect that Wittgenstein did not himself work arguments out very carefully or very explicitly—largely because he did not feel he needed to: it seemed to him that he could just *see* how certain propositions fitted together. (The story of Russell’s bewilderment at Wittgenstein’s argument against his theory of judgement is a good illustration of the different character of these two minds.<sup>17</sup>) And secondly—no doubt encouraged by the first thing—he seems to have been impatient about explicit argument, almost as if he regarded the explicit laying out of a proof as vulgar.

But there is perhaps a deeper explanation, which is more attractive both from a philosophical and from a literary point of view. If we attempt to develop the hints which Wittgenstein offers into explicit arguments, we find ourselves laying out claims like (1), (2), (3), and (4)—and, of course, (P2)—which have a bluntness which feels almost crude. One thing this does is make it very difficult to resist applying the conclusions of the *Tractatus* to itself—and so finding it odd to be claiming, for example, that (P2) is a proposition which might be true. If we press that, then, as we have just seen, it looks as if the whole thing unravels. In the end, this is not obviously a bad thing, on the text’s own terms. In the end, as we know, Wittgenstein claims, ‘he who understands me finally recognizes [my propositions] as senseless’ (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.54). But perhaps it is important that we should not reach that point too quickly: perhaps we are supposed to get there only when we have ‘climbed out through them, on them, over them’. So there is another reason why Wittgenstein might at least have been content to leave only

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<sup>17</sup>See Russell’s letter to Ottoline Morrell of 27 May 1913, quoted in Monk (1996, 297).

hints of arguments in the text: while there are just hints, we have the sense of doing philosophy, and of there being a whole theory which makes sense of everything; but when we develop those hints into something explicit, the theory unravels and we are left with no meaningful propositions at all.

What this means is that we can acknowledge that any making explicit of the arguments of the *Tractatus* will give us something which is un-Wittgensteinian in character. But that does not mean that we should give up all attempts to develop the hints into explicit argument: rather, developing the hints into explicit argument seems to be just what we should do, if we are to see how the whole work unravels in the way Wittgenstein seems to have thought it did. That means that it is no immediate objection to any particular interpretation of a stretch of argument that it presents us with something which feels un-Wittgensteinian in the kind of way the interpretation offered here does. As for the interpretation itself, whatever one thinks about the detailed account of the working out of the conclusion of the argument on the fixed-form interpretation which I have offered here, it strikes me that the sequence of four-digit-numbered remarks from 2.021 to 2.027 constitutes a very compelling case for thinking that some version of the fixed-form interpretation must be right.

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