

# WITTGENSTEIN'S *TRACTATUS* AS A MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING SOME SYMPTOMS OF ONTOLOGICAL ANXIETY

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During the cultural upheaval of the 1960s it was R.D.Laing's *The Divided Self* (Penguin, London 1960) which set psychiatry in the context of ontology, that is, the study of being.

Laing was preceded by others pursuing the link between philosophy and psychotherapy. In Ludwig Wittgenstein we have a 20th century equivalent of a Socrates whose military courage and philosophical work was outstanding and insightful. Wittgenstein's remarkable *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921 /1922) and his lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge may have earned him the admiration of fellow dons but in nick-naming him "God", they played some part in pushing him into remote exile in a house built for him on the banks of Norwegian fjords and on an island off the coast of Ireland where he could see a realisation of the logic which he hoped would be experienced as ethics.

He served as a porter at a London hospital during the Second World War. So much for his supposed arrogance.

Having lived through the First World War during which he was promoted to the rank of reconnaissance officer for showing outstanding bravery, he was to write: "How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world." (proposition 6.432 in the *Tractatus*).

Nevertheless, he prayed and his opening proposition "The world is all that is the case" to be relevant must refer to either a potentially scientifically understandable world or one in which least a God or a god-like intelligence exists even if only in the linking together of all Artificial Intelligence accessible in the background, otherwise what would be the point of positing omniscience?

The *Tractatus* is worthy of study if only because it does attempt to de-construct language until it honestly *shows* us what we mean.

If we read it back to front, starting with its conclusions we find Wittgenstein is actually composing a social philosophy of the ontological self, not unlike the existentialist psychiatrist, R.D.Laing famous for his first and later books (*The Divided Self* and *The Self and Others*).

The *Tractatus* starts by showing that the world is socially constructed from the point of view of what only God could know *in toto* although “God does not reveal himself in the world” (proposition 6.432) despite the fact that a God-like omniscience is presumed in the opening proposition.

Thus proposition 1: “The world is all that is the case” - who but God could know in theory everything about what is the case? Perhaps the omniscient Judeo-Christian culture is implicit?

Wittgenstein’s family descending from Ludwig’s great-grandfather who was Jewish and was called Moses Maier. The paterfamilias according to the prevailing Napoleonic code had to take a “proper” Austro-German name (getting rid of a typically Jewish family name and chose “Wittgenstein” a family associated with Maier in business. )

Ludwig’s father became one of the richest industrialists in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the children, many of them highly gifted musically and intellectually, inherited great wealth, although his older brothers committed suicide. Their father understandably decided that his youngest children which included Ludwig would be spared the relentless pressure to follow in their father’s footsteps that probably played some part in causing the older sons’ suicides.

The world being the case was for the Wittgenstein family *fin de siècle* Vienna and the nearby countryside where they owned three palatial houses. They entertained guests like Klimpt, Mahler and Brahms. With the coming to power of Hitler and the Nazis the Wittgenstein’s wealth enabled Ludwig’s older siblings to buy their freedom under the Nuremburg Laws, as to their Jewish and non-Jewish ethnicity.

Ludwig trained as an aeronautical engineer in England and was lectured and tutored by none other than Bertrand Russell at Trinity College, Cambridge, before the Great War, and by a reversal of roles Ludwig became the master and Russell the pupil recognising genius when he saw it. Wittgenstein’s second body of work, *Philosophical Writings*, was edited by others, including lecture notes, and consolidated his pre-eminent position as one of the leading philosophers of the day.

So in proposition 1 “The world is everything that is the case:” The totality of facts, not of things comprises the world which the psychotherapist, in this case Wittgenstein, speaking in his own voice,

helps me address my “case”. The world also takes the form of symptoms. The actual facts, symptoms and situations, are a totality of facts, not of things. 1.11 says “the world is determined by the facts and by their being all the facts.” All the facts include therapy systems which can be mobilised to change my language about myself.

The facts are in logical space and are the world. My logical space includes my position within my therapy-system. How I think about myself alters my logical space: I can operate within a world which divides into facts.

Whereas the victim of ontological anxiety does not know her/himself as whole, continuously, in a factual context. However, this can only be shown, not explicated by logical propositions.

The main thrust of the theory can be illustrated by showing rather than proposing how the Wittgenstein family dealt with their own experience of anti-Semitism. Ludwig and his siblings were the descendants of Moses Maier who in accordance with the provisions of the

Napoleonic decree that all Jews should have a nationally accepted surname, changed the family name from Maier to Wittgenstein. In the patriarchal context of sur-naming, this affected the sons and grandsons and great-grandchildren of Moses Maier who was the land agent for the princely family of Seyn Wittgenstein. Ludwig’s father Herman Christian Wittgenstein added the name Christian to his baptismal name so as to distance himself further from his partly-Jewish origins (Ray Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* Jonathan Cape / Vintage 1990/1991 index references to L.W.’s Jewish origins).

Ludwig’s mother was a Jewish convert to Christianity. So, by Jewish religious law Ludwig was Jewish. The Jewish mother’s ethnic-religious identity determines the children’s “sacred” identity.

A Wittgenstein sister of Ludwig, Milly, sought reassurance that the rumours that their ancestry was Jewish were untrue when told by her brother Louis that they were “pure blooded”, that is, purely Christian which of course wasn’t true at all.

How, then, does Ludwig’s logic of showing logically rather than proposing logically actually work itself out?

The famous opening propositions take on a new meaning in the context of Jewish identity which can be seen as the unstated assumption of the whole system of the *Tractatus*. Without the “scaffolding” of Jewish ambivalence the whole structure becomes “shaky”, just like the “transference” structure of psychotherapy

It now appears that in terms of Jewish law God may indeed be the *implied* author of “The world is everything that is the case.”

“The world is all that is the case” takes on a new meaning in the context of an oncoming second world war. Who besides God could possibly *show ethically* and could *know everything about the world being the case*? Everything therefore has to be in the form of anti-Nazi prayer *and* the refutation of Nazi “logic” by, say Greek logic or Old Testament Hebrew logic?

This then is the logical space for using the genius of Wittgenstein: it is a religious form of psychotherapy as well as a system of linguistics where things are combined logically until they make sense, exactly as does psychotherapy.