Elucidation and Ostension in the *Tractatus*

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§ 1. Introduction

WITTGENSTEIN WRITES AT §3.263 OF THE *TRACTATUS* THAT "[t]he meanings of primitive signs can be explained by elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. They can therefore only be understood if the meanings of these signs are already known." My main aim in this essay is to argue for the negative claim that, contra Hacker (1975, 1986), the elucidation mentioned here should not be understood in terms of ostension. Understanding the elucidatory connection of names with objects at work in §3.263 in terms of ostension renders mysterious Wittgenstein's claim at §3.02 that "what is thinkable is also possible." It is, of course, part and parcel of Hacker's reading of the *Tractatus* that the view of language it presents is flawed, and that Wittgenstein's later work is shaped by his understanding of the shortcomings of the early work. It is therefore no objection to Hacker's reading of the *Tractatus* that it ascribes an incoherent view to it. But I will try to show that the problem incurred by reading §3.263's elucidation as a form of ostension is strongly reminiscent of a problem Wittgenstein raised a few years earlier for Russell's multiple relation theory of judgement. We therefore have good reason, I argue, to think it improbable that Wittgenstein himself thought of the elucidation of Tractarian names in the ostension–based way Hacker suggests.

In section 2, I give a partial overview of the notion of elucidation as it occurs in Frege's works, and in section 3, I explain the parts of the *Tractatus*'s account of propositional representation necessary to get the relevant issues in view. In section 4, I outline Hacker's ostension–based view of Tractarian elucidation. Section 5 is concerned with establishing that Hacker's understanding of Tractarian elucidation creates problems with the explanation of the claim at *Tractatus* §3.02 that anything thinkable is possible, and in section 6 I try to show that this problem is a close relative of Wittgenstein's objection that Russell's

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theory of judgement does not make it impossible to judge a nonsense, and that we ought therefore to be sceptical that Wittgenstein would advance a view of elucidation in the *Tractatus* which is susceptible to such a problem. In section 7 I conclude with some remarks on connections to Frege.

§ 2. The Fregean background

The explicit occurrences of "*Erläuterung*" in Frege's works — in a letter to Hilbert of 1899 (1980, pp. 36–37), "On the Foundations of Geometry" ([1906], 1984, pp. 293–340), the posthumously published "Logic in Mathematics" (Frege 1997, pp. 308–318), at various points in the *Grundgesetze* (2016 [1893], e.g. §34 and §35), and in the *Grundlagen* (1884, p. viii) — suggest the following understanding of the term. Doing science rigorously requires that the terms of the language in which it is done have precise and fixed meanings. This is in order to avoid misunderstanding among scientists, but also, Frege would say, to ensure gapless and explicit proofs. One way of co–ordinating on a sign's meaning is to define it; one supplies another expression with which the defined term is stipulated to be synonymous. This requires, of course, that the terms in the defining expression have a clear and fixed meaning too, and to achieve this the terms might in turn be given definitions using other signs. But evidently, all this defining has got to come to an end somewhere, so long as one wants to avoid circularity. What, then, of the primitive signs, those at the end of the chains of definitions? They have their meanings fixed through elucidation. In elucidating a sign, one makes use of parts of ordinary, non–scientific language, and therefore forgoes the clarity which definitions bring: "in so doing we have again to use ordinary words, and these may display defects similar to those which the elucidations are intended to remove" (1997, p. 313.) In elucidating, then, we leave the system proper; elucidation is part of the propaedeutic to a science (Frege 1980, p. 36)[1].

Frege was, as is well known, a key influence on Wittgenstein, and much has

[1] A similar idea seems to be in play in "Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences" (Frege 1979, p. 271), "What is a Function?" (Frege 1984 [1904], p. 292) and in "On Concept and Object" in the last of which we find Frege's notorious request that his hints ["*Winke*"] at the concept-object distinction be met halfway by an understanding reader (Frege 1997 [1892], p. 193). See Weiner (1990, chapter 6 and 2010), and Conant (2002) for more discussions of Fregean elucidation. See also Ricketts's (2010, p. 192, fn. 91) remark on the possible significance of Frege's use of *Winke* rather than *Erläuterungen* to refer to his own comments on the concept-object distinction.

been written about their relationship (see Reck's Introduction to his 2002, Diamond 2010, and Beaney 2017 for a start.) Wittgenstein mentions his indebtedness to Frege's "magnificent works" for the "great stimulation of my thoughts" in the *Tractatus*'s preface. And while Wittgenstein claimed to have been able to demonstrate Frege's influence even into his late work (Wittgenstein 1967, §712), this influence is most transparent in the early work. We can see the *Tractatus* in particular as extending Fregean problems and concerns from the context of scientific, formalised enclaves of language to the whole of language. The sort of primitive terms most relevant for Frege, those the elucidation of which he discusses in *Logic in Mathematics*, for instance, are terms at the bottom level of a formal language devised for the purpose, first and foremost, of conducting mathematical proofs more rigorously. But the early Wittgenstein faces a prima facie similar predicament with the meanings of what he calls names, primitive signs in terms of which a meaningful proposition of any language is supposed to be analysable. Potter writes of Wittgenstein's tendency to "press an idea more resolutely than its originator" (2020, p. 327.) Tracing problems from Frege through to their expression in Wittgenstein can be a fruitful method of appreciating their more general forms, and of attaining a fuller sense of what was "bothering" Frege[2]. It makes sense, therefore, to look to the *Tractatus* in hope of elucidating the rather hazy notion of elucidation that we find in Frege, and to keep Frege in mind when trying to understand certain notions in Wittgenstein. As will emerge in section 6, Wittgenstein's take on Russell's theory of judgement seems to have an importantly Fregean provenance.

Frege's primitives were the symbols in his *Begriffsschrift* in terms of which the system's other vocabulary were to be defined. But Tractarian names are the primitives undergirding the whole of language (indeed, of any possible language.) When discussing the elucidation of primitive terms in "Logic in Mathematics" (Beaney 1997, pp. 308–318), Frege writes that "in doing so we have again to use ordinary words." He thus seems to suggest that the elucidation of the primitive vocabulary of a formal system can make use of the vocabulary from language outside that system. This marks one important difference between primitive–term–elucidation as it features in the *Tractatus* and in Frege,

[2] I have in mind here the following intriguing remark of Wittgenstein's, reported by Bouwsma (1986, p. 27): "Frege is so good. But one must try to figure out what was bothering him, and then see how the problems arise. There are so many of them."

since Tractarian primitives are those lying at the bottom of the analysis of the whole of language. It would thus seem that Tractarian elucidation is in a sense *harder* than Fregean elucidation; as Hacker notes, Frege allows himself to "fall back on the resources of ordinary language, *the functioning of which is taken for granted*" (1975, p. 604.)

§ 3. Wittgenstein on propositions in a nutshell

In the *Tractatus*, the notion of a proposition is introduced through a comparison with the notion of a picture. "A logical picture of facts is a thought" (§3), and a thought is a proposition with sense (§4). Elements of a picture correspond to, or stand for (*vertreten*), worldly things (§2.13–2.131), and the picture represents the worldly things as standing to one another as their representative elements stand to one another in the picture. (The picture and what it pictures therefore have something, a form, in common: what they share is the picture's "form of depiction" (§2.17.)) The picture is correct, or true, if the worldly things for which its elements stand do stand to each other as their representatives stand in the picture, and incorrect, or false, otherwise. What a true proposition represents is a fact, an obtaining of states–of–things (*das Bestehen von Sachverhalten*) (§2), while the sense of a false proposition is a merely possible, non–obtaining state–of–things[3].

These actual things, which true and false propositions alike are about, Wittgenstein calls objects. Tractarian objects are not middle–sized dry goods: they are "simple", i.e. not complexes, and "form the substance of the world" (§2.02–2.021.)] The objects are common to every possible way the world could be. (Hacker uses the useful adjective "sempiternal" throughout his (1986) to capture this cross–modal persistence, although it can seem to suggest a merely temporal persistence.) We read at §2.022 that it is simply "obvious that an imagined world, however different from the real world it may be, must have something —a form— in common with the real world" and that "this fixed form consists simply of the objects" (§2.2023.) Despite this, there does seem to be an argument in the text for the admittedly non–obvious notion of a Tractarian object, though how exactly it should be understood is controversial, and I will not sketch any particular interpretation of it here. (For discussion, see

[3] We have here, then, the seeds of an answer to the so-called problem of falsehood: what a false thought represents is a non-actual arrangement of actual things.

Carruthers 1990, chapters 9 and 10, McGinn 2009 (pp. 109ff), and Potter 2020, chapter 52.)

Not every meaningful proposition is meaningful in this way —the picture theory outlined above is really only a theory of the sense of elementary propositions, those propositions sitting at the end–point of analysis, consisting only of simple signs standing for simple objects. But should it be expected that analysis will hit a bedrock of elementary propositions? As above, Wittgenstein claims this to be obvious (§4.221) but nonetheless offers an argument. "Objects form the substance of the world" (§2.021), and "[i]f the world had no substance," writes Wittgenstein at §2.0211, "then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true." The thought here seems to be that a proposition making reference to a complex depends, if it is to have determinate sense (so if it is to be a proposition at all), on the truth of the further proposition that the complex it mentions is actually so–arranged. If these further propositions mention complexes, their sense will likewise require the truth of further propositions to the effect that these complexes are indeed realised. So if analysis never yielded elementary propositions making reference only to simples, any proposition's having sense would be infinitely deferred, and we would be left unable to "draw up a picture of the world (true or false)" (§2.0212) Hence Wittgenstein's later reflection that "[w]hat I once called 'objects', simples, were simply what I could refer to without running the risk of their possible non–existence, and that means; what we can speak about *no matter what may be the case.*" (Wittgenstein 1990, §36.)

All other non–elementary propositions are meaningful by being truth–functions of elementary propositions; that is, their truth or falsity is fully determined by (is a function of) the truth or falsity of some elementary propositions (§5). The possibility of our representing the world requires, then, that our propositions admit of analysis as truth–functions of elementary propositions. An elementary proposition is a proposition which asserts only the obtaining of a *Sachverhalt* (§4.21), a state of things consisting only in a configuration of objects which "hang in one another, like the links of a chain" (§2.03.) The only components of an elementary proposition are signs which are simple in that they stand for objects. These simple signs Wittgenstein calls names, and "[t]he possibility of a proposition rests on the principle of the representation of objects by signs" (§4.0312.)

§ 4. Hacker on elucidation in §3.263: ostension "seen through a glass darkly"

While much attention has been paid to later occurrences of cognates of *Erläuterung* in the *Tractatus* (at §4.112 and §6.54,) particularly in the context of the debate surrounding resolute readings (see e.g. Crary and Read 2000 and Diamond 1991), relatively little has been written about §3.263. This is in spite of the latter's puzzling nature, and its more obvious similarities with Frege's notion of elucidation. This paper might be seen as a step towards redressing some exegetical balance regarding the *Tractatus*'s various uses of elucidation[4].

In *Insight and Illusion* (1986) and his 1975 paper "Frege and Wittgenstein on Elucidations", Peter Hacker advances a reading of the *Tractatus* according to which the elucidation of names at §3.263 is a sort of ostension[5]. In this section, I outline Hacker's view, before turning in the next to a problem with it, stemming from Wittgenstein's claim at §3.02 that "what is thinkable is also possible."

Wittgenstein writes at §4.026 that "[t]he meanings of simple signs (words) must be explained to us for us to understand them", and at §3.263 that "[t]he meanings of primitive signs can be explained by elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. They can therefore only be understood if the meanings of these signs are already known." To know the meaning of a name is to know which object is its meaning (§3.203.) An elucidation of a name will be a proposition which contains that name. But if understanding a proposition requires knowing the meaning of each name it comprises, then understanding an elucidatory proposition seems to require an understanding of the very name which that proposition is supposed to elucidate. This is not a happy situation —Hacker calls §3.263 a "wilfully obscure remark" (1986, p. 76).

Hacker presents his reading as a synthesis of two extremes of opinion

[4] One significant discussion of §3.263 which I do not address here occurs in Anscombe's criticism of Popper's reading of the *Tractatus* in her 1963 *Introduction*.

[5] Hacker writes that "the sense of elucidation in §3.263 is quite different" from the other occurrences in the *Tractatus*. I take it that it would count in favour of an interpretation of §3.263 that it make the sense of "elucidation" that features there more obviously consonant with §4.112 and §6.54. While I do not get as far as considering these occurrences in this paper, I will note that they seem on their face hard to square with an understanding of elucidation as effected by a sort of ostensive gesture.

surrounding the remark (1986, pp. 75ff.) On one hand we have what we might call the crude ostensive reading, on which name–object correlations are established by some kind of psychological, pointing–like ostensive act. Such a strategy is a natural response to the apparent threat of circularity to which I alluded in the previous paragraph, which stemmed from the idea that understanding a proposition required understanding the names it comprises, and that understanding such a name requires understanding of the elucidatory proposition in which it figures. The circle is broken by the thought that the second sort of understanding is of a different type —namely, acquaintance (of whatever sort is required for ostension) with the meant object.

The more general thought that ostension can come in where words give out should appear intuitive enough; faced with the task of giving the meaning of a sign, but restricted by the apparent incompleteness of any would–be proposition containing that still unelucidated sign, the temptation in general is simply to point at the object one means. As Hacker notes, Wittgenstein himself gives voice to this impulse in the *Notebooks*:

> If someone were to drive me into a corner in this way in order to shew that I did not know what I meant, I should say: 'I *know* what I mean; I mean just THIS', pointing to the appropriate complex with my finger (1915; 1961, p. 70).

But this crude ostensive reading, thinks Hacker, obscures what he takes to be the obvious fact that such an elucidation is a genuine bipolar proposition, something capable of being either true or false (1986, p. 76)[6]. For such episodes of naming seem merely stipulative. We do not normally think of this sort of baptismal statement as answering to the world in the way that Wittgenstein requires of anything he is willing to call a genuine proposition. The second extreme view with respect to which Hacker will situate his reading makes more of this propositional nature of elucidations. According to this view, an elucidation is an elementary proposition which somehow elucidates a name by using it to say something true or false. Hacker thinks this understanding of elucidations as "full–blown" elementary propositions misses the sense in which elucidations have a particular explanatory function not shared by elementary

[6] As an anonymous reviewer points out, Wittgenstein merely says that elucidations are propositions, and maintains a sense of 'proposition' according to which a proposition might not be bipolar (as e.g. in §5.47, §§6.2-6.21, and §6.54.)

propositions in general, and leaves us with the unsatisfying view of Wittgenstein as "suggesting that we just 'pick up' the meanings of simple names from attending to their use in various elementary propositions" (1986, p. 76).

Hacker's middle way goes via the suggestion that Wittgenstein saw the elucidation of a name as somehow playing both roles, as a genuine bipolar proposition somehow embodying the import of an ostensive definition: on this reading, a Tractarian elucidation "is, one might say, an ostensive definition 'seen through a glass darkly', misconstrued as a bipolar proposition" (1986, p. 77.) In support of this reading, Hacker advances several quotes from the *Notebooks* that seem to make implicit reference to the notion of ostension, as well as a later remark from Wittgenstein that "[i]n the *Tractatus* logical analysis and ostensive definition were unclear to me. At that time I thought there was 'a connexion between language and reality.'" (Waismann 1979, pp. 209–210). I will not assess this textual evidence in the present paper, but suffice it to say that it is not by itself decisive in favour of the claim that Wittgenstein had ostension in mind in §3.263 (see Helme 1979 for critical discussion of Hacker's evidence). My criticism of Hacker's reading in what follows turns on the understanding of the name–object relation as based on an ostensive correlation, and so applies equally to the crude ostensive view on which he aims to improve.

§ 5. Representability and possibility

In this section, I present the objection that understanding §3.263 in terms of ostension renders problematic the understanding of Wittgenstein's claim at §3.02 that "what is thinkable is also possible." This is not itself a decisive mark against Hacker's reading, for it is just his contention that the view expressed in the *Tractatus* is unstable. I therefore give reasons in the next section against attributing the ostensive view to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, stemming from his earlier debates with Russell on the latter's theory of judgement.

The claim that what is thinkable must be possible is not a psychological claim; thought is a matter of "picturing facts" (§2.1: "*Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen*"). Thought might in this sense just as well occur in other media than minds, for example in writing or speech. Wittgenstein's remark at §3.02 is therefore better understood as a claim that anything representable in a proposition is possible. (Cf. §2.203: "[a] picture contains the possibility of the state of affairs that it represents").

We can begin attempting to understand this remark by asking what it would

take, on the picture theory, for an impossible state of affairs to be represented. Clearly, the objects which together made up that state of affairs would have to be represented as fitting together in a way that they could not possibly fit together. So names would have to be combined in the proposition in a way that the objects with which they were correlated could not be. If this could happen, we would, contra §3.02, be able to represent impossibilities. So §3.02 requires that names must not be combinable in a manner that their referents are not. "A name's form or syntactic kind", as Johnston (2017, p. 127) puts it, is "given by the ways in which it can combine with other names in elementary propositions", and an object's "ontological kind is given by the ways in which it can combine with other objects in atomic facts"; "[t]he possibility of its occurrence in states–of–things is the form of an object" (§2.0141).

In the context of the picture theory, therefore, the claim about representability ensuring possibility becomes the requirement that "[t]he possibilities that an object has of combining with other objects are duplicated by the possibilities that its name has of combining with other names in elementary sentences." (Malcom 1986, p. 4.) For representability to entail possibility, names and the objects they name must have matching forms. Following Johnston 2017, call this the *formal identity requirement*. Why should we expect the *Tractatus*'s system to satisfy the formal identity requirement?

That is, why could we not assign an object a name that combines with other names in a way that that object cannot combine with the other named objects? Say we have an object O1 that just cannot, due to its form, combine in way W with object O2, and a name N1 with syntactic properties (since it is a name's syntactic properties that constrain its combinatorial potential with respect to other names) such that it can combine perfectly well in way W with a name N2. Suppose that N2 names O2; why then can N1 not name O1? Nothing in the ordinary view of ostensive naming would seem to rule out such a case — ostension seems blind to the logical forms of the objects on which it is supposed to bestow names. This is to say that an ostension–based reading of the elucidation of names would seem to leave open the possibility of deviant elucidations, or dubbings of objects with names, syntactically formed such that they can be used to represent ontological nonsense, impossible configurations

of objects like "this table penholders the book"[7,8].

In a later paper (1999), Hacker gestures at a route to explaining formal identity via Wittgenstein's claim at §3.3 that "only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning". He writes, "I also agree that a name's having a meaning is not something prior to its having the logical syntax which it has. For a name fulfils a representational role —goes proxy for the object which is its meaning— only in the context of a proposition which depicts a state of affairs" (p. 121). This seems to yield the following explanation. We want to establish that a name's referent cannot be an object whose worldly combinatorial possibilities fail to mirror its own linguistic ones. But "only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning", and the meaning of a name is just the object it names (§3.203), so a name only gets to refer to an object when it occurs in a well–formed proposition. To say a name occurs in a well–formed proposition is just to say that its occurrence in the proposition accords with the combinatorial possibilities its syntactical form determines. So a name will only manage to get a referent at all, as it were, if it occurs in a combination that its syntax allows. Johnston (2017) rightly rejects this approach as circular, as it turns on the claim that propositions represent only possibilities. Being told that a name only refers when it occurs in a well–formed proposition only ensures its referent's combinatorial form mirrors its own if we know that propositions never represent impossibilities, but we began with that as our explanandum.

Another tactic is to restrict the ostensive relation in such a way that necessarily, it can relate only formally identical relata. While expounding the picture theory, Wittgenstein speaks at §2.1514 of a "depicting relation" consisting in "correlations of the elements of the picture and the things." Pears's (1987) strategy is to attempt to state a constraint on this depicting relation which makes it intelligible that it could only come to bear between formally identical relata[9]. As Johnston notes, however, such a constraint ought to make nonsense,

[7] Merely *like* this example, and different of course in comprising only names for Tractarian objects (tables and books being complexes.) This example is Wittgenstein's from the *Notebooks* (1961, p. 93), and will come up again in the next section.

[8] This idea of ontological nonsense involves, of course, a substantial conception of nonsense of the sort which Diamond and Conant argue is anathema to the *Tractatus* (see Diamond 1991 and Conant 2002.) But the thought that there are independent grounds in the *Tractatus* for rejecting the idea of ontological nonsense seems of little help for the advocate of the ostensive reading, since the present objection will, in these terms, be that their view countenances substantial nonsense.

[9] While this discussion is cast in terms of an ostension-based view of §2.1514's "depicting relation", it seems

construed as the representation of an object as combining in a way its form precludes, not just somehow incorrect but impossible.

On Pears's view, the name–object relation is to be understood in such a way that it is a condition of its continuing to hold between names and objects that the former's use respects the latter's ontological form. Citing Wittgenstein's claim in the *Notebooks* of November 1914 that "the logical connection must, of course, be one that is possible as between the things that the names are representatives of, and this will always be the case if the names really are representatives of the things", he argues for a view of naming on which an object's form, its potential for combinations with other objects, "takes over and controls" its name's syntax, "causing it to make sense in some sentential contexts but not in others" (Pears 1987, p. 88.) Claiming that "the initial act of attachment is necessary for representation but not sufficient" (1987, p. 103), Pears supplements the relatively naïve view of naming with an additional constraint such that the naming relation requires not just a kind of ostensive label–tying, but that use of the name in propositions respects the possibilities inherent in the named object, on pain of annulment of the naming relationship.

Pears's method of making nonsense not just incorrect, but impossible, is to maintain that a correlation simply fails to hold between a name and an object if the name occurs in a context that would represent an impossibility for the object (if, per impossibile, that correlation did obtain.) But as Johnston writes, without an account of what it is about the character of the name–object relation which makes it clear why it should suddenly fail to hold in such contexts, Pears is merely asserting that whatever relation does obtain in those situations is not to be called "reference", or "naming" (2017, 133).

Those interpreters who, like Hacker, see the relationship between Tractarian names and objects as forged by ostension face a particular explanatory burden with respect to formal identity, and so to the claim about thinkability and possibility. Hacker's reading appears vulnerable to a type of objection often levelled at so–called realist readers of the *Tractatus.* The core of this objection (recent versions of which can be found in Johnston (2017), McGuinness (2002), and Sullivan (2001)) is that the realist lacks the resources to demystify Wittgenstein's claim at §3.02 that what is representable in thought

clear that a parallel strategy is available for defenders of an ostension-based view of elucidation. It may be that the relation between the depicting relation and §3.263's elucidation complicates my discussion, but I will not examine this further in this paper.

or language must be possible. Johnston (2017) locates this difficulty in the adherence of such commentators to a metaphysically realistic interpretation of the *Tractatus*'s system, using the problem to argue for his non–realist reading. But I think it is possible to make a more specific diagnosis, and to locate the source of this difficulty in the ostensive view of the name–object which has tended to go hand–in–hand with so–called realist readings[10,11].

§ 6. A reason not to think Wittgenstein was thinking of ostension at §3.263: Wittgenstein versus Russell on Judgement

At this point, a fair reply will be that internal problems in the view which Hacker finds in the *Tractatus* do not disqualify it as a good interpretation of the text, since Hacker's view is just that the picture presented in the *Tractatus* is incoherent in a way that calls for superseding in the *Investigations*. It is therefore no good objection to Hacker's reading that the view it ascribes to the *Tractatus* is flawed. This raises the interesting issue of how the *Tractatus* is to be read in the light of Wittgenstein's own later disavowal of it. Unless we are willing to see Wittgenstein as simply mistaken in his eventual belief in the mistaken nature of the early work (which would seem a rather desperate strategy,) we seem indeed to be committed to attributing some sort of fault to the *Tractatus*[12]. A simple charity–based method of interpretation is complicated in the case of any work later claimed by its own author to be fundamentally flawed.

My reply will be that we need not locate the problem in Wittgenstein's early work in a misconception of the powers of ostension. Indeed, quite apart from the question whether the view is properly called "ostension–based", I think we have good reason not to read the *Tractatus* as containing such a view, since the problem to which it gives rise is strikingly similar to a problem Wittgenstein

[10] So long as we think there are non-ostensive conceptions of naming compatible with realism. The view in Davidson 1977 might involve such a conception.

[11] At this point, it may be objected that for want of a viable alternative view which manages to make good sense of §3.02, it is no mark against Hacker's reading of §3.263 that it fails to. While my primary aim in this paper is not to defend a positive reading, I suggest that Marie McGinn's discussion of the remark in her (2006, p. 121ff.) may furnish such a view. As Johnston urges in his (2017) discussion of the issue, making sense of the *Tractatus*'s claim about representability and possibiltiy may require giving up on certain metaphysically realistic interpretations of its ontological talk. See also McGuinness (2002) and Winch (1987) for non-realist readings, and Potter (2021) for a more recent discussion.

[12] A flaw, that is, from the perspective of someone with at least some sympathy for the later work.

raised for Russell's multiple relation theory of judgement in 1913. Making this point will require a brief detour into that theory. One can see already, however, the shape of the point: Wittgenstein's objection was that Russell's theory failed to make it impossible to judge a nonsense. The claim that it is impossible to judge nonsense is at the very least a close relative of the claim that "what is thinkable is also possible", perhaps even equivalent to it by Wittgenstein's lights. If Wittgenstein had been sensitive to this problem in 1913, it looks implausible to suppose that the view outlined in the *Tractatus* would be such as to be vulnerable to a similar problem.

Russell's view in *Principles of Mathematics* (1903) was that judgement is a binary relation between a judging mind and the proposition judged. It is important to note here that Russell saw a proposition as literally composed of the objects, properties, and relations which that proposition is about. When one judges truly, one stands in a two–place relation to a proposition, a complex of the judgement's constituents. Since judging falsely is different from not judging at all, to judge falsely on this view is to stand in a two–place relation to a false proposition. This view led Russell to the unhappy position that, roughly, there was no metaphysical distinction to be made between true and false propositions: "[s]ome propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white" (Russell 1973, p. 76.) Dissatisfaction with this result led him to abandon the binary relation view in favour of what came to be known as the multiple relation theory of judgement, which he was advocating by the time of the first volume of *Principia Mathematica* in 1910. On the new view, true and false propositions alike were analysed away, and a judgement that *aRb*, for example, was to be understood as a four–place relation between the judging subject, *a*, *b*, and the relation *R*, i.e. the constituents which Russell had before held constituted the proposition to which the judger stood in a two–place relation. The problem of admitting false propositions on an ontological par with true ones is thus gotten around, roughly speaking, by eschewing propositions altogether. On the new account, when one judges falsely that *aRb*, one no longer stands in a relation to the false proposition *aRb*, but separately to each of its erstwhile constituents *a*, *b* and *R*[13].

The multiple relation theory was thus a step in the direction of the theory of

[13] Since assessing the multiple relation theory is not my aim here, I am trying to suppress important complications about the directionality, or "sense" of the relevant relations. For more detailed discussion of Russell's theories of judgement, see MacBride (2013) and Hylton (1992, ch. 8).

the proposition which we find in the *Tractatus*, outlined above. But Wittgenstein found it wanting, stressing to Russell the (at first sight puzzling) objection that the multiple relation theory fails to make it impossible to judge a piece of nonsense. It is this objection which I claim is strongly reminiscent of the problem for the ostension–based understanding of elucidation discussed above. In what remains of this section, I will explain this "no–nonsense" objection in more detail so as to make this similarity manifest.

At *Tractatus* §5.5422, Wittgenstein writes that "[t]he correct explanation of the form of the proposition 'A judges p' must show that it is impossible to judge nonsense. (Russell's theory does not satisfy this condition)". And in the *Notes on Logic* (dated September 1913) we find a suggestive example of such a piece of nonsense: "[e]very right theory of judgment must make it impossible for me to judge that 'this table penholders the book' (Russell's theory does not satisfy this requirement.)" (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 93.) But the point first seems to have been put to Russell in a letter of June 1913, in which Wittgenstein writes that

> I can now express my objection to your theory of judgment exactly: I believe it is obvious that, from the prop[osition] "A judges that (say) a is in the Rel[ation] R to b", if correctly analysed, the prop[osition] "aRb v ~aRb"[14] must follow directly without the use of any other premiss. This condition is not fulfilled by your theory (Wittgenstein 2008, p. 40).

The relation to nonsense is more oblique in this formulation of the problem, but the point is the same. Wittgenstein insists that it is a requirement on A's judging that *aRb* that *aRb* express a genuine possibility, a state of affairs that is capable of either obtaining or not.

According to Russell's new theory, the complex objects of judgement are no longer located in the world independently of judging subjects, but are brought into a kind of unity by the act of judging. Hylton stresses this as a key point of difference between the new and old views (1992, p. 334.) On the old view, the possible contents of judgements, both true and false, went around in the world readily unified. On the new view, which no longer countenances such worldly unities but merely their constituent terms, the unification of these constituents into articulate contents of judgement becomes a task delegated to the thinking

[14] Note that "*aRb* v *~aRb*", or more generally "*p* v *~p*" does not express bipolarity, but merely bivalence. Bipolarity is not the claim that any proposition *p* must be either true or false, but that any proposition must be such that it is possibly true and possibly false. That is, for any *p*, ♦*p* & ♦*~p*.

subject. But for all Russell's theory tells us, what is there to stop the thinking subject combining these terms into nonsensical complexes? MacBride puts the point vividly:

"Once the unity of a proposition had been destroyed, its erstwhile constituents laid out side by side on the mortuary slab, there was nothing left to guide the judging subject in cognitively stitching the pieces back together and holding them present before the mind in a natural rather than monstrous configuration; there was nothing to prevent, to use Wittgenstein's example, the assembling and judging of such a cognitive Frankenstein as 'this table penholders the book'" (MacBride 2003, p. 206).

An example (taken from Hanks 2007, p. 128) may help further clarify the point. On the old binary relation view, Othello's judgement that Desdemona loves Cassio was analysed as consisting in a relation between Othello and the complex constituted by Cassio, Desdemona, and the loving relation. But on the multiple relation view, there is no such complex until its elements are co–ordinated in an occurrent judgement; Othello's judgement that Desdemona loves Cassio is now to be understood as a matter of Othello's standing in a relation separately to Cassio, Desdemona, and the loving relation. But it seems we have nothing in this new account, in either the individuation of the constituents or the judging relation, to explain the manifest impossibility of Othello's judging that Desdemona Cassio Iago[15]. On the new multiple relation theory, every possible constituent of a judgement seems to make itself available for any possible position in a judgement.

Russell's multiple relation theory of judgement contains no account of the relationship between linguistic signs and the contents of judgements, and in this respect of course differs from Hacker's account of elucidation. But this is inessential to the core insight of Wittgenstein's objection, as I see it. Wittgenstein's objection can be understood as based on the observation that Russell's dissection of the articulate judgement into its parts has failed to individuate them in the right sort of way, where the right sort of way would be one that imposed the right sort of nonsense–barring restrictions on the ways

[15] I am presenting a simplified version of Russell's theory; Russell attempted later, in his abandoned 1913 manuscript *Theory of Knowledge*, to strengthen the theory by including the logical form of a judgement among its relata, though this failed to solve the problem as Wittgenstein saw it. See Hanks (2007). But my argument does not require that Wittgenstein's objection really was fatal to the strongest form of Russell's theory, only that Wittgenstein believed it to be.

that they are allowed to re–combine in a judgement. And the crux of the problem discussed in section 5 is that ostension, mere pointing (whether psychological or physical), is in an important sense blind to distinctions of logical form[16]. If the relation between a name and an object is effected by an act of ostension, there seems nothing to prevent the elucidatory connection of a name with an object such that we might represent what is an impossibility for that object. If the elucidation in §3.263 is seen as a kind of ostension, then, we forego the possibility of explaining the congruence between the world and any possible representation of it expressed in §3.02, and render it a metaphysical mystery[17].

We might summarise the similarity as follows: ostension might fail to respect the combinatorial possibilities inherent in objects in much the same way that Russell's judging relation might fail to respect the combinatorial possibilities inherent in the possible constituents of judgement, and both thereby fail to rule out the possibility of nonsense (whether judged or merely represented.) These two problems are, I would like to suggest, similar enough that one ought to be at least sceptical of the idea that Wittgenstein could have pressed one so persistently to Russell from 1913 onwards, but only a few years later advanced a picture of elucidation which seems to give rise to the other.

The insight undergirding Wittgenstein's objection to Russell's theory of judgement can be discerned in Wittgenstein's remarks on logical form at §2.012, where he writes that "[i]n logic nothing is accidental: if a thing can occur in a state–of–things, then the possibility of the state–of–things must already be prefigured in the thing." This formulation makes clear the insight's status as a close relative of Frege's doctrine of the essential unsaturatedness of concepts (and of the essential saturatedness of objects). Frege held infamously that a concept word denoted something essentially unsaturated, or gappy, calling out for completion by something saturated, an object (*Function and Concept* in

[16] Wittgenstein later makes a similar point at the outset of the *Blue Book* with his 'tove' example (Wittgenstein 2007, pp. 1ff.)

[17] The mysterious quality of such connections is nicely captured by the following passage from Hertz's *Principles of Mechanics* (also quoted in this context by McGuinness (2006, 83): "We make for ourselves inner pictures or symbols of outer objects, and we make them in such a way that the consequences of the pictures that are necessary for our thought are also at the same time pictures of the consequences that are naturally necessary for the objects depicted. In order that this requirement should be capable of being fulfilled, there must be certain correspondences already in existence between nature and our mind" (Hertz 1899, p. B.)

Beaney 1997, pp. 130–148). Wittgenstein, of course, disagreed with Frege about the distribution of saturatedness, urging that proper names and their referents were just as unsaturated as concept words and their referents (see Textor 2009 for discussion). But the common core of their views is captured nonetheless in §2.012; our logic must individuate things in such a way that their combinatorial possibilities with other things are written into them from the outset (and this will, it seems, have something to do with the thought that "to recognize the symbol by its sign, one must pay attention to the senseful use" (§3.326); cf. Frege 1997 [1884], p. 90.)

In a letter to Russell dated 26th of December 1912 and composed after one of his meetings with Frege, Wittgenstein wrote that he had "had a long discussion with Frege about our Theory of Symbolism of which, I think, he roughly understood the general outline. He said he would think the matter over. The complex problem is now clearer to me and I hope very much that I may solve it" (Wittgenstein 2008, p. 36.) Only months later, Wittgenstein was to present Russell for the first time with the objection which Russell was eventually to find so devastating. It would appear at least possible that his engagement with Frege's ideas was what suggested this problem to Wittgenstein.

7. Concluding remarks: back to Frege

Sullivan 2001 draws a connection between the *Tractatus*'s concern with the relation of representability to possibility and what Beaney (1996) calls Frege's *semainominalism*, the view that thoughts and their constituents occupy a third realm of abstracta. But since "[i]t is internal to the occupants of the world of thoughts that they be so and so inferentially related", then "[i]t appears that the world of thoughts, in virtue of its isolation, would be what and as it is if the world of things were quite different"; but then "what is the connection between the abstract world of thoughts and the actual world of things that brings it about that the occupants of the first *non–accidentally* have properties which depend on the disposition of the second?" (Sullivan 2001, p. 92) We can see this form of sceptical anxiety, encouraged by Frege's semainominalism, as a relative of the following thought, implicit in the above discussion of whether understanding the *Tractatus*'s elucidatory correlation of words and names as ostension risked allowing nonsense. The combinatorial possibilities of a name are a matter of its syntax, the rules set down for its use, and these are apparently a matter internal to language, and thus seem that they would be as they are even if the world were

quite different. Therefore, an account of the elucidation of a name which fails to make clear why what is permitted by the linguistic rules should be expected non–accidentally to mirror worldly possibilities for the named object leaves us in just the sort of bind that Sullivan finds in Frege. And, as we have seen, avoidance of this bind in the context of the *Tractatus* requires the rejection of the view that the elucidation of primitive signs is to be understood as a form of ostension.

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Elucidation and Ostension in the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein writes at §3.263 of the *Tractatus* that "[t]he meanings of primitive signs can be explained by elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. They can therefore only be understood if the meanings of these signs are already known." Hacker has argued that such elucidation should be understood in terms of ostension. But Hacker's reading belongs to a class of realist interpretations which, it has been argued, render mysterious Wittgenstein's claim at §3.02 that "what is thinkable is also possible." This is as yet no good as an objection to Hacker's reading of the *Tractatus*, since it is part and parcel of that reading that the view to be found in the *Tractatus* is flawed. But in the second part of the paper, I try to show that the problem incurred by Hacker's understanding of §3.263 is strongly reminiscent of a problem Wittgenstein first raised for Russell's multiple relation theory of judgement in 1913 (recapitulated at

Tractatus §5.5422.) It is therefore unlikely that Wittgenstein should have thought of the elucidation of Tractarian names in the ostension–based way Hacker suggests.
Keywords: Objects · Russell · Judgment · Names · Primitive Terms

Elucidación y Ostensión en el *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein escribe en §3.263 del *Tractatus* que "[l]os significados de signos primitivos se pueden explicar mediante elucidaciones. Elucidaciones son proposiciones que contienen los signos primitivos. Por consiguiente, se pueden entender sólo si los significados de estos signos ya son conocidos". Hacker arguye que semejantes elucidaciones se deberían entender en términos de ostensión. Pero la lectura de Hacker, arguyo, hace misteriosa la afirmación de Wittgenstein en §3.02 de que "lo que es pensable también es posible". En la segunda parte del trabajo trato de hacer ver que el problema generado por el entendimiento de Hacker de §3.263 es fuertemente reminiscente de un problema que Wittgenstein señaló primero para la teoría de relaciones múltiples de juicio en 1913 (recapitulado en *Tractatus* §5.5422). Es improbable, por consiguiente, que Wittgenstein hubiera pensado de la elucidación de nombres tractarianos de la manera basada en ostensión que Hacker sugiere.
Palabras claves: Objetos · Russell · Juicio · Nombres · Terminos primitivos

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