INTRODUCTION TO
WITTGENSTEIN’S TRACTATUS
LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY W. E. O’HEA
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The editors of this book are a grandniece and nephew of author Friedrich Hülster. After the death of Hülster in 1992 and his wife Eva Hülster in 1996, the nephew received from the executor of the estate a large box containing Hülster’s writing about philosophy, all of which is in German.

The box included an introduction to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which we had known about, but also, rather unexpectedly, an English translation by W. E. O’Hea. This book is based on that material.

The delay in issuing this book has a simple explanation. For many years, it was not clear how the material could be published, since it seemed unlikely that a publisher would anticipate sufficient profit to print the material.

But that is no longer a concern. Books can now be efficiently printed and distributed via the Internet.

The editors have freely modified the text to clarify or revise statements, and to update the spelling to US English.

Citations of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are based on a 1961 edition that contains the translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. Wittgenstein assigned decimal numbers to paragraphs. Citations use these numbers even when just a portion of the material is quoted. Here and there, we have adjusted a citation to achieve a US English version that, we hope, properly represents the original German version of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

To keep the presentation uncluttered, the modifications of the translation by O’Hea as well as of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* citations are not specially marked.
As an aside, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is available free of charge from several websites; just google “Wittgenstein Tractatus free pdf.”

**About Wittgenstein’s Tractatus**

In 1921, Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951) published a landmark book in philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The book, now often just called the *Tractatus*, puts forth a picture theory of the meaning of language. There is little doubt that Wittgenstein would have been upset by this characterization. He would have been right, too. There is no brief way to characterize the main hypotheses and conclusions of the Tractatus. But clearly a key goal, if not *the* key goal of Wittgenstein, was to help the reader avoid errors of philosophy.

By 1929, Wittgenstein realized that important arguments of the Tractatus were not correct. Indeed, in the subsequent book *Philosophical Investigations* published in 1953 shortly after his death—followed by a number of additional books assembled later from his notes by his students—he set out to describe methods that, just as intended by the Tractatus, help the reader avoid errors of philosophy. But the approach had drastically changed.

In the preface of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he wrote that the Tractatus contained “grave mistakes.” Despite Wittgenstein’s harsh assessment, the Tractatus has been reprinted time and again. There is good reason: Understanding the explanations put forth in the Tractatus and then reading the *Philosophical Investigations* and realizing why certain arguments are incorrect, is an excellent way to see why determination of the meaning of language is so complicated.

Amazingly, some current methods of Artificial Intelligence for the computation of meaning of language implicitly assume cer-
tain parts of the Tractatus to be correct that according to results in the *Philosophical Investigations* are in error. Accordingly, any such method must fail.

**Why You May Want to Read This Book**

If you are a person whose profession is not philosophy, and if you are interested in the fundamental question “What can be expressed by language?” then this book is a good way to start an investigation of that question.

It is written by a physicist who for many years was baffled by the fact that language is frequently abused. He then decided to focus on the above question. He started out by studying the works of Wittgenstein, who had dedicated most of his life trying to answer that question.

Don’t be deterred from reading this book by the fact that Wittgenstein later refuted the Tractatus. Actually, he desired to publish the Tractatus together with the *Philosophical Investigations*, so that the reader could see how the two works are related.

Wittgenstein is considered by some the most important philosopher of the 20th century. Indeed, the Tractatus is a work of genius. Reading this little book about the Tractatus, you will not just understand the main arguments in that profound work of Wittgenstein, but—as an important side effect—you will also learn how to recognize and cope with the nonsensical statements that swirl around us and try to confuse us.

If reading this book motivates you to delve further into Wittgenstein’s works, then that is another positive effect.
Editors’ Note

Other Introductions and Commentaries


In contrast, this book is not a technical work in philosophy, in fact is not intended for the specialist. There is no attempt of completeness of approach. But the book does bring out the fundamental ideas of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus.

In the Author’s Preface, which immediately follows this note, Hülster cites the book *Wittgenstein und die moderne Philosophie* (Wittgenstein and Modern Philosophy) by Justus Hartnack as an outstanding example of a short, clear, and concise commentary of the Tractatus that is accessible to nonspecialists. The book is indeed excellent, but also really brief. It explains the Tractatus in just 45 pages of small format. In contrast, this book covers the Tractatus at a more leisurely pace, includes many examples, and is written from the viewpoint of a physicist instead of a philosopher.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to a number of people who assisted in the publication. M. Opperud and U. Truemper reviewed a first version of the book and suggested changes. B. Scheidegger and J. Trümper provided data about the author and the translator.
M. Hittinger helped with technical aspects of the typesetting. The University of Texas at Dallas generously supported this effort; special thanks are due to Provost B. Wildenthal.

Last but not Least

Since we made numerous changes in the translated text, any errors in this book, of whatever kind, are ours alone.

I. T. and K. T.
Summer 2015
These notes had their origin in a habit of mine—dating from long before I became acquainted with Wittgenstein’s book—of never being sure of understanding anything until I could write it down in my own words. It seemed worthwhile to apply this method to the Tractatus. When I began writing, I was not yet aware of the existence of commentaries on the Tractatus which are not only profound but easily understood. An outstanding example is the short book *Wittgenstein und die moderne Philosophie* (Wittgenstein and Modern Philosophy) by Justus Hartnack.

Is it still worthwhile today, so many years after its first appearance in 1921, to work through the Tractatus, if one isn’t a professional philosopher? Didn’t Wittgenstein himself at a later date, particularly in his *Philosophical Investigations*—written between 1936 and 1949 and published posthumously in 1953—move away from his earlier work and even subject it to sharp criticism?

Indeed, the later work of Wittgenstein is more general in content than the Tractatus, since it treats the informational statements covered by the Tractatus as one among many possible language games. Furthermore, the method of research and exposition used in the *Philosophical Investigations* has little in common with that of the Tractatus.

Both books agree to a great extent in their practically important conclusions. In fact, the warning against the misuse of language becomes more insistent in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and the rejection of philosophy as a doctrine more radical.

Wittgenstein’s later work, although written almost entirely in everyday words and phrases, is not easy to understand. The
reader will hardly succeed in fathoming that material without having first worked through the Tractatus.

Friedrich Hülster
Louveciennes, France, July 1969
Overview

The first three chapters describe the main results of the Tractatus regarding the role and limits of human language.

Chapter 1 begins with the definition of “world.” According to that definition, the world of the Tractatus consists of everything that we can communicate about. That world consists of things and facts that by analysis can be reduced to elementary things and elementary facts.

Chapter 2 examines the representation of the world by pictures, for example, geographical maps and technical drawings. Specifically, things and facts of the world are tied to picture elements and their relations. If such a picture is to be a correct one, the relationships among things and facts of the world on one hand, and among the elements and relations of the picture on the other hand, must—in a certain sense—be in agreement: Wittgenstein says that they must have the same logical form.

Chapter 3 uses these results to analyze the human thought processes that find their expression in propositions of language. The chapter shows that every such thought—and thus the corresponding proposition of language—is a combination of pictures, each of which depicts parts of the world, that is, things and facts.

The main conclusion of the first three chapters can be expressed as follows: A meaningful proposition—no matter how complex—can only depict things and facts of the world.

Chapter 4 applies this result to philosophy and shows that many philosophical claims are meaningless. This is demonstrated using pseudoproblems of philosophy—that is, problems where the formulation is already meaningless.

So what role is then left for philosophy to play?
Chapter 5 gives Wittgenstein’s answer: Philosophy is to help achieve clarity when language is misused in meaningless questions and claims.