

# The New Tractatus: Summing Up Everything

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- 0 Because we're alive, we're creatures of motion, and so creatures of change. . . . 1**
- 1 We're all beginners at the game of life. . . . 4**
- 2 Our projects are what give us goals, which in turn give us a reason for acting. . . . 11**
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## Preface

*Like Ludwig Wittgenstein, I believe that big topics can be covered in little ground. In his **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus**, Wittgenstein offered what he thought was a philosophy to end all philosophy, ordered in seven propositions with sub-propositions. Every new whole number, 1, 2, and so on up to 7, is a new major topic. 1.1 is a sub-topic to 1.0, 1.11 of 1.1 (and so on).*

*This is the **New Tractatus**: informed by what I take to be the essential spirit of the “old” one, but making this essential spirit clearer than it was in Wittgenstein’s work, then reacting to it and taking it in a different direction. The **New Tractatus** uses the same numbering system as the old, though I’ve begun with a 0.0 proposition as a preamble and have used the seventh proposition to its full length.*

*Wittgenstein was concerned with questions like how language could mean anything, what our relationship to the universe is, and the nature of philosophy itself. I treat these, and many other topics, such as: Why is sex such a hot potato? Why are we so interested in celebrities? What is the nature of love? Why do liberals and conservatives argue about so many things? What is magic? Can miracles happen? Is science objective? Does art lie to us? How do we win arguments? What is the meaning of life? It’s not technical philosophy, any more than these are technical topics. People can read it on the train, on the beach, or in the carrel of a library.*

*The **New Tractatus** shares with the old the fundamental perception that we can never transcend what is. On the cover of a guide book to Mexico I found this: “Wherever you go, there you are!” You achieve the foreign, and find the domestic. Before you got there it was foreign because you weren’t there; after you’re there it’s once again the taste of your own saliva and the grittiness of sand under your feet. And you have to find a new “foreign.” You never eliminate things beyond you in the world, you just change your relationship to them. But that changes the things themselves. The universe works, in philosophical terms, on a conservation of matter basis: nothing is ever created or destroyed, just rearranged. We’re the ones rearranging it.*

*Thus order can be created in the world, but it isn’t created in absolute terms. Order in the world is silhouetted against the disorder that this action hasn’t affected, and the “waste” disorder that the act of focusing on this order has produced: while we’re doing this, we’re failing to do many other things, which probably go even further to seed than they would have done. Our world is all of this: the creation of order, the disorder this action itself adds to, and*

*the action that takes us between these realms. At any one time, we're in one part of this cycle, but that means that at the same time, we're working out the whole cycle.*

*The whole of Wittgenstein's **Tractatus** is summed up in its opening phrase: "Die Welt ist alles, Was der Fall ist." The standard translation of Pears and McGuinness rendered this as a statement about statements: "The world is everything that is the case." This translation helped ensure that Wittgenstein's **Tractatus** was initially read as an essay on language. This led to the Vienna School of logical positivism, exemplified by Carnap, whose mission was to purify language of the things that were getting in the way of perfect picturing of facts. What a bizarre fate for a book about the ineffability of language!*

*The **Tractatus** is more profoundly seen as being about the strange fact that whatever you've said, you've said it, so it too is part of the world. Even what you'd like to take out, or pretend doesn't exist—say, mistakes—still did happen, and all this too is part of the world. Life is the whole transcript, not the edited version. This is what Wittgenstein meant, I believe, when he said, in 5.473, "We cannot, in a certain sense, make mistakes in logic." They're part of reality too. We see another version of this same idea in 2.063: "The sum-total of reality is the world." ("Die gesamte Wirklichkeit ist die Welt"; here the standard translation seems more to the point.)*

*I express this idea that everything is part of life—not just the motion forward we put on our résumé—as "living in error"—as in NT 1.1. "Life consists of realizing what we didn't know before. This means that most of life consists of living in error." Or NT 1.11: "Life consists of learning things." We emphasize the result, perhaps even denying what it took to achieve that result: but this emphasis hasn't made the motion toward the result disappear, and life is thus both the time before and the achieved result—as well as the time after.*

*It makes more sense to translate the opening of the **Tractatus** as follows: "The world is everything that is." ("Der Fall" in German can also mean an instance of something, "the case of x"—something real, not used merely in the abstract sense of "being the case," where in this phrase we don't know what "the case" is.) Or just as likely: "Everything that is: that constitutes the world." It's similar to 2.063, "The sum-total of reality is the world." This gives us a sense of the shoulder-shrugging "that's the way it is" quotidian nature of life that is at the center of Wittgenstein's **Tractatus**. We can apparently escape what we have, but whatever we get is then also what we have.*

Many individual propositions of the **New Tractatus** could serve as a comparably efficient sum-up of this work, in the way that the opening of the **Tractatus** can for it. One is this: NT 1.811 “The feeling of control and predictability is always based on things we have under control, not on the things we fail to have under control.” Or this: NT 7.6 “We spend our lives in the attempt to pin things down, make the world certain. In the moment of pinning down, it feels as if we have achieved our goal. But we have only pinned down one thing, the thing we are considering right here, right now.” We don’t create more of anything in the world, just re-arrange what’s here already.

The painter Ferdinand Léger was mesmerized by the beauty of machine-like shapes, the gizmos of industrialization. So, to a degree, was Wittgenstein, in his case things like truth tables and mathematical formulae. Thus it’s not merely Wittgenstein’s readers, but Wittgenstein himself who overplayed his fascination with a vision of a crystalline world: the utterances themselves were lapidary, and all those truth tables seemed so nicely objective—in the service, paradoxically, of a philosophy of what couldn’t be said. Perhaps Wittgenstein was merely falling prey to the lure that the machine-like has for the young, while simultaneously realizing its insufficiency.

Still, it seems Wittgenstein did think that he could talk people into silence. The **New Tractatus**, by contrast, is imbued with the fatalism—and thus perhaps realism—of the not-quite-so-young. I say, with a shrug: All you’re doing is changing the position of things. But sure. Go ahead—talk away. People will anyway, since each new person, each new generation, has to have a swing at the paradoxes of the human condition—such as, among others, this one: that transcendence is always a response to and within the context of the non-transcendent—and each attempt to cut off the head of the Hydra of talk, each attempt to get everybody to Solve the Big Problems once and for all, merely causes more heads to sprout, more talk to flow.

Why wouldn’t it? Other people have to live too, and that means: others have to do things their own way. Each person has to mature, and find love, and decide what the universe is up to. It seems crabbed and strange to think that we’re going to do this so well that they needn’t, as if we thought a man could shave so well today he wouldn’t ever have to do it tomorrow. That’s only true if there is no tomorrow, when he dies.

The sense that Wittgenstein thought he was going to put muzzles on people who didn’t say what he wanted to hear is what’s soured a generation or two on the **Tractatus**, now almost

universally laid aside in favor of the **Philosophical Investigations**. For, after a “l’entre-les-deux-guerres” infatuation with the **Tractatus** came the recoil: the picture theory was wrong! Now, of course, we know that “meaning is use.”

But “early” and “late” Wittgenstein (as we sometimes call the identical author of these two respective works) merely offer two different emphases within the same world-view. Either we emphasize that we can get somewhere else than where we are now, achieve the exotic, or we point out that we don’t achieve it for very long, and have to move on. Both of these positions are part of the world, and that’s what Wittgenstein seemed to have been aiming at in the **Tractatus**. You can’t get beyond what is. Both the going and the moving on are part of the world. Wherever you go, there you are!

Wittgenstein’s famous last line in the **Tractatus** is this: “Alles, Was nicht gesagt werden kann, darüber muss man schweigen.” “As for everything that can’t be said: we just have to [in the sense of prediction] fall silent about that.”

Pears and McGuinness translate this as: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” As in: I have things to say but am not allowed to say them? I think it unlikely Wittgenstein meant we were capable of forming phrases that nonetheless were not permitted to exit our mouths or flow from our pens. It’s too inconsistent with his sense that people are going to do what they do, that whatever we do, that’s part of the world too. (“The sum-total of reality is the world.”) I think he meant that once you’d articulated both the transcendence and the fact that it was a reaction to the non-transcendent, you’d just have to shrug your shoulders. If he really meant to forbid something he could have done it this way: “Alles, Was nicht gesagt werden kann, darf nicht gesagt werden.” “Everything that can’t be said: that may not be said.” Or perhaps this: “Alles, Was nicht gesagt werden kann, das soll man nicht sagen.” “We shouldn’t speak what can’t be said.” But see how ridiculous we sound if we actually articulate the meaning so many have thought these phrases to have. Why shouldn’t we say these things? Who’s stopping us?

In fact, this last line reads to me like a shrug: “Everything that can’t be said— you just have to fall silent about that.” Not “be silent,” as in: don’t even try to articulate the both/and of two alternatives one of which denies the other. Instead: Sure, try, go ahead. But in the end, he knows

*we'll just give up. It's not so much an order as a prediction. We can't order two contraries into anything larger. We take them one at a time, in alternation.*

*The American transcendentalist Margaret Fuller is said to have announced, grandeloquently: "I accept the universe!" When someone repeated this to Thomas Carlyle, he's supposed to have responded: "Egad! She'd better."*

*I share Carlyle's bemusement at such grand pronouncements by individuals. The universe doesn't care whether we accept it or not. Still, we might as well accept it. Once you realize that all of this is life—not just the moment you succeed in jumping off the ground, but the preparation for the jump, the jump, the descent, and finding yourself back on solid ground—why not accept the fact with enthusiasm as well as with resignation?*

*Arguments arise between people about issues for the same reason they arose between the blind men each of whom had his hands on a specific part of the elephant. The man touching the leg announced that the elephant "was very like a tree!"; the man with his hand on the trunk that it was "very like a snake." We try to equate all of life with a fragment, getting the other blind men who assert that the elephant is too like a snake or a tree to see things our way. Sure, we can try. And probably we're condemned to, given that we're all in the position of the blind men. But we never transcend the position of the blind men. Offering an over-view that includes the points of view of the other blind men is something a single blind man can do. But this doesn't end the argument. It just takes its place in the flow, especially as there's no guarantee the other blind men will be interested in such an over-view, at least not then.*

*If Wittgenstein did believe he could talk himself, or others, into silence, he found out he was wrong by living on after the **Tractatus** and responding to its reception. Philosophy begets philosophy; a response begets another response. In everyday terms, this means that the next person is going to have to have his or her say, whatever we think we've done. We don't stop time or make anything definitive by wrapping it up and putting a bow on it. The next person refuses the package, or opens it and uses the contents for something else entirely.*

*Wittgenstein said he thought his **Tractatus** could only be understood by someone who had thought the same things. I think pretty nearly everybody has thought about the things covered in the **New Tractatus**.*