

SHOWABILITY AND SAYABILITY IN THE TRACTATUS

An important aspect of Wittgenstein's picture theory of propositions is captured in his assertion: "What can be shown, cannot be said" (4.1212). Still some of his commentators have shown fundamental confusion regarding the meaning of this remark. The cause of this confusion, in my opinion, lies in the fact that some of these commentators have tried to over-extend the application of this remark in interpreting some other passages in the Tractatus. Particularly, Wittgenstein's ladder analogy passage, by the end of the book, has been a source of trouble. The passage runs as follows:

6.54: My propositions serve as elucidation in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as non-sensical, when he had used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.

In what follows I wish to comment basically on this ladder analogy passage. In so doing I would try to establish that confusions regarding Wittgenstein's remarks about "showability" and "sayability" have resulted from extending it to the areas where it does not apply. I would basically argue against the way Carnap and Pitcher have interpreted the ladder analogy passage.

The basic question before me is: What is the status of philosophical propositions stated in the Tractatus? Viewed in the light of the ladder analogy passage this question becomes particularly hard to answer. No wonder then that it has been answered divergently. George Pitcher, for example, assigns a showing status to the propositions of the Tractatus. He thinks that these propositions make us "see that certain important things are the case - things which are shown, but which cannot be said."¹

Carnap, on the other hand, takes a different view of the situation. He declares the Tractatus as inconsistent, and seems to imply that philosophical propositions can have sense. In other words they are sayable. In his *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, he says:

In the first place he seems to be inconsistent in what he does. He tells us that one cannot state philosophical propositions and that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent; and then instead of keeping silent he writes a whole philosophical book. Secondly, I do not agree with his statement that all his propositions are quite as much without sense as metaphysical propositions are. My opinion is that a great number of his propositions (unfortunately not all of them) have in fact sense; and that same is true for all propositions of logical analysis.²

First I wish to develop and examine the view which assigns a showing status to the propositions of the Tractatus. Pitcher thinks that "the Tractatus is filled with statements that could not possibly be construed as truth-functions of elementary propositions, that are not descriptive propositions about states of affairs, that are not propositions of the natural sciences. Indeed, it is filled with nothing

1. George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p.155.

2. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1935) p.37

else; Wittgenstein would insist that no descriptive proposition - i.e. no proposition that simply states an empirical fact - has any place in a book of philosophy".³ Pitcher cites as example of a philosophical propositions the thesis from the Tractatus that the logical structure of a proposition is identical with the logical structure of the state of affairs it depicts. He says that as this thesis does not depict the existence or non-existence of any state of affairs in the world, it can only be assigned the showing-status. He goes on to equate this thesis with Wittgenstein's discussion of solipsism;⁴ and says that, like solipsism, this thesis is also true. Their truth is shown by something. In case of solipsism it is shown by the fact that limits of my language mean the limits of my world (5-62); and in case of the above-mentioned thesis it is shown by the structure of elementary propositions and by that of the states of affairs they depict. Pitcher goes on to conclude that, in the ladder analogy passage, "Wittgenstein does not mean that his assertions are sheer non-sense, as if he had said "Gloom black pan fowfy". Nor does he mean that they are obfuscating nonsense, like the pseudo-propositions of some meta-physicians (e.g., "The Absolute is becoming"). Wittgenstein considers his philosophical assertion to be illuminating non-sense. What he had intended to say is quite true - only, as it turns out, it cannot be said. So we must grasp what it is that he intended to say, learn the lesson - climb up the ladder. But precisely in virtue of having done so, we will no longer continue trying to say such things, for we realize that they cannot be said. We will throw away the ladder by means of which we came to have this insight. We will see that certain important things are the case - things which are shown but which cannot be said."⁵ This is Pitcher's sympathetic interpretation of the ladder analogy passage in the Tractatus. I call it sympathetic because he says also that "one immediately feels a sense of uneasiness with Wittgenstein's position here, and I think it is in fact untenable." In this sense Pitcher's point of view seems to be no different from those who charge Wittgenstein with inconsistency. But, here I am concerned with his sympathetic interpretation primarily.

I feel that Pitcher is really mistaken in equating Wittgenstein's philosophical assertions with his discussion of solipsism.

3. Pitcher, op. cit., p.154

4. Ibid., p.153

5. Ibid., pp.154-5.

Wittgenstein uses the word showing only and only in connection with tautologies and contradictions, logical form, solipsism, and the mystical in its special sense. All these areas constitute the limits to our language for him. They only manifest themselves as limits, we cannot state them. For example, in regard to logical form of propositions, he says:

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it - logical form. In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, this is to say outside the world.

So the logical form is only displayed by the propositions, they cannot represent it (4.121). In other words the logical form manifests itself, it shows itself, but it cannot be stated. Any such effort requires us to go beyond the limit of logic, but that is impossible. The limits of logic manifest themselves in the limit of our language. They show themselves but we cannot state them. Tautologies and contradictions also fall on the limits of the sensible discourse. Wittgenstein says:

5.143 Contradiction is the outer limit of propositions: tautology is the unsubstantial point at their centre.

And like all the limits they shows themselves as the limit. "Every tautology shows that it is a tautology" (6.127). Not only tautologies/contradictions and logical form but also solipsism and the mystical fall on the limits of the language or the world. Wittgenstein makes it abundantly clear in the following propositions.

5.62 ...For what solipsist means is quite true; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest. The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world.

6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.

It is obvious that, for Wittgenstein, there are things that manifest themselves as the limit to the language, to the factual world. They show themselves as the limits. It is in connection with these and only these things that Wittgenstein uses the word "showing" in its special sense. Philosophical propositions do not fall under this category precisely because they are not limits. In fact, they have got nothing to do with what Wittgenstein calls as the limits of the world or the limits of language. Now the heart of the matter is that Wittgenstein does not use his thesis "What can be shown, cannot be said" except for the category of things that manifest or show themselves as the limits to our language. And these limits cannot be stated. Any effort to do that i.e. to state these limits must end up in non-sense.

He declares his philosophical propositions as non-sensical in the ladder analogy passage in the same vein that he declares metaphysical or ethical propositions as non-sensical. All of them do not portray any possible states of affairs. Philosophical propositions are not non-sensical like the proposition "Gloom black pan fowdy"; they have the same status as the proposition of metaphysics. This position of Wittgenstein on the status of philosophical proposition, I believe, does land him in a paradox. The Tractatus certainly is a book filled with philosophical propositions, and if all of them are non-sensical then the Tractatus really is a self-defeating project. And this is exactly what Wittgenstein wanted it to be. We will return to this point a little later.

Pitcher seems to be really mistaken in his sympathetic interpretation of the ladder analogy passage, i.e., in assigning a showing status to the philosophical proposition in the Tractatus. There seems to be absolutely no reason to equate philosophical propositions with solipsism or the mystical in this regard. Philosophical propositions are elucidatory in their character, they play a clarificatory role, but they do not manifest themselves as the limits of our language or the world.

If we assign a showing status to the propositions in the Tractatus, we can't escape the conclusion that Pitcher reaches at, i.e.,

"we will see that certain important things are the case - things which are shown, but which cannot be said".⁶ But such a conclusion runs counter to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in the *Tractatus*. He says:

4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).

4.112 Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

Philosophy does not result in philosophical propositions, but rather in the clarification of thoughts.

It is clear from these observations in the *Tractatus* that philosophy can only play a clarificatory role; it neither can state nor show anything to be the case. "The correct method in philosophy would be to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy"(6.53). If Wittgenstein had intended to assign a showing status to his propositions in the *Tractatus* he would not have declared the role of philosophy to be only clarificatory. Nor would he say that these propositions are non-sensical and must be transcended in order to see the world aright; because he actually did not say any such thing, for example, about the solipsism or the mystical, the things which simply manifest themselves. He says explicitly that "philosophy settles controversies about the limits of natural sciences"(4.113). This clearly means that philosophy itself does not constitute these limits. "The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them (4.111). And whatever is above or below natural sciences is nothing but nonsense. If Wittgenstein states

6. *Ibid.*, p.154.

philosophical propositions in the *Tractatus*, he is fully aware of the paradoxical nature of his own project. He boldly admits it and asks us to throw away the ladder after climbing up it. This is the true meaning of the ladder analogy passage. If the *Tractatus* was not a paradoxical project it would not have served the purpose that it did i.e., it would not have proven the impossibility of philosophical propositions. The success of the book lies in its self-destructive character more than anywhere else.

Carnap rightly points out the inconsistency in the *Tractatus*. But, like many others, he also fails to appreciate the significance of Wittgenstein's paradox. Carnap says "I do not agree with his statement that all his propositions are quite as much without sense as metaphysical propositions. My opinion is that a great number of his propositions (unfortunately not all of them) have in fact sense."⁷ Now such a view of philosophical propositions viz. philosophical propositions with sense, cannot be held without doing violence to Wittgenstein's picture theory of language. The *Tractatus* is loud in claiming that sensible discourse is confined to the propositions which picture the existence or non-existence of possible states of affairs in the world. But clearly philosophical propositions do not picture any state of affairs. Hence Wittgenstein declares them to be nonsense. It is hard to imagine how Carnap has come to think that a great number of these propositions have sense. I think he fails to see the full import of the picture theory which draws clear boundaries between nonsense, sayable and showable. If Pitcher is guilty of over-extending showability, Carnap moves on to the other extreme. He seems to think that philosophical propositions can have sense; which is the same as sayability in the Tractarian theory of language.

It is clear from the foregoing that Wittgenstein's remark that "What can be shown, cannot be said" must be read in conjunction with his picture theory of language which demarcates the areas of showability and sayability. Otherwise we are bound to run into confusion.

7. Carnap. op. cit., p.37.