

9 'There is no such thing as the subject that thinks': Wittgenstein and Lacan on Truth and the Subject

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THIS CHAPTER IS part of a larger sequence, one aim of which is to articulate a bit what can still be said, in truth, about the 'being' of a subject – if one can be said to have any – within the scope of a formal approach to truth as having the structure of language.¹ It is a familiar point of the doxography of the twentieth century that such an approach, as taken for example by analytic philosophy after the 'linguistic turn', destabilises the psychological subject of thought and experience by displacing it from any constitutive position, either with respect to objects or meanings. What remains less well-marked is what results from this displacement with respect to the position from which these – objects and meanings – take their place in language and from which can then be articulated the knowledge of them that the structure of a language, as spoken, permits. I shall have recourse to the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, as well as the late seminars of Lacan, because of the way both locate this positional question in relation to the *totality* of what that structure allows to be articulated as known. I will be interested, especially, in the particular kind of complex organisation that both give to the structural field of what can be said, according to their own methods, and in the correlative kind of unity that this allows to be inferred in the position from which this articulation can be enunciated. This unity, I will argue, can be seen as having its point in the application it permits – an application that might, as I shall suggest, be called 'ethical' – to what speaks in the life of a speaking being, in default of agency, ego and consciousness, and in abeyance of the identity of thinking and being that these presume as their metaphysical guarantee. That the identity of thinking and being is here in abeyance means, as I shall suggest, that if the 'subject' or 'I' can indeed be specified as a 'linguistic' or 'grammatical' fiction, it is nevertheless not a 'subjective' being as opposed to an 'objective' one, but (as one that locates itself in being with respect to what can be

articulated in language) comes to have there the sense of the undecidability of their alternative.²

I.

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* at section 5.5421, appealing to considerations about the logical form of the possible relations between sentences, Wittgenstein draws the striking conclusion of the nonexistence of a psychological subject:

5.5421 This shows too that there is no such thing as the soul – the subject, etc. – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day.

Indeed a composite soul would no longer be a soul.

Slightly later in the text, at 5.631, Wittgenstein repeats the conclusion, this time appealing to considerations about the form of a complete expression of the truths of the world:

5.631 There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. [*Das denkende, vorstellende, Subjekt gibt es nicht.*]

If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book.—

What is it that leads Wittgenstein, in both cases, to this striking denial of the existence of a subject capable of entertaining thoughts and ideas, of expressing judgments or of making assertoric claims about the world, of representing the world or its objects or facts in consciousness, or of possessing a knowledge of its circumstances or affairs? In the second case at least, despite the evident boldness of the conclusion, the argument is relatively straightforward. If I were to write a book that would include all and only the *facts* of the world as I can establish them, know them or express them, such a book could include (in addition to any number of banal empirical particularities of the distribution of matter or the happening of events) an indication of one particular body as ‘privileged’ – so to speak – that is, as under *my* volitional control and as the body whose pains *I* (the author of the book) feel. But such an indication would be no *description*: there would be, and could be, no sentence in the book that *describes* a subject that is privileged in this sense. Nor indeed would it be possible for any sentence in the book to describe the form of this ‘privilege’ itself:

that is, although the book would indeed include many descriptions of the activities of persons (including those of the author of the book), and although I can say that there is a person that is privileged as the author of *this* book itself, there is nothing in the world that corresponds to what I will feel to be *my* subjectivity, agency or selfhood. Assuming only the identification, maintained throughout the *Tractatus*, between the world as a whole and the totality of what can truly be said ('The world is all that is the case'), the conclusion follows directly: as there is nothing that can be said of the subject or self, and hence nowhere for 'it' to be found, there is in all rigour no 'it' at all.

Since the argument thus turns on language, it might be resisted on these grounds. Could there not, even granting the validity of the argument, still be a subject whose being or essence necessarily identifies it as *beyond* the possibility of linguistic expression – no subject or self *in* the world of facts, but (so to speak) nevertheless one that takes up its distinctive position – that from which it speaks, judges, understands or perceives – outside it? This suggestion is worth taking seriously, and is even motivated by the once-influential line of interpretation of the *Tractatus* that drew on biographical and historical detail to ally what is effectively the *Tractatus*'s own position of enunciative demonstration with that of a 'transcendental' subject in the Kantian mould and its agency with the noumenal will that Schopenhauer treated, in idealist fashion, as constituting the 'inner' nature of the world itself.³ But the most we can say about such a noumenal subject, given the *Tractatus*'s project of the delimitation of language, is that *nothing* could be said about it. Or, accordingly, *from* its position. To suppose a structural truth about the world to be discernible from its (imagined) perspective would be to assume there to be such an 'outside' perspective from which the structure of the world could be viewed. But the visual metaphor aside, it is clear that there could then be *no* possible articulation in language of any truth of this position itself.⁴

Where, then, do we speak from, if what speaks in us is not locatable anywhere within the being of what-is? Or more broadly and formally: if we cannot, in view of the linguistic argument, place ourselves who speak within the world that we can speak about, what speaks in us when we speak in the first person? If a unitary sense of the being that speaks can be sustained, positionally, only by rejecting any possible characterisation of what holds it in being, then the unitary source or sense of a speaker's intentions or presentations can be sustained only by obscuring a radical and basic incommensurability between this position and that of anything about which anything can, in truth, be said. But the anonymity that necessarily then appears to characterise the position of enunciation whose positive description was frustrated by our insight into the form of the world might also be taken as a positive indication, having, on the level of a formalism indicative of the structure of truth, its own purely positional sense.

As I shall argue, such a formalism is indicative not with respect to ‘the’ being of the subject but with respect to the structure that ultimately supports the kind of unitary being that a subject is *supposed* to have – and, in this way, indicative of a characteristic desire, what we might express – speaking ‘metaphysically’ – as the desire to occupy a position outside of the world. In addition, however, this already suffices to indicate the relevant desire as the only one that Wittgenstein ever indicates positively to characterise the motivation of ethics. In the concluding sentences of the 1929 ‘Lecture on Ethics’, Wittgenstein asserts the form of this desire, while at the same time insisting on the complete futility of its pursuit, as that of our inclination to ‘run against’ the boundaries of language:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.⁵

That the sense of ethical desire can yield nothing other than the nonsense that it inevitably produces at the point of its attempt to locate for itself a substantive unity of its being: this is what is shown by the examples that Wittgenstein adduces, in the lecture, in arguing that the attempt to express the ‘absolute’ position of the sense of the world must fail. This attempt has the form, for example, of the attempt to express in language the ‘miracle’ that there should be a world at all, and thus to find in the being of language a positive support for what appears miraculous in the fact of its existence. But the attempt to characterise those experiences which should bear witness to such a miracle inevitably fail. For these experiences too are, if anything, expressions of what happens at a particular time and not at others, and as such cannot express – as all expressions of facts cannot – the sense of an absolute. The recognition that the subject has no being beyond the relationship it here seeks with the dissimulated totality of language as a whole, then suffices to expose that the real support of this operation – the only support it can have – lies in just this dissimulation of the flat formal structure of language itself.

II.

Whence, then, what must in fact and all truth stand revealed as the illusion of a subject of thought and experience, the constantly maintained appearance, pursued throughout the career of the life of a speaking subject and at the root of the constitutive fictions that are societies and cultures, communities and values? Here, the argument leading to the conclusion of 5.5421 is more revealing, and can be put in summary form as showing that all of these illusions, along with the underlying illusion of the 'intentional' relationship itself, are *uniformly* the outcome of a falsified mode of unity, in particular of a distinctive mode of the falsification of the unification of sentences in truth. This is the way that this argument, like the first one, turns on the structure of linguistic truth, and more specifically on the formally flat unicity of its expression in sentences. But let us move closer.

The conclusion reached at 5.5421 of the necessary simplicity of a subject and hence the nonexistence of any subject follows from considerations in 5.541 and 5.542 concerning the real form of sentences appearing to report the beliefs, thoughts or assertions of a subject – sentences, that is, such as 'A believes that *p* is the case' or 'A thinks *p*' – and from the underlying claim (5.54) that a sentence can only appear significantly within another one if the two are connected by means of a *truth-functional* operation. This claim itself follows from the recognition that truth-functions are interdefinable (and indeed uniformly definable in terms of a single operation, the operation of joint negation or neither-nor) and finally from the overarching claim, at the plenary remark 5, that all propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions.

More important, for the current argument, than the logical atomism and reductionism implicit in these remarks is the formal requirement they effectively place on the composition of truths and on the forms of combination that can appear within them. There is no form of combination of truths that is not directly compositional, no way for a being of truth to appear that is not comprised by the unitary and wholly decidable law of the formation of more complex sentences from simpler ones.⁶ Thereby Wittgenstein excludes any mode of the composition of truths that is, so to speak, itself 'substantive': that is, any mode of the combination of truths that would have, or require, a being of its own. The exclusion is itself licensed by the underlying formal flatness of the world as the totality of facts: for if there were any such substantive function of combination, the fact of its being or its truth would necessarily find expression only in the superlative forms of exceptionality that the logical apparatus of the *Tractatus* would itself discern as nonsensical.⁷

Given this, the argument of 5.5421 follows directly. Sentences containing 'verbs of intentionality' (such as 'believes', 'has the thought that', etc.) and having a propositional complement appear at first to relate a subject to a proposition. But that

relationship, if it existed, would be non-truth-functional: there is, for example, in general no way of inferring from the truth value of p to that of ‘A believes that p ’, or conversely. Given, then, that a sentence can appear within another sentence *only* truth-functionally, this cannot be their real form. The appearance that such a sentence asserts a relationship between a subject and a sentence is thus misleading: whatever the actual form of these sentences may be, they cannot be taken to be descriptive of the changing and variable attitudes or intentional acts of a thinking subject. The point is general, bearing against any conception on which the being of a subject of thought, experience, judgment or assertion is understood through its purported relations or capacities to relate to the ‘objects’ or ‘contents’ of that thought, experience, judgment or assertion. From this, Wittgenstein accordingly concludes that there is and can be no such thing as the soul or subject that thinks or experiences. Indeed there is no coherent conception of a soul that is ‘composite’ in the sense that it entertains or holds differing contents over time, while remaining (in whatever sense) self-identical.

Formally speaking and with respect to the structure of truth, the commitment to there being only truth-functional combinations of sentences amounts to the commitment to a general *extensionalism*: all genuinely meaningful sentences can be replaced, without change of truth value, by equivalent sentences whose referring terms refer to the same objects. Since intentional sentences apparently reporting the attitudes of subjects towards propositions fail of this requirement, they are often rejected in the course of an extensionalist accounting for truth and meaning overall. For many projects, such as Quine’s, this goes along with an *eliminativist* conclusion on the level of total ontology: intentional ‘attitudes’ in general, and indeed intentionality itself, are to be eliminated from a scientifically motivated accounting for the totality of what there is.

But Wittgenstein’s aim is not a total ontology in this sense, and the positive aspect of what a subject of language might nevertheless be taken to be begins to emerge if we consider rather the implications of what he characterises as the *real* form of the (apparently) intentional sentences. These sentences do not, as we have seen, have the form of asserting a relationship between a subject and another proposition. But, significantly, they are *not* meaningless:

5.542 It is clear, however, that ‘A believes that p ’, ‘A has the thought p ’, and ‘A says p ’ are of the form “‘ p ’ says p ”: and this does not involve a correlation of a fact with an object, but rather a correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects.

This positive suggestion has a partial basis in the ‘picture’ theory announced earlier in the *Tractatus*, according to which sentences in general have their meaning in

virtue of the structural isomorphism between the names in a sentence and the objects in the state of affairs (whether actual or only possible) for which it stands. This sufficiently ensures that the coordination envisioned here – that of the fact of a sentence as written or spoken with the fact for which it stands – is possible only insofar as the two share a structure, and thereby that the reality of an act of asserting or believing is essentially and fully determined by structure in this sense. In this sense, structure is the reality of meaning in that there is no possible act of asserting, believing, meaning or thinking except that which takes its place, and sense, within the structure of a language. But in addition, it ensures that any such act has, primarily, the structure of a propositional *saying*: no thought that such-and-such, no believing or imagining it, no denying or doubting it either, unless there is a *saying that* such-and-such: unless, that is, there is a structural possibility that it be said at some time by someone. What can be said: that is what can be the case, but it is also what can be thought, believed, asserted or maintained. But what is it that can be said? Evidently, what can be the case: but to say that it is the case is just to say it.⁸

By making all intentional meaning a matter, at basis, of this structural isomorphism between the sentence '*p*' and the fact that *p*, Wittgenstein thus simultaneously suggests that there is no sense outside the formal structure of disquotation: no meaning, that is, except as it exists in the movement from '*p*' to *p* and back again. But it is also here that, formally and decisively, what may be characterised as the structure of truth can be seen to enter the analysis. For it will be noted that the disquotational analysis of meaning, which analyses the meaning of '*p*' quite simply, by associating it with the circumstance that *p*, is formally identical with the criterion that Tarski proposed in 1933 for an extensionally adequate and formally correct theory of truth:

'*p*' is true if, and only if, *p*.

As a long series of analyses in the analytic tradition bear out, the schema is fruitful despite its simplicity. In particular, as Tarski discovered, it suffices to demonstrate that any language that includes the resources to describe its own sentences, and that is semantically 'closed' in the sense that it does not require the position of a metalanguage from which to characterise its structure, will be subject to inevitable contradictions that systematically render truth axiomatically undefinable and the truth-conditional sense of its sentences undecidable. Though I cannot go into detail here about the implications of this structural undecidability, it is perhaps to be noted that, given it, Wittgenstein's analysis of the real disquotational form of the (apparently) intentional sentences effectively can then already be seen to show the possibility of a formal anomalousness of the intentional and mental with respect to determinate causation, and that this formally demonstrable anomaly appears, at

least, analogous to the antinomical structure that, for Kant, opens the possibility of a subject's freedom.⁹ In any case, it thus appears on the level of the semantic analysis of truth for a language as a whole, that the schema which captures it already suffices to demonstrate the inability of such a language to ensure, without contradiction, the closure of its world, and thereby, also, to the formally paradoxical situation of whatever operates or figures the operation of an agent of that attempted closure.¹⁰

III.

Here, however, I would like to suggest in a more limited way simply that if we take the disquotational schema, as Wittgenstein's analysis suggests, to operate as a general and minimal schema of linguistic presentation as such, this is not without consequences for an analysis of the subject insofar as it can be grounded in truth. The schema is itself, obviously, devoid of subjectivity or agency. As far as the schema *itself* is concerned, it is not a subject, or 'the' subject, that speaks when it is asserted that $\neg p$. The only evident 'agent' of assertion is, rather, the sentence ' p ', or its sense, itself. If we generalise this over-hastily, we will be tempted to suppose that the schema witnesses something like a *total* capture of truth in essentially anonymous sentences, each of which would be wholly objective: an impersonal annunciation of the whole of being from no position at all. But if we may indeed take the schema as a *general* form of presentation, we may also ask – and this is the key, as I shall argue, to that understanding of the truth of a subject's position that we can hereby reclaim – *how* and *by whom* the schema is applied.

For if, as the schema bears out, every speaking is thus, as such, structured so as to bring the whole structure of a language to bear, it is also to be noted here that there is no such thing as a speaking that does not take place somewhere, or at some time. This recognition corresponds to a formal one which, to anticipate a little, Lacan also makes an axiom of his project: namely, that there is no metalanguage. This means that there is no position from which one can articulate the structure of one's language in a way that does not also bear on the language in which that articulation itself takes place. But the reflexivity of this self-application is also quite evidently central to the *Tractatus*'s project and elucidatory method. Famously, this method culminates, in the penultimate and final remarks of the text, with a decisive recognition that the propositions of the work are, by the light of its own theory, nonsense. The 'ladder' is thus to be kicked away if we are to 'see the world aright', and all that is left, after this, is the silence of proposition 7. In response to this, Russell had imagined, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, that there might be some escape from the paradoxical character of the book's final conclusions by means of an open hierarchy of distinct languages, each capable of delimiting the previous one but having no final

summation into a totality. But it is clear that Wittgenstein does not consider this a real possibility: the theory of the *Tractatus* is indeed to be applied to *all* that can be said, and the self-application of the semantic results to the (seeming) propositions of the work is itself essential to the intended demonstrative outcome, the possibility of seeing the world *as a whole* in a clarified way.

What is said, is said by someone at some time. But what can be said by someone (or, rather, written) can, in principle, capture the *totality* of what is the case. Far from this seeming paradox being an objection to Wittgenstein's analysis, it is in fact the formal core of the *positive* theory of a subject – this time, of what he terms 'metaphysical' subject – that Wittgenstein goes on, immediately after the remark about *The world as I Found it*, to propose.

According to this theory, as stated at 5.641:

... there really is a sense in which philosophy can talk about the self in a non-psychological way [*in welchem in der Philosophie nichtpsychologisch vom Ich die Rede sein kann*].

What brings the self [*das Ich*] into philosophy is the fact that 'the world is my world'.

The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world – not a part of it [*die Grenze – nicht ein Teil – der Welt*].

How can we understand a self – an 'I' or, perhaps, 'ego' – that is nowhere *in* the world but is rather the boundary of it? Evidently, there is no possibility of *directly* attributing to such a 'self' anything like intentionality, agency or thought. Despite this, as Wittgenstein says, there *is* a sense in which the limit-structure of language that becomes evident through the disquotational schema, as applied, effectively reintroduces the position of the speaker, and indeed clarifies its status on a radical formal ground.

How, then, *does* the 'I' that speaks in the position of enunciation enter the totality of structure that it speaks about? Put another way, how does a structure of enunciation that articulates the meaning of presentation in general – that suffices formally for the saying of all that is, or can be, the case – enter, even necessarily, into any possible act of saying, any possible phenomenon of temporally unfolding discourse?

As Wittgenstein says, it enters in the precise sense that 'the world is my world'. At 5.62, he specifies this further: 'The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of my *language* (of the language which alone I understand) mean [or refer to -P.L.] the limits of *my* world.'¹¹ That is, the sense in which the world is limited for

me is the same as the sense in which my language is. But why speak about ‘my world’ or ‘my language’ here at all? The decisive consideration, I think, is again this: that there is no such thing as a language that is not spoken and understood; that is, there is no language, as we may now say, that is not someone’s. And thus, no truth except that which can be articulated at a point where such a one can find itself. For, at any rate, if Wittgenstein *had* written, instead of ‘the limits of my language . . . mean the limits of my world’, rather ‘the limits of *language* mean the limits of *the* world’, he would thereby have invoked, necessarily, something about which the least or first question we should ask would be what possible support it could have, in all sense and truth, for *its* kind of being, if this support is not ultimately to be located in the dynamic reality of discourse – in the life of speaking beings – itself.¹²

But that there is no such thing as language-as-such is not only, then, the evidently necessary source of the articulation of the ‘I’ that alone bears philosophical relevance to that dynamic reality of human discourse and life, but also equally necessary for the sense of what any kind of structural reflection on it can have for that life. Contrary to the many interpretations that have taken the *Tractatus* (often in supposed distinction to what is purported to be the contrasting ‘use-theory’ of meaning of the *Investigations*) to be theorising the logical structure of language ‘as a whole’ from the austere and abstract point of view that its visual metaphor induces, Wittgenstein’s method does not ignore this positionally necessary co-articulation of truth and life but rather, and centrally, affirms it. Indeed, as I have suggested, this is what makes it possible for that method to operate, not indeed as the metaphysics of a subject or the repetition of idealism’s promise to ground an identity of thinking and being, but rather, in default of any such identity, as the potential dissolution of the problems of a life through the radical clarification of its sense.¹³

IV.

If the preceding analysis is correct, there is no possibility of thought, belief, assertion or judgment except as structured by the linguistic schema of disquotation: that is, except that which is to be located strictly within the movement from ‘*p*’ to *p* or back again. This means that that the privilege and unity of the ‘I’ that is purported to think, judge or assert has nothing other than a *positional* ground in relation to what its imagination figures, in its own discourse, as the whole of language: the totality of all that can be said. There is no subject but that which takes up its place within the linguistic structure that disquotational truth effectively delimits: no place, in truth, for the subject’s saying but that whose place is already laid by this structure itself, and which a speaking being sometimes comes to occupy. This means that a living being’s saying, as discourse, is always structured by the dynamics that this structure

imposes, or that it holds itself in being as such only as it can effectively situate itself with respect to this total field that defines truth, but this also does not preclude, as we have seen, its entry into this field, at the limits, or the potential transformation of its total relation to it.

I should now like to consider briefly the relationship of this to Lacan's most consistently maintained 'definition' of the subject, as that which 'slides in a chain of signifiers' or that which one signifier presents to another.¹⁴ This will operate as a kind of prolegomenon – and that is all it can be – to considering how the formal structure of truth can be seen, in terms both Lacanian and Wittgensteinian, as articulating the linguistic field that Freud radically opened to our understanding with his discovery of the unconscious and within which psychoanalysis moves. It will also have consequences, as well, for the question of the way in which Wittgenstein's and Lacan's own discourses effectively maintain themselves, and thus for the kinds of illumination, insight or transformation these discourses offer to provide.

In his seminar session of 21 January 1970, Lacan devotes several pages to the *Tractatus*, by way of illuminating what he is there theorising as the discourse of the analyst by contrast with the other three he introduces in seminar XVII (namely those of the master, the university and the hysteric).¹⁵ Lacan emphasises, in particular, the way in which Wittgenstein's project in the *Tractatus* casts light on the way that truth is structurally situated within the 'effects of language taken as such' and how this situation points to the reality of the unconscious as it is uncovered by analysis. Crucial to this uncovering, Lacan emphasises from the start, is that it operate by treating the value of 'truth' *only* as it can appear within the constraints of a propositional logic: that is, as reduced to the inscription of its symbol (the capital letter 'T' (or 'V')). Lacan describes Wittgenstein, along these lines, as:

... the author who has given the most forceful formulation to what results from the enterprise of proposing that the only truth there is is inscribed in a proposition, and from articulating that which, in knowledge as such – knowledge being constituted on the basis of propositions – can in all strictness function as truth.¹⁶

For Lacan, the result of Wittgenstein's exceptionally forceful operation will be to draw out the consequences of what he (Lacan) calls the factitiousness [*le factice*] of language: the consequences, in other words, of Wittgenstein's recognition that, while there is no truth outside of propositions – and therefore no truth outside the single composite proposition expressing the totality of facts that constitute the world as such – the true proposition is already, structurally and as such, on the other hand so constituted as to assert a fact.¹⁷ It follows, as Wittgenstein notes and Lacan underscores, that there is no logically coherent possibility of signifying an act of assertion

or judgment, separate from the inscription of the proposition asserted or judged-true itself. Given that ‘an assertion declares itself to be the truth’, Wittgenstein’s operation accordingly allows no sense for the act of assertion – indeed for the ‘intentional’ act in general – other than that which is already involved in the marking of propositions with the empty inscriptions ‘T’ or ‘F.’ But this marking, as applied to the elementary propositions that form, for Wittgenstein, the scaffolding of all truths, is sufficient to determine the world as a whole.

The negative consequences of this, for the placement of anything like a subject in the world, are those we have already seen. There is no place in truth, nowhere within the world whose truth is the totality of true propositions, for a subject *capable* of thinking or experience. There is thus no place for a psychology of the ego, or even for a philosophy of ‘the’ self. Indeed, as Lacan notes, this suffices to indicate the whole philosophical development of the self-identical and transcendental ‘I’ as rather an exemplary, and ultimately illusory, product of the *university* discourse, which seeks to harbour truth in the form of the signifier of the master, S_1 .¹⁸ The analyst’s discourse that Wittgenstein’s operation of factitiousness is shown to articulate, by contrast, locates in the position of truth the whole battery of signifiers S_2 – that is, what articulates and defines the totality of possible knowledge as articulated in linguistic signs – thereby to occupy no agency but that of the structurally ‘lost’ object small-a: for this discourse, for which there is no object but what can be described in propositions, there is only the possibility of articulating propositionally, and subject to the constraints of the logic that imposes itself here, whatever of knowledge can be asserted as truth. And to mark this articulation formally is just to realise, in one’s own discourse, the structure of truth insofar as it speaks in what language – *my* language – allows to be said.¹⁹ Absent from the world and without character, the subject that would organise the activities and events of a life leaves behind only the effective possibility of this self-articulation, at the limit of the sense of sentences, of what their structure formally permits.

What can we then say about the way that this absence and this possibility can be said to organise the field of human desire, the point at which we can presumably then locate any ‘ethical’ significance they might be seen to have? Commenting on the simple ‘stupidity’ [*betise*] of isolating the factitiousness of the simplest of sentences – the impersonal ‘it is day’ – Lacan specifies this precisely as the pivot to the detection of what is concealed in the desire of the subject and is thereby exposed by means of the way it puts in relief the topology of the position from which its language speaks:

The stupid thing, if I may say so, is to isolate the factitiousness of ‘It is day.’ It is a prodigiously rich piece of stupidity, for it gives rise to a leverage point, very precisely the following one, from which it results that what I have used as a lever-

age point myself, namely that there is no metalanguage, is pushed to its ultimate consequences.

There is no other metalanguage than all the forms of knavery [*toutes les formes de la canaillerie*], if we thereby designate these curious operations derivable from the fact that man's desire is the desire of the Other [*que le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre*]. All acts of bastardry [*Toute canaillerie*] reside in the fact of wishing to be someone's Other, I mean someone's big Other, in which the figures by which his desire will be captivated are drawn.

Thus this Wittgensteinian operation is nothing but an extraordinary parade, the detection of philosophical skullduggery [*qu'une détection de la canaillerie philosophique*].

The only sense is the sense of desire. This is what one can say after having read Wittgenstein. The only truth is the truth of what the aforesaid desire hides about its lack, so as to pretend to make nothing of what it finds [*Il n'y a de sens que du désir. Voilà ce qu'on peut dire après avoir lu Wittgenstein. Il n'y a de vérité que de ce que cache le dit désir de son manque, pour faire mine de rien de ce qu'il trouve.*]²⁰

In the absence of the metalanguage position or the transcendental subject that would occupy it, Lacan suggests that the only possible way for sense to be constituted is as an effect of desire, in particular the desire which – as all desire is the desire of the Other – operates in particular as that of the constitution of the (big-‘O’) Other for another. The movement of this desire is then recognisable: it is the imaginary production of the illusion of the totality of language, the truth of the world as a whole. But if sense is constituted by this desire, we can also read in it, diagnostically, the temptation to try to speak outside language, the desire that produces, as Lacan says, all the forms of mischief [*canaillerie*], endemic to our human self-reflection, that the Wittgensteinian critique of language suffices to root out.

By means of the critique, these forms of philosophical mischief are, uniformly, shown to be grounded in an illusion: the illusion of the Other, which does not exist. But at the same time, if Lacan's reading is correct, their production is diagnosed as the outcome of a structure of human motivation that is inherent to the life of the speaking being, insofar as it speaks.

This means that the disillusion that consists in the clarification of the sense of life cannot have the significance that I come to stand outside the world, but only that I locate myself differently with respect to truth: that I no longer can situate myself in relation to a truth that I think to correspond to being as a whole, but that I come to orient myself differently *within* the chain of signifiers that effectively positions me in being. This disorientation has, and can only have, a positional sense with respect to the illusory or contradictory totality of structure by means of which the appearance

of the Other subsists. The nonexistence of the Other thus means, in these terms, that I cannot rely on any assumption of the unity of thinking and being, because a position from which this unity could be maintained does not exist. There is thus no synchrony between them: not only does an ‘I think’ fail to ground an ‘I am’, but the same can be said of all the forms in which what Lacan calls the ‘I-crazy’ of the university discourse proposes to ground truth and knowledge in the activities and agency of a subject, be it as transcendental a one as one likes. But that there, where I think, I am not, or at any rate my being cannot be assured: this, as Lacan points out, effectively defines a task, predicated on the movement of the subject’s place of enunciation itself.

With this, we can perhaps venture to return, without, of course, seeking to endorse anything like maxims for action or principles of conduct, to what might be said to be ‘ethical’ dimensions of what the project of the *Tractatus* effectively inscribes in the life of a speaking being. Famously, this project culminates with the enjoined silence of proposition 7, which commentators have seen as having the form of a prohibition that effectively creates the field from which access is thereby barred, whether of (it is supposed) mystical insight into what cannot be said or the nameless surplus of an impossible pure *jouissance*.²¹ But rather than following either of these suggestions, I would prefer instead, cleaving to the clear Lacanian instruction according to which ‘structure is the real’, to return to the main structural suggestion of the ‘Lecture on Ethics’, about the form of ethical motivation. This is the suggestion according to which it is the *same* desire that moves us, uselessly, to run up against the boundaries of language, or to speak nonsense there where, realising that no propositions can express what we want to mean, we see that we can no longer speak sense.

In Lacanian terms, we can now recognise this desire as the desire to place oneself in the position of someone’s Other, and, acknowledging, with Wittgenstein, the *complete* futility of the attempt to fix ethics in propositions, we can nevertheless understand differently the significance of the characteristic activity it involves. The desire that animates this activity is, as we have seen, the desire to speak in the locus of another. But if it cannot yield ethical propositions or truths, nevertheless we can say something more of where this desire moves us: to where the subject tries to establish itself in being. We have seen that ‘it’ cannot do that: as Wittgenstein says, here any attempt to finally fix the ethical position of the subject in the medium of the absolute can only yield nonsense. But in abeyance of any possible *existing* subject of thought or experience, it remains open to investigate the logico-grammatical form of the attempt, and perhaps to find in this investigation the possibility of a clarification of its sense.

In ‘The Freudian Thing’, Lacan specifies the task of psychoanalysis by interpreting what he calls Freud’s ‘last will and testament’, the penultimate sentence of lecture 31 of his *New Introductory Lectures*: ‘Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.’ Resisting the usual

translation of ‘id’ and ‘ego’, Lacan emphasises that there is nothing in this formulation that suggests, in either case, a definite article. The question is rather that, as Lacan suggests, of a ‘locus of being’: in that place where the ‘Es’ – the subject – was, there must I come to be. We saw that, though there is no place for a subject in the world, there is nevertheless a distinctive entry of the ‘I’ into the world, in the *Tractatus*, one that I can make through the reflective analysis of the position from which I speak. We find our way to this entry, or renew it, when we practise the clarification of our language, the language that is our own and is the form of our life. The suggestion would be that this entry – just that which Wittgenstein treats as the entry of the ‘metaphysical subject’, propounding from its position a discourse which, like the analyst’s discourse as Lacan defines it, removes itself from its field of knowledge in order to let that of its knowledge which appears as truth support its agency – then can operate the radical clarification of life that a critical reflection on language offers it to practise.

Notes

1. See also Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), especially chapters 2 and 9, and Paul M. Livingston, ‘Science, Language, and the “Truth of the Subject”: Lacan and Wittgenstein’, *Crisis and Critique*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018), pp. 237–59.
2. Compare Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* § 307: “‘Aren’t you nevertheless a behaviorist in disguise? Aren’t you nevertheless basically saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction?’ – If I speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, German text with English translation, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Revised 4th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).)
3. See, for example, P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), chapters 1 and 3, who sees the ‘metaphysical self’ of the *Tractatus* as essentially a ‘transcendental’ self and Wittgenstein’s Tractarian position as a whole in terms of a transcendental idealism inherited from Kant and Schopenhauer, later to be rejected in the *Investigations*.
4. Here I follow the so-called ‘resolute’ interpretation, suggested by Cora Diamond, ‘Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*’, reprinted in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2001); and James Conant, ‘Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein’, reprinted in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2001), among others, which balks at the idea of a thinkable but not sayable ‘content’ of what can only be shown.

5. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. and ed. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) (henceforth: *TLP*), pp. 11–12.
6. Decidable, at any rate, as long as we restrict ourselves to the truth-functional calculus of propositional logic without treating quantification; there are, of course, well-known inadequacies in the *Tractatus*'s account of quantification which I do not go into here. For a helpful treatment, see, however, Diego Marconi, 'Predicate Logic in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', *Logique et Analyse*, vol. 38, no. 152 (1995), pp. 179–90.
7. This is also closely connected to what Wittgenstein calls at 4.0312 his 'fundamental idea': that the signs for the logical truth-functions (AND, OR, IF-THEN and NOT) do not represent anything, and more generally, that there can be no signs that represent the underlying logical structure of facts.
8. For this reason, Wittgenstein says at 4.064 that assertion [*Bejahung*] is not external to propositions and indeed that a proposition asserts, precisely, its sense.
9. The analogy is suggested, though cautiously, by Donald Davidson in 'Mental Events', reprinted in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
10. For some suggested connections between the formal structure of cosmological antinomies and the structure of Kantian freedom, see, for example, Anonymous, 'Politics, Subjectivity, and Cosmological Antinomy: Kant, Badiou, and Žižek', *Crisis and Critique*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2014), pp. 23–50.
11. As G. E. M. Anscombe (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 1971), p. 167), points out, this should be read (according to a correction in Wittgenstein's own hand to a copy of the first edition of the *Tractatus*) as having the sense of 'the only language I understand' rather than 'the language that only I understand': the sense is not then of a radically private language (what is perhaps envisioned critically in the *Philosophical Investigations*' later attack on that idea), but only of the first-personal orientation I must necessarily take toward any language I can understand at all.
12. Here I am indebted to Maria Balaska's perceptive argument (in Maria Balaska, *Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit: Meaning and Astonishment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)) for the ethical significance of what, drawing on Lacan and Wittgenstein, she terms the 'merits of being involved in meaning'.
13. Compare, especially, *TLP* 6.52 and 6.521.
14. For example:

The signifier, as I have said, is characterized by the fact that it represents a subject to another signifier . . . The subject is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which signifier he is the effect of or

not. That effect – the subject – is the intermediary effect between what characterizes a signifier and another signifier, namely the fact that each of them, each of them, is an element. We know of no other basis by which the One may have been introduced into the world if not by the signifier as such, that is, the signifier insofar as we learn to separate it from its meaning effects.

Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore 1972–1973*, trans. with notes Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 48.

15. 'To say that the true is inseparable from the effects of language, considered as such, is to include the unconscious within them.' Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. with notes Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), p. 70.
16. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, p. 66.
17. As in *TLP* 4.21: 'The simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition, asserts the existence of a state of affairs.'
18. The transcendental I is what anyone who has stated knowledge in a certain way harbors as truth, the S_1 , the I of the master . . . The myth of the ideal I, of the I that masters, of the I whereby at least something is identical to itself, namely the speaker, is very precisely what the university discourse is unable to eliminate from the place in which its truth is found. From every academic statement by any philosophy whatsoever, even by a philosophy that strictly speaking could be pointed to as being the most opposed to philosophy, namely, if it were philosophy, Lacan's discourse – the *I-cracy* emerges, irreducibly. (Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, pp. 70–1)
19. Compare Lacan's 'The Freudian Thing', under the heading 'The Thing Speaks for Itself':

But now the truth in Freud's mouth takes the said bull [*bête*] by the horns: "To you I am the enigma of she who slips away as soon as she appears, you men who try so hard to hide me under the tawdry finery of your proprieties. Still, I admit your embarrassment is sincere, for even when you take it upon yourselves to become my heralds, you acquire no greater worth by wearing my colors than your own clothes, which are like you, phantoms that you are. Where am I going, having passed into you? And where was I prior to that? Will I perhaps tell you someday? But so that you will find me where I am, I will teach you by what sign you can recognise me. Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak.

Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with H  lo  se Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 340.

20. Translation slightly modified from the translation by Grigg; in addition to the French original, I have also consulted Gallagher’s translation.
21. Compare, for example,   izek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 184–5:

If we define the Real as such a paradoxical, chimerical entity which, although it does not exist, has a series of properties and can produce a series of effects, it becomes clear that the Real par excellence is *jouissance*: *jouissance* does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects. This paradoxical nature of *jouissance* also offers us a clue to explaining the fundamental paradox which unfailingly attests the presence of the Real: the fact of the prohibition of something which is already in itself impossible. The elementary model is, of course, the prohibition of incest; but there are many other examples – let us cite only the usual conservative attitude toward child sexuality: it does not exist, children are innocent beings, that is why we must control them strictly and fight child sexuality – not to mention the obvious fact that the most famous phrase of analytic philosophy – the last proposition of the *Tractatus* – implies the same paradox: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’