

# TRUTH AND LANGUAGE IN TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS

TEODOR DUMITRU IȘTAN\*

dumitru.istan@student.usv.ro

***Abstract:** This study investigates the fundamental and multifaceted relationship between truth, logic, and language within Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, tracing how the uncompromising ontological rigor of "logical atomism" defines the precise boundaries of meaningful discourse. Through a detailed analysis of the "picture theory" and the cardinal distinction between saying and showing, this paper argues that confining language to the domain of isomorphic scientific description serves a profound, paradoxical purpose: the safeguarding of ethical and aesthetic values within a protected transcendental sphere. By integrating classic and contemporary interpretations from Bertrand Russell, G.E.M. Anscombe, and Mircea Flonta, the analysis demonstrates that the famous Wittgensteinian "silence" is not a terminal failure of logic, but a deliberate philosophical strategy to preserve existential meaning from the distortions of propositional language. Ultimately, the research posits that this early pursuit of a unique, crystalline reason provides the necessary dialectical foundation for the later transition toward the plurality of "language games" and social pragmatism, reflecting the broader 20th-century shift from formal essence to lived practice.*

***Keywords:** Isomorphism, logical atomism, picture theory, ethics, transcendental silence, language games, saying vs. showing*

## Introduction

Published in 1921, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is not only the only book published by Ludwig Wittgenstein during his lifetime but also one of the most radical philosophical monuments of the 20th century. Written largely in the trenches of World War I, the work bears the mark of an existential urgency masked under an apparently impassive logical rigor. Wittgenstein did not intend to write a mere compendium of mathematical logic, but to definitively resolve the problems of philosophy by drawing a sharp line of demarcation between what can be clearly thought and what must remain in silence.

Although indebted to the analytical toolkit developed by Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege, Wittgenstein operates a fundamental break

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\* Ph.D. Student, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava.

from his mentors in the *Tractatus*. His project must be understood as a critical reaction to Russellian "logical atomism": Wittgenstein rejects the idea that logic should be based on a theory of knowledge or on empirical data, arguing instead that logic is the transcendental, *a priori* condition of any possible world.

This text aims to analyze the concept of truth within the economy of the *Tractatus*, tracing how its strict definition determines and limits the sphere of meaningful language. The thesis maintained is that the geometric rigor of the picture theory (*Bildtheorie*) is a double-edged sword: on one hand, it ensures absolute clarity for scientific discourse, and on the other, it protects ethical and metaphysical values from trivialization by placing them in the sphere of the inexpressible. Thus, the final silence is not a failure of language, but a deliberate strategy for salvaging existential meaning.

The analytical approach will be structured into four major stages. In the first part, we will explore ontology, defining the fundamental concepts of "world," "fact," and "object" that constitute the basis of the system, highlighting the crucial difference between atomic reality and logical construction. In the second part, we will detail the core of the work, the picture theory, explaining the mechanism of isomorphism and the concept of "logical multiplicity" (analyzed through the lens of G.E.M. Anscombe's exegesis), through which the proposition succeeds in modeling reality.

Once the mechanism of representation is established, the third section will analyze the dramatic consequences of this theory: the cardinal distinction between saying and showing, culminating in the transcendental character of ethics. We will support this perspective by appealing to the arguments of A.C. Grayling, who demonstrates why absolute values cannot be contingent facts. Additionally, we will include the interpretation of Mircea Flonta, who views Wittgensteinian silence as a form of protecting ethical meaning. Finally, the study's conclusions will highlight the dialectic of transcending this system. We will show, through the lens of Saul Kripke's critique, how the impasse of static "truth conditions" necessitated the subsequent transition toward "assertability conditions" and social pragmatism.

### **The World as the totality of facts**

The starting point of the *Tractatus* is not epistemological (what we can know), but ontological (what exists). Wittgenstein opens his treatise with a

radical demarcation: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things"(Prop. 1.1).<sup>1</sup>

This distinction, seemingly subtle, is crucial for understanding how meaning functions. A world composed only of "things" would be an inert collection of objects—a bag of scrambled puzzle pieces. However, our world is structured; it consists of determinate relations between these objects.

To clarify this architecture, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of the "state of affairs" (*Sachverhalt*), defined as a "combination of objects" (Prop. 2.01).<sup>2</sup> We can use the puzzle analogy here: objects are the individual pieces, simple and indestructible, which form the "substance of the world" (Prop. 2.021). The state of affairs represents a possible configuration of these pieces—their potential to fit together according to their form. When such a configuration actually occurs, we are dealing with a fact (*Tatsache*). Thus, reality is not given by the mere presence of the pieces, but by the specific way in which they are assembled at a given moment.

An essential aspect of this architecture is logical independence. Wittgenstein postulates in Proposition 1.21 that each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same. This means that in the world of the *Tractatus*, there is no indefinite causality linking facts together; the universe is a constellation of discrete atomic facts. This guarantees that we can analyze the truth value of a proposition in isolation, without having to know the history of the entire surrounding universe.

This ontological vision is called logical atomism. As A.C. Grayling explains<sup>2</sup>, the postulate of simple objects is not an empirical hypothesis about physical matter, but a logical necessity for the determination of meaning. Grayling emphasizes that, in the system of the *Tractatus*, every fact must have a single correct analysis. If the analysis of facts could continue to infinity, without stopping at an ultimate and unalterable element, the meaning of our propositions would remain vague and dependent on infinite knowledge.

Thus, objects function as the "substance of the world". They are unalterable, while their configurations (states of affairs) are changeable. Grayling clarifies that Wittgenstein intentionally avoids providing

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 1.1, pg. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, pg. 81.

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 42.

concrete examples of such objects, because their specific nature is philosophically irrelevant; what matters is their structural role: they are the rigid terminal points to which names hook, thereby ensuring that language has a fixed structure that can mirror the world. This possibility of mirroring is based on what Wittgenstein calls logical form—the only thing that language and the world have in common and which makes representation possible.

To understand the radical nature of the ontology in the *Tractatus*, a brief reference to Wittgenstein's mentor, Bertrand Russell, is necessary. Both philosophers share the vision of "logical atomism" - the idea that the world can be decomposed into ultimate, simple elements. However, the nature of these "simple objects" (*Gegenstände*) constitutes the point of rupture between the two. For Russell, logical atoms were epistemological entities discovered through direct experience (*knowledge by acquaintance*); for example, a patch of red color at a certain visual point. Russell constructed the world from the bottom up, starting from sense data.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Wittgenstein rejects any psychological or empirical basis. For him, the existence of simple objects is not a matter of experience (we never see them in their pure form), but a logical necessity. His reasoning is *a priori*: if there were no simple and indestructible objects to ensure the substance of the world, then our propositions could not have a determinate sense. The sense of one proposition would depend on the truth of another proposition, *ad infinitum*<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Wittgenstein's objects are requirements of language, deduced purely formally. This shift from what we know (Russell) to what must be the case for language to function (Wittgenstein) emphasizes the transcendental, rather than empirical, character of the treatise.

### **The picture theory and logical isomorphism**

Once the ontology of facts is established, the *Tractatus* must resolve the problem of epistemological connection: how does the sentence (a mere string of dead signs on paper) manage to latch onto living reality? Wittgenstein's answer lies in the famous "picture theory" (*Bildtheorie*), a

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bertrand Russell, „The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 31–33. Russell defines logical atoms(particulars) as immediate sense data, "such as little patches of colour or sounds," accessible to the subject through acquaintance, as opposed to inferred physical objects.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 2.0211, p. 81.

concept that should not be understood simplistically as a photograph, but as a rigorous structural construction inspired by physics.

The genesis of this theory is found in a biographical episode that has become legendary: Wittgenstein was inspired by a model used in a Paris courtroom to represent an automobile accident. He observed that the model could stand in for the real event and serve as judicial evidence only because of a correspondence between the parts of the model (miniature cars, dolls, trees) and the elements of reality.

However, to transform this intuition into a philosophical theory, Wittgenstein draws on his background as an engineer and the decisive influence of the physicist Heinrich Hertz.<sup>5</sup> In his work, *The Principles of Mechanics*, Hertz argued that scientists do not work with raw reality, but create pictures (*Bilder*) or dynamic models of phenomena. For Hertz, such a picture is valid if the logical consequences within the model correspond to the necessary consequences in nature. Wittgenstein takes this instrumentalist concept and applies it to language: the proposition is not a passive copy, but an actively constructed model of reality. He explicitly points to this lineage: "A proposition must have exactly as many distinguishable parts as in the situation that it represents [...] (Compare with Hertz's *Mechanics*, on dynamic models)."<sup>6</sup>

To concretely illustrate how the "ruler" of the picture theory works, we can compare two propositions, following the Wittgensteinian mechanism of validation. Let us take proposition A: "The cat is on the mat." This has sense (*Sinn*) because it constructs a possible logical model: the element "cat" and the element "mat" are placed in a spatial relationship that can be verified. Even if the cat is not on the mat (the proposition is false), it has sense because it describes a possible state of affairs. We have a picture.

Let us take proposition B: "Socrates is identical." Although it seems grammatically correct, from the perspective of the *Tractatus*, it is nonsense (*Unsinn*). Why? Because the term "identical" does not function as an adjective (like "white" or "tall"), but expresses an internal relation. In the

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<sup>5</sup> "The idea of a picture or model is taken from Hertz, who suggested in *The Principles of Mechanics* that we form for ourselves pictures of external facts." — A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein's conception of the proposition as a picture (*Bild*) has its roots in the philosophy of science of Hertz and Boltzmann. Hertz used the term *Bild* to designate the conceptual models that physicists construct to represent mechanical systems. Hans-Johann Glock, "The Picture Theory," in *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, p. 160.

perfect logical syntax dreamed of by Wittgenstein, the sign of identity cannot stand alone; it requires two terms ( $a = b$ ). The proposition fails to project a picture because the logical form of the words has been violated. We do not have a "state of affairs" in which "identical" is a property of Socrates. This distinction shows us that natural language disguises thought. The role of philosophy becomes that of eliminating the confusions generated by superficial grammar, showing that many traditional metaphysical problems are, in fact, type B propositions: constructions that seem to say something but fail to depict a situation.

Next, it is necessary to discover how the connection between the model and reality is technically achieved. Wittgenstein introduces the concept of "lines of projection." A proposition does not simply stand alongside a fact; it must be actively connected to it. The elements of the proposition (names) correspond to objects in the world. This correspondence is what Wittgenstein calls the "correlation of the elements of the picture with things".<sup>7</sup> This is where the capital distinction between sign (*Zeichen*) and symbol (*Symbol*) intervenes. The sign is merely the physical, perceptible entity (the sound or the ink on paper), which in itself is dead and devoid of meaning. For this sign to become an active logical symbol, it must be correlated with an object in the world.

This correlation is called the relation of denoting (*bezeichnen*). Wittgenstein explains that "a name means an object. The object is its meaning".<sup>8</sup> In the *Tractatus*, the relation of denoting is strict: a name stands for an object. If the object did not exist, the name would be devoid of significance (*Bedeutung*), and the proposition would have no sense.

This relation is not a natural property of the ink, but a logical act of projection. To illustrate this invisible connection, Wittgenstein uses an organic metaphor: "These correlations are, as it were, the feelers of the picture's elements, with which the picture touches reality".<sup>9</sup> Through these feelers, the arbitrary sign is anchored in the substance of the world, transforming into a symbol. Only through this touch of reality does the proposition acquire the capacity to be true or false.

However, for this "touch" to be possible, there must be a prior condition of possibility: logical form. This is where the fine distinction

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 2.1514, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, prop. 3.203, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, prop. 2.1515, p. 84.

between the form of representation and logical form comes in. A painting is a form of spatial representation just as a gramophone record is a sonic one, but both share a common point with reality - logical form - which is, essentially, an abstract structure. As G.E.M. Anscombe emphasizes, the crucial concept here is that of logical multiplicity.<sup>10</sup> To be a picture, the proposition does not need to visually resemble the fact (the word "cat" does not have fur and does not need to look like a feline), but it must possess "the same logical multiplicity as the situation it represents".<sup>11</sup> If the fact has three components (A, B, and the relation R), the proposition must have three logical elements. Any loss of this multiplicity leads to nonsense or an inadequate representation.

### **The limits of truth: saying versus showing**

The geometric rigor defined by the picture theory possesses an auto-destructive potential that Wittgenstein is prepared to assume fully: the drastic restriction of the domain of things that can be meaningfully said (*sinnvoll*). If a proposition has sense only insofar as it is a logical picture of a possible fact, then any proposition attempting to describe something that is not a fact becomes, technically, nonsense (*Unsinn*). From this constraint arises the cardinal distinction of the *Tractatus*, that which separates science from metaphysics: the distinction between saying (*sagen*) and showing (*zeigen*).

The first thing to fall under the scope of the inexpressible is the very mechanism of representation. We can describe a fact ("The apple is red"), but we cannot describe the logical form that makes the description possible. To describe logical form, we would need to be able to place ourselves outside of language and the world, in an impossible point of observation (an "eye" that sees itself). Wittgenstein formulates this verdict in Proposition 4.121: "Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them." Language mirrors the world, but the mirror cannot reflect itself. The logical structure of the world shows itself in our propositions (through syntax, through the way we combine signs), but it cannot be said through them. To attempt to speak about logic means to step outside of logic.

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<sup>10</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 4.04, p. 99.

To explain this paradox, Wittgenstein employs rigorous logic:

1. The premise (picture theory): every sentence is a picture of a fact. For it to represent that fact, it must have something in common with it: the logical form (structure). It is like having a map: to represent the terrain, the map must share a spatial structure with the terrain.

2. The Problem (impossibility of self-reference): you can use the map to talk about mountains and rivers (facts), but you cannot use the map to represent the "method of projection" itself (the mechanism by which the map relates to the terrain). That method is not an object on the map; it is the very nature of the map.

3. The verdict (The inexpressible): to be able to describe (to say) the logical form, we would have to be able to place ourselves outside of logic - that is, outside of the world and language - to look at them "from above". This is impossible.<sup>12</sup>

A nerve center where the limits of language intersect with the ineffable is the problem of the subject. Wittgenstein makes a shocking claim: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world".<sup>13</sup> This seems to lead to solipsism (the idea that only the self exists). However, Wittgenstein resolves the problem through a brilliant visual analogy. He asks us to imagine the visual field of an eye. In this field, we see trees, houses, hands, but we never see the eye itself that looks. The eye is the condition of seeing, but it is not part of the seen image. Likewise, the "thinking subject" or the "I" is not a fact in the world (like our body), but rather the limit of the world.<sup>14</sup> The metaphysical self cannot be encountered in experience and, therefore, cannot be spoken of. It shows itself through the fact that the world is "my world." This disappearance of the subject behind reality is the moment where solipsism pushed to the extreme coincides with pure realism: the Self contracts into a point without extension, leaving only the reality coordinated by it.

If logic is inexpressible, all the more so are supreme values.<sup>15</sup> In a world defined as the "totality of facts," values (the good, the beautiful, the divine) are not found, because a "fact" is neutral: it simply is or is not; it is not good or bad. Therefore, Wittgenstein states that "the sense of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 4.1212, 4.121, p. 103-104.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, prop. 5.6, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, prop. 5.632, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> See P.M.S. Hacker's analysis, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, „The Self and the World“ chapter.

world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists."<sup>16</sup> The consequence is disarming and counter-intuitive at first glance: ethical propositions do not exist. "It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental."<sup>17</sup>

Wittgenstein does not say, therefore, that ethics is irrelevant, but on the contrary, that it is too important to be trivialized through language. Values are not facts to be described, but attitudes to be lived. They belong to the realm of the mystical (*Das Mystische*), about which Wittgenstein says: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical."<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, Ray Monk offers a crucial interpretation for understanding the *Tractatus*. He is the one who most strongly popularized the idea that the *Tractatus* is, in essence, a book of ethics, not logic. His argument is based on a famous letter that Wittgenstein sent to the publisher Ludwig von Ficker.<sup>19</sup> He argues that Wittgenstein delimited the sphere of "saying" (science) precisely to show that what truly matters (ethics) is not found there. Ethics is not nonsense in the sense of "rubbish," but is rather inexpressible.

A.C. Grayling, on the other hand, provides a more analytical interpretation and explains that if ethics were a matter of facts (for example, if "being good" were a physical fact like "being red"), then it would be subject to contingency - it could be true today and false tomorrow. But ethical values must be necessary and absolute. Therefore, Wittgenstein removes them from the world of facts (making them transcendental) to protect them, not to deny them.<sup>20</sup>

A reader accustomed to analytical texts will notice a fundamental paradox: if metaphysical propositions are nonsense, then the *Tractatus* itself, which is full of statements about the world, the will, and limits, is nonsense. Wittgenstein assumes this with a rare intellectual honesty in the penultimate proposition, using the famous metaphor of the ladder: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who

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<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, Prop. 6.41, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem. 6.421, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem. 6.522, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein*, London, Granta Books, 2005, p. 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 55-56.

understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it).<sup>21</sup> Philosophy is, therefore, not a doctrine of eternal truths (which are "said"), but a therapeutic activity of clarification. Once we understand that traditional philosophical problems are errors of language, we do not solve them, but rather dissolve them.

The final silence is not a dogmatic prohibition, but a logical finding: we have reached the edge of what can be thought, and beyond this edge, life itself begins. To avoid falling into the error of considering Wittgenstein's "silence" in Proposition 7<sup>22</sup> as a simple positivist prohibition, the distinction made by Mircea Flonta is vital. In his introductory study of the *Tractatus*<sup>23</sup>, Flonta proposes a reading in a Kantian key. Just as Kant limited the sphere of rational knowledge to make room for faith, Wittgenstein delimits the sphere of factual language to protect the integrity of the ethical.

Flonta argues that the nonsense of ethical propositions is not a destructive one, but a protective one. The fact that ethics cannot be "said" does not mean it is inferior to science, but that it is of a different, superior order. "Silence" is not a void, but the space in which authentic life manifests itself. Thus, the saying/showing distinction becomes the linguistic counterpart of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*). Value does not appear in the description of the world, but in the subject's attitude toward the world. As Flonta emphasizes, the *Tractatus* does not eliminate metaphysics to destroy it, but to place it where it belongs: in living, not in discourse.

### **Conclusions: toward assertion conditions**

The analysis conducted in the pages of this study has allowed us to X-ray what we might call the "logical tragedy" of the *Tractatus*. We have seen Wittgenstein as an architect, obsessed with the purity of structure, who succeeds in building a perfectly closed system—a declaration of the strength of reason. Starting from ontological atomism and moving through the geometric rigor of the picture theory, he defines sense strictly through

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<sup>21</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Romanian trans. by Mircea Dumitru and Mircea Flonta, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, prop. 6.54, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, prop. 7, p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> Mircea Flonta, „În ajutorul cititorului”, (*Help to the reader*), in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2001, p. 136–138.

the lens of truth conditions. In this crystallized universe, a proposition has a right to exist only if it isomorphically mirrors a fact. The price of this absolute clarity is, however, devastating: the exile of ethics, aesthetics, and the meaning of life into the mystical silence of the inexpressible.

Yet, it is precisely this sterile perfection of representation that generated, dialectically, the necessity of transcending the system. As Saul Kripke emphasizes, the impasse of the *Tractatus* resides in the attempt to found language on a static relationship with reality. The failure to explain normativity through the simple "viewing" of facts opened the way to the semantic revolution of the later philosophy: the abandonment of the search for hidden factual correspondences in favor of assertion conditions.<sup>24</sup> Truth ceases to be a solitary property of the mirror-proposition and becomes a social function of justification within the community. The ladder was thrown away not to remain suspended in a vacuum, but to be able to descend onto the "rough ground" of forms of life.

Ultimately, the aim of this article has been to demonstrate that the relationship between truth and language in Wittgenstein's early work is not one of simple subordination, but of mutual constraint. We have shown that defining truth exclusively as structural overlap (picture theory) forced language to restrict itself to a mere description of the natural sciences, leaving the human essential outside. What we have gained through this analysis is the validation of the thesis that Wittgensteinian "silence" is not a failure of expression, but a strategy for protecting values. By tracing the limits of factual language, Wittgenstein did not destroy metaphysics, but secured it in a domain inaccessible to logical falsification. Thus, the *Tractatus* remains the testament of a fundamental paradox: logic had to be taken to the very end of its expressive powers so that the crucial importance of what cannot be said could be revealed.

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<sup>24</sup> Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982, 71-79. Kripke argues that the Wittgensteinian "inversion" consists of replacing realist semantics (based on correspondence with facts) with a semantics of justification (based on public verifiability).

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