

## SUMMARY

Intersubjective philosophical activity can only be possible if the semantic content of sentences (and hence the conditions for mutual understanding) can be allowed to vary from context to context. Recognition of this possibility saves *TLP* from absurdity, while leaving all its main doctrines intact.

## 8

## Gedanken

Our task in this chapter is to elucidate Wittgenstein's use of the term 'thought' (*Gedanke*). At issue once again will be the extent to which the semantics of *TLP* is broadly Fregean in character.

## 8.1 PRELIMINARIES

As we had occasion to note in chapter 2, it is an important aspect of Frege's doctrine of sense that senses should be objective: they should have an existence which is at least intersubjective, and relations between them (such as entailment and inconsistency) should obtain wholly mind-independently. Indeed he also maintains that the senses of whole sentences, which he calls 'thoughts' (*Gedanken*), exist necessarily, at all times in all possible worlds.<sup>1</sup> He seems to have regarded this as a crucial part of his rejection of psychologism. Although conceding that there must be a mental component in any act of thinking (namely 'grasping' a *Gedanke*), he believes that the thought itself is not in any way dependent upon mental acts or states. And contra, for example, the imagist theory, thinking does not consist in any kind of inner mental process, but rather in a mental relation between the thinker and an objectively existing *Gedanke*.

It is almost certainly true that Wittgenstein rejects any belief in the necessary existence of sense. While endorsing Frege's objectivism about logic and logical relationships, he thinks (rightly, as I shall argue in chapter 9) that he can avoid Frege's heavy ontological commitments. The easiest way to see this is to reflect on the fact that the notion of sense in *TLP*, on the interpretation I have been defending, is essentially tied to the significant use of signs. (Recall that symbols are signs together with their mode of projection. There is no suggestion that the mode of projection might exist

independently of the sign.) So unless he believes that signs themselves have necessary existence, he cannot believe that senses do. Yet throughout *TLP* he uses the language of construction with respect to new notations, rather than that of 'apprehending' or 'selecting' (see for example 5.475, 5.556).

Aside from the above, Wittgenstein's notion of *Gedanke* is much disputed. In particular, many interpret him as being opposed even to the possible intersubjectivity of *Gedanken*.<sup>2</sup> On this view, Tractarian thoughts are the link between sentences and states of affairs, those sentences only coming to represent reality via private acts of thinking. So what gives words their life, or significance, is not anything about their (potentially) public use, but rather the private mental states and acts of those who use them.

If this interpretation could be substantiated, then so far from broadly endorsing aspects of Frege's sense/reference distinction, Wittgenstein would be consigning the theory of sense to the province of psychology in a much more radical way than we have hitherto considered. For on the reading of *TLP* defended in earlier chapters, the modes of projection of signs are inessential to logic only in the sense that mutual knowledge of them is not required for factual communication. But they are at least potentially intersubjective, perhaps consisting in aspects of their public use. (And as we saw in the last chapter, the possibility of philosophy may require that they be actually so.) On the interpretation above, on the other hand, our modes of projection of signs are inessential to logic in consisting wholly of facts about the individual thinker's private psychology.

I shall be arguing for a way of taking Tractarian *Gedanken* which places them somewhere between a Fregean necessary existent and the above out-and-out of psychologism.<sup>3</sup> I shall try to show that *Gedanken* are abstract but temporal (supervenient) entities, which are realized in any significant arrangement of signs having truth-conditions (*Sinn*). On this view spoken or written signs are not supposed to get their life from internal acts of thinking. Rather, both public sentences and private thoughts stand on the same level, expressing *Gedanken* in virtue of consisting of signs which are used in such a way as to represent a *Sinn*.<sup>4</sup>

## 8.2 TEXTUAL EVIDENCE OUTSIDE *TLP*

Many have sought firm confirmation of the psychological interpretation sketched above, in Wittgenstein's 1919 letter to Russell, where he says that a *Gedanke* consists of psychical constituents analogous to words, which it would be the business of psychology to investigate.<sup>5</sup> Yet what is overlooked by these commentators is that it may have been quite clear from the way in which Russell framed his questions that he was using 'Gedanke' in the sense of 'thought-in-the-mind' (which is, after all, normal German usage), and that Wittgenstein may simply have responded in kind. Indeed there is some reason to think that this is the case.

Although Russell's original letter has not been preserved, Wittgenstein fortunately quotes from it in giving his replies. Russell's questions had apparently been (a) 'But a *Gedanke* is a fact: what are its constituents and components, and what is their relation to those of the pictured fact?', and (b) 'Does a *Gedanke* consist of words?'. It is clear, firstly, that Russell was not asking for an elucidation of any remark in *TLP*, since it is nowhere said that a *Gedanke* is a fact. (It is propositional signs – *Satzzeichen* – which are facts; see 3.14.) Rather, taking a particular use for granted, he seems to have been asking a substantive question about what Wittgenstein believes thinking to consist in. Moreover the terms in which Russell framed his questions – in such a way as to expect a unitary answer – would not even make sense unless he were thinking of a *Gedanke* as being a thought-in-the-mind. For of course if 'Gedanke' can cover all different forms of representation, in whatever medium (as I shall argue), then it would obviously be silly to ask what the constituents of a *Gedanke* are; and even sillier to ask whether it always consists of words.

It would thus be unwise to take Wittgenstein's remarks in his letter to Russell to be our guide in interpreting the *TLP* use of 'Gedanke'. Since Russell is clearly asking about thoughts-in-the-mind, Wittgenstein's reply relates not to the way in which he uses 'Gedanke' in the text, but rather to what he takes thoughts-in-the-mind to consist of. Nor would it be at all surprising that he should have failed to put Russell right on this crucial piece of *TLP* terminology. For the whole tone of the letter is one of exasperation and despair at Russell's lack of comprehension.

Moreover, Wittgenstein's statement in the letter that a

Gedanke consists of psychological constituents which have the same sort of relation to reality as words strongly suggests that he did not regard thoughts-in-the-mind as providing the link between language and reality. Had he believed this, he could hardly have used the phrase 'having the *same sort* of relation to reality'. This suggests, on the contrary, that he saw sentences and thoughts-in-the-mind as being very much on a par: each making use of ordered structures of signs to represent reality. And this is precisely the view which I believe may be discerned in *TLP* itself, as we shall see shortly.

The only other non-Tractarian evidence relevant to our topic is an isolated remark at *NB* 82, where Wittgenstein writes as follows:

Now it is becoming clear why I thought that thinking and language were the same. For thinking is a kind of language. For a thought too is, of course, a logical picture of a proposition, and therefore it is just a kind of proposition.

This is initially puzzling. For how can a thought both picture a proposition and *be* a proposition? But the puzzle dissolves if we suppose that the first occurrence of 'proposition' is Russell's use (where a proposition consists of the entities which the judgement concerns) whereas the second is his own, according to which a proposition is a significant sentence.<sup>6</sup> Then what remains is the claim that both private thoughts and public statements are on a par, each consisting of logical pictures of states of affairs. This gives some support to my intermediate reading of *TLP*, since there is no suggestion here that sentences come to depict via their association with private thoughts.

### 8.3 THE EVIDENCE OF *TLP*

There are only two remarks in *TLP* itself which appear to speak in favour of the psychological interpretation. One is 3.11, which says (in the Pears and McGuinness translation) that the method of projection for a propositional sign is to think of the Sinn of the proposition. This seems to be telling us *how* to project a sentence onto the world, telling us what such a projection would consist in. The other is 3.5 where Wittgenstein says (again in the Pears and McGuinness translation) that a propositional sign, applied and thought out, is a thought. This seems to suggest that it is

the 'thinking out' – the mental projection – of a sentence which gives it its content.

Note however that in the original German version of 3.11 the definite article is used on both sides of the 'ist'. Note also that the word translated by Pears and McGuinness as 'to think' is in reality a noun ('Das Denken'). Literally translated, as Ogden does, 3.11 says that *the* method of projection of a propositional sign is *the* thought of the Sinn of the proposition.<sup>7</sup> Now elsewhere in their translation of *TLP* Pears and McGuinness render such uses of the definite article by the indefinite, and rightly so. For example 4, which says literally that *the* thought is *the* proposition with Sinn, they render as: *a* thought is *a* proposition with Sinn. One wonders why they departed from this practice at 3.11. Had they not done so, 3.11 would say: a method of projection for a propositional sign is a thought of the Sinn (truth-condition) of the proposition. This has quite a different flavour to it, suggesting that – rather than telling us how to project a sentence onto the world – we are being informed of a connection between the concept of such a projection and the concept of a mode of thinking of a truth-condition.

Moreover throughout *TLP*, whenever a simple is-statement occurs with the word 'ist' flanked by concept expressions governed by the definite article, I believe Wittgenstein intends to be making a statement with a form analogous to a statement of identity: a statement, that is, of the necessary co-extension of two concepts. (And wherever the word 'ist' is flanked by concept expressions governed by the definite article on the left, and by the indefinite article on the right, he intends that there be an implication from left to right but not vice versa).<sup>8</sup> If we adopt such a reading of 3.11 then we get the following: necessarily, something is a method of projection of a propositional sign if and only if it is a thought of the Sinn (truth-condition) of that sign. This does not even begin to lend itself to the psychological interpretation. On the contrary, it looks as if Wittgenstein is saying something like the following: each mode of projecting a sentence onto reality is, necessarily, a mode of thinking about the possible situations which constitute the truth-condition of that sentence, and vice versa. And the idea of a 'mode of thinking' could then be construed in a way which is at least very similar to a Fregean sense. For one can say that, for Frege, the sense of an expression is a mode of thinking (considered as abstract) about its referent.<sup>9</sup>

Confirmation of this interpretation of 3.11 may be found in

*PTLP*. In the passages which correspond most closely to 3.11, Wittgenstein writes as follows (translating literally):

*PTLP* 3.12 The method of projection [of a propositional sign] is the manner of applying the propositional sign.

*PTLP* 3.13 The application of a propositional sign is the thought (das Denken) of its truth-condition (Sinn).<sup>10</sup>

It would surely be very strange indeed to describe as an 'application' of a propositional sign an act of giving it life through associating it with a thought-in-the-mind (the psychological interpretation). Wittgenstein seems rather to be emphasizing that it is the manner of our use of signs which makes them connect with reality, as opposed to the connection consisting either in an association with a thought-in-the-mind, or in an association with a necessarily existing *Gedanke*. On my interpretation, he would be insisting that the sense of a sentence (its mode of projection, the mode of thinking which it expresses) consists in the conventionally determined use of its component parts (together with the conventionally determined significance of their arrangement).

As for 3.5, note that no conjunction occurs in the original German; neither is 'thought out' a literal translation of 'gedachte'. The literal translation is the one given by Ogden: The applied, thought, propositional sign is the thought. This suggests that 'applied' and 'thought' are *alternative* ways of characterizing that which makes the connection between a sentence and reality, which is in line with our reading of *PTLP* 3.12 above. The point being, that it is the (conventionally determined) use of a sentence which makes the connection with reality, and which constitutes it as expressing a mode of thinking of reality (i.e. as expressing a sense).

Now consider 3, which says, literally, that the logical picture of facts is the thought – that is, that the concept of a thought is necessarily coextensive with the concept of a logical picture of facts. Here the notion of a *Gedanke* appears to be introduced as a generic concept to cover all picturing of facts, whether external (spoken or written sentences, pictures, maps, etc.) or internal (thinking, imagining, etc.). Consider also 4, which says, again literally, that the thought is the proposition with Sinn. This equates the concept of a *Gedanke* with the concept of a proposition with a directed truth-condition. Neither of these remarks lends any support to the psychological interpretation.

Further confirmation of my intermediate interpretation may be found at 5.542. There, in the context of criticizing Russell's theory of judgement, Wittgenstein says that both 'A thinks P' and 'A says P' have the form "'P' says P'. He must therefore believe that both private acts of thinking and public sayings are similarly related to their truth-conditions (as opposed to the one being so related via the other). I take the remark to mean that neither an act of thinking nor a public saying consists in a relation between a subject (soul) and a state of affairs. Rather, both consist in ordered arrays of signs, which are used in such a way as to represent that state of affairs.

#### 8.4 THOUGHTS AND PROPOSITIONS

One awkwardness about my reading of the *TLP* use of 'Gedanke' is that it appears to entail that thoughts-in-the-mind are *not* *Gedanken*. For notice that 4 tells us that something is a *Gedanke* if, and only if, it is a proposition with Sinn. And yet 3.1 entails that it is only perceptible signs which, together with a method of projection, can constitute a proposition. Then unless thoughts-in-the-mind are somehow perceptible, it will follow that they are not *Gedanken*.

However this absurdity can easily be avoided if there is sufficient reason to discover an ambiguity in the *TLP* use of 'proposition' (Satz), between a sense in which it means 'perceptible sentence plus its method of projection', and one in which it means 'complete sign – whether perceptible or imperceptible – plus its method of projection'. And indeed, just such reason is provided by 3.3, where we are told that only propositions have Sinn. For if we interpret 'proposition' here in the sense of 3.1, this tells us that only perceptible propositional signs have Sinn; thus entailing that no thought-in-the-mind could have Sinn, which would be absurd.

In general Wittgenstein uses 'proposition' in the wider sense, to cover both perceptible and imperceptible (i.e. mental) propositional signs. The narrower use, to cover the perceptible case only, is restricted to the 3.1s. And here Wittgenstein's purpose is to introduce for the first time the distinction between 'proposition' and 'propositional sign'. This can be done most easily in connection with perceptible propositions: the propositional sign being that

which is immediately perceptible, the proposition itself being this together with what is not immediately perceptible, namely the use of that sign to represent reality.<sup>11</sup> We might then be expected to infer that there is some similar distinction to be drawn in connection with non-perceptible propositions, namely thoughts-in-the-mind.

If 'Gedanke', too, is used widely, to cover both perceptible and imperceptible propositions (as 3 and 4 suggest), then are the *TLP* notions of a thought and of a proposition one and the same? There can be no simple answer to this question, because of the possible ambiguity in the use of 'proposition' noted in chapter 4. We saw that on most of its occurrences, 'proposition' is used to mean a propositional sign together with its sense (cognitive content). On this usage propositions are symbols (signs together with their mode of projection) and there can be many different propositions with the very same truth-conditions; tautologies and contradictions counting as propositions. Understood in this way, a *Gedanke* is a kind of proposition, but there are propositions which are not *Gedanken*. For Wittgenstein is consistent in claiming that only propositions with Sinn – which mark a division within the set of all possible worlds – count as *Gedanken*. Thus 3.02 tells us that a *Gedanke* contains the possibility of the situation it represents; 4 says that a *Gedanke* is a proposition with Sinn; and at 6.21 we are told that a proposition of mathematics does not express a *Gedanke*.

However, we also noted that at a number of points in the 5s Wittgenstein uses 'proposition' in such a way that all sentences with the same truth-conditions are the same proposition, and in such a way that tautologies and contradictions, which lack Sinn, are not propositions at all. So in one respect this use of 'proposition' is closely linked to the use of 'Gedanke', since all and only sentences with truth-conditions are propositions, and are *Gedanken*. But in another respect it is very different, since the identity-conditions are different. For the notion of a *Gedanke*, unlike this notion of a proposition, belongs with the idea of a mode of determination of Sinn, rather than being closely tied to the identity of the Sinn itself. Thus on my reading there may be many different modes of thought (many different *Gedanken*) of one and the same Sinn (i.e. which express one and the same proposition, on this use of 'proposition').

### 8.5 ARE THOUGHTS ESSENTIALLY ASSERTORIC?

In discussing the *TLP* notion of a *Gedanke* we have come across a number of passages which apparently suggest that it is the *use* of a propositional sign which constitutes it as expressing the proposition or thought which it does. But does Wittgenstein go beyond this in believing propositions to be essentially assertoric? Does he, as some have maintained, believe that every proposition, and every *Gedanke*, is an act of thinking (judging) that such-and-such is the case?<sup>12</sup>

This interpretation is almost certainly wrong. Note to begin with that the frequent occurrences of such phrases as 'the proposition says' and 'the proposition states' (e.g. at 4.022 and 4.03) do nothing to show the essential assertiveness of the proposition. For of course a language teacher may write sentences on the blackboard and ask the class, 'What does this sentence say/state?', in circumstances which make it perfectly clear that, in another sense, nothing at all has been said (asserted). Nor does Wittgenstein's criticism of Frege's judgement-stroke at 4.442, as being logically quite meaningless (note: *bedeutungslos*), rest on a belief in the essential assertiveness of proposition. For what he clearly conceives of himself as rejecting is the idea that a judgement-stroke could contribute towards the semantic content of a proposition.<sup>13</sup> And it is entirely compatible with this that propositions may exist unjudged.

The main argument against the proposed interpretation is that Wittgenstein apparently believes propositions to have an existence which is prior to, and independent of, their being judged. Thus at 4.064 it is insisted that every proposition must already have a determinate Sinn, prior to the act of judging. And it is hard to see how this could be so unless the proposition already exists prior to being judged. That is to say: unless there already exists a propositional sign expressing that thought or proposition. Furthermore, Wittgenstein appears quite ready to believe in the existence of infinitely many propositions (4.2211, 5.43), which would be unintelligible if propositions were themselves acts of thinking or judging.

We saw at the outset of this chapter that Wittgenstein rejects the Fregean doctrine that thoughts (*Gedanken*) have necessary existence. Yet now, on the other hand, he does seem prepared to allow that they exist independently of being entertained or judged by a

thinker. So his position must be something like the following: it is the conventionally determined use, or application, of signs which determines in advance what thought (proposition with Sinn) is expressed by any given sentence, and which thus determines its Sinn in advance. We can therefore talk of thoughts as existing in advance of being entertained. But they do not exist necessarily, since they only exist in so far as, and so long as, there are signs with an appropriately determined conventional use. We shall explore the strength of this position in the chapter which follows.

### SUMMARY

A *Gedanke*, in the terminology of *TLP*, is any proposition (sentence together with its mode of signifying) which has Sinn. Both spoken sentences and thoughts-in-the-mind are equally *Gedanken*, provided that they have Sinn. But spoken sentences do not have truth-conditions in virtue of their association with a thought-in-the-mind. On the contrary, both are related to reality in the same kind of way, consisting of significant arrangements of signs with a conventionally determined use. But they do exist independently of, and prior to, being entertained by a thinking subject.

## The Existence of Thoughts

This is the first of two chapters to employ the principle of Charity in defence of our intermediate interpretation of *TLP*, argued for on textual grounds in chapter 8. Here I shall defend Wittgenstein against the first of the twin extremes of necessary existence for thoughts, on the one hand, and psychologism about language on the other hand.

### 9.1 MIND-DEPENDENT THOUGHTS

In the last chapter we found Wittgenstein to be committed to the existence of thoughts as abstract types which are independent of their tokens being entertained in judgement. And since, for him, a thought is a sentence together with its mode of projection, we should also expect a commitment to the existence of abstract sign-types as well. (And indeed, 5.535 allows that there may be infinitely many names – 3.203 making clear, if further argument is needed, that in *TLP* terminology names are types and not tokens.) So both thoughts and signs have an existence as abstract types, their existence being independent of whether tokens of them are ever entertained or constructed.

Wittgenstein is committed, on the other hand, to denying Frege's doctrine that thoughts exist necessarily. Nor is there any trace of idea that thinking consists in the subject coming into some relation to (i.e. 'grasping') one of these abstract entities. On the contrary, the *TLP* doctrine is that all thinking consists in the employment of logical pictures: structured arrays of sign-tokens (whether linguistic, in speech or writing; or psychical, in private acts of thinking) which have a conventionally determined application. For Wittgenstein, acts of thinking *exemplify* thought-types, rather than consisting in the thinker standing in some *relation to* a thought-type.

- 4 Provided, of course, that they understand the other words in the statement.
- 5 I am inclined to agree with Davidson that the semantic content of a live metaphor is exhausted by its literal (non-metaphorical) meaning. See essay 17 of his (1984).
- 6 See *PI* 65–9. This was the only option I thought available in my (1984b).
- 7 Moreover, even within the area of factual discourse, conditions for understanding might be expected to vary with context. Thus someone who knows only that elms are a kind of tree may be said to understand statements involving the word 'elm' in contexts where the rational grounds for those statements are not in question. In these contexts they can defer to the understanding which other people possess of the term, knowing that they can at any time fill-out their understanding by consulting reference books or competent speakers. This enables them to build up a file of information about elms in advance of knowing what distinguishes elms from other sorts of tree, and enables them to serve as a channel through which information about elms can be passed on. But if the context is such that they themselves need to be in a position to challenge or to appreciate the justification for those statements, then they require an ability to tell elms apart from other sorts of tree. And if they lack such an ability, then they cannot be said to have understood those statements.
- 8 See Essay 13 of Lewis (1983), 'Scorekeeping in a Language-game'.
- 9 I intend this vague formulation to be ambiguous between internalist and externalist accounts of knowledge, since this is not an issue on which I need to commit myself for present purposes.
- 10 Indeed it seems to me on the basis of these considerations that the Wittgenstein of *PI* goes wrong in insisting that understanding is a family resemblance concept. We can provide for unity in diversity by construing the concept as purpose-relative.
- 11 Can it really be so easy to side-step the philosophy-as-nonsense doctrine? Especially since Wittgenstein himself places so much stress upon it, for example in the preface to *TLP*, and in the 1919 letter to Russell where he says that the main point of the work lies in the showing/saying doctrine (see his 1974, p. 71). One reply is that Wittgenstein's failure to allow for purpose-relative concepts is all-of-a-piece with his lack of attention to the context-dependent aspects of language generally, such as indexicals. But a different sort of reply is that he did not really *want* to avoid the philosophy-as-nonsense doctrine. On the contrary, he needs it in a place to give symmetry with his views on the inexpressibility of the Ethical; providing, as it were, innocence by association.

## CHAPTER 8 GEDANKEN

- 1 This interpretation is a rational reconstruction of Frege's position, since Frege himself makes no use of the notion of a possible world.

- 2 See in particular Favrholt (1964), ch. 3, Kenny (1973), pp. 58–60 and (1981), Malcolm (1986), chs. 4–7 and McDonough (1986), ch. 6.
- 3 Only the text-based part of the argument will be completed in the present chapter. Arguments from Charity will be pursued in chs. 9 and 10.
- 4 Maslow (1961) rightly stresses that for Wittgenstein thought and language are inseparable (*ibid.* p. 49ff), though in many other respects he gets *TLP* wrong.
- 5 See Wittgenstein (1974), p. 72. Those influenced by the letter include Favrholt (1964), p. 81, Kenny (1973), pp. 58–9 and Malcolm (1986), pp. 65–6.
- 6 Malcolm makes heavy weather of this remark, and tries unconvincingly to work it around to support his own psychological interpretation. See his (1986), p. 65.
- 7 Ogden actually uses 'the thinking' instead of 'the thought', which seems unnecessarily barbaric.
- 8 For example, at 5 he is careful to say that *the* proposition is a truth-function of propositions. For on the use of 'proposition' common to the 5s, which we noted in ch. 4, there exist truth-functions (namely tautologies and contradictions) which do not express genuine propositions.
- 9 For a vigorous defence of this way of interpreting Frege's notion of sense, see Evans (1982), ch. 1.
- 10 I am not aware of any significant distinction between 'das Denken' and 'der Gedanke' in the terminology of *TLP*. Indeed, see the preface where they seem to be used interchangeably.
- 11 I am aware that some have claimed our knowledge of the meaning of a proposition to be a matter of perception, claiming that we literally hear the meaning in the person's utterance. See for example McDowell (1980). For an effective critique see Cooper (1987). But in any case the distinction between sign and symbol will remain.
- 12 See for example Shwayder (1963), and Griffin (1964), p. 124ff, both of whom apparently conflate the essential directedness of truth-conditions (which we acknowledged in ch. 3) with the idea that propositions are essentially assertoric.
- 13 This remark of Wittgenstein's then embodies a serious misunderstanding of Frege's mature view of his judgement-stroke, in which he makes a sharp distinction between sense (the content judged) and force (the linguistic act of assertion) – see *BLA* 5. It is not, however, wholly inaccurate as an account of Frege's view in *Begriffsschrift* where he says that the judgement-stroke (like the predicate 'is a fact' in a language where all assertions are made in the form 'Such-and-such is a fact') is the common predicate involved in all judgements – see his (1972), p. 113.

## CHAPTER 9 THE EXISTENCE OF THOUGHTS

- 1 See *MT* ch. 4 for further discussion of this idea.
- 2 The talk of 'fixing conventions' in this paragraph should not be