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"L'enigma non c'è". Sulla proposizione 6.5 del Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

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Abstract: The essay has as its main theme proposition 6.5 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* and, in particular, its second paragraph "The riddle does not exist". In the first section, the notion of riddle is compared with that of problem, emphasising, among other things, the great relevance that, for Wittgenstein, the distinction between problems of philosophy and problems of natural science has; in the second, an attempt is made to clarify the meaning that Wittgenstein assigns to the word "riddle": a riddle would be a question "in the void", without any "direction", that is, so to speak, a question that does not know what it is asking. This means that, even if it presents itself as a question, the riddle is a non-question. The third section highlights how the denial that there is the riddle is complementary to the denial, so characteristic of the *Tractatus*, that there are a priori true thoughts or propositions.

Keywords: Problem, Riddle, Science, Sense of Life, Philosophy.

Sommario: Il saggio ha come suo tema principale la proposizione 6.5 del *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* di Wittgenstein e, in particolare, il suo secondo capoverso "L'enigma non esiste". Nella prima sezione la nozione di enigma viene messa a confronto con quella di problema, sottolineando, tra l'altro, la grande rilevanza che, per Wittgenstein, ha la distinzione tra problemi della filosofia e problemi della scienza naturale; nella seconda, si cerca di chiarire il significato che Wittgenstein assegna alla parola "enigma": un enigma sarebbe una domanda "nel vuoto", senza alcuna "direzione", ossia, per così dire, una domanda che non sa che cosa sta domandando.. Ciò significa che, anche se si presenta come una domanda, l'enigma è una non-domanda. Nella terza sezione si mette in evidenza come la negazione che ci sia l'enigma è complementare alla negazione, così caratteristica del *Tractatus*, che ci siano pensieri o proposizioni vere a priori.

Parole: Problema, Enigma, Scienza, Senso della vita, Filosofia.

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In this short essay, I propose to analyse with some care proposition 6.5 of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, that proposition, consisting of three short paragraphs, which sounds like this: "When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. / *The riddle*

does not exist. / If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it". In particular, my focus will be on the second paragraph, which contains that statement "*The riddle* does not exist" that is more often quoted than analysed or interpreted.^[2] With regard to it, I will try to ask at least the following four questions: (a) What is a riddle? Or, perhaps better, what does Wittgenstein properly mean by "riddle" (*Rätsel*)? (b) What role does this far from marginal statement play in the *Tractatus*, given that it appears in a proposition that must be counted, by virtue of its decimal numbering, among the five direct comments to proposition 6, that is, to what is one of the seven cardinal propositions of the work? (c) Why is Wittgenstein so peremptorily keen to inform us that the riddle does not exist, even considering that in a previous proposition he had used, without hesitation, the term "riddle" to speak of the riddle that is life and to observe that "[t]he solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time" (TLP: ^[3] 6.4312a)? (d) ^[4] What, if anything, can we learn about this proposition 6.5 from the four direct comments accompanying it (TLP: 6.51, 6.52, 6.53 and 6.54) ^[5] and from its being one of the main comments on proposition 6? ^[6]

What is a problem? The problems of philosophy and the problems of natural science

The term "riddle" immediately recalls another term, the term "problem" (*Problem*), which, as we can easily verify, occupies an important place in the *Tractatus*. Moreover, "problem" is on at least one occasion used by Wittgenstein as a synonym or in the sense of "riddle". It is, in fact, evident that "the problem of life" spoken of in the first paragraph of proposition 6.521, i.e. that problem whose solution "is seen in the vanishing of the problem", is none other than that "riddle of life" evoked in the first paragraph of proposition 6.432: "The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time".

"Problem", in the singular or plural, is, as has just been mentioned, a term that recurs frequently in the *Tractatus*. We immediately note that, in this regard, Wittgenstein's interest seems to be above all to distinguish (or not to confuse) "the problems [and questions] of philosophy" (TLP: p. 3) from what he calls the "problems [and questions] of natural science" (TLP: 6.4312b). Of the former he tells us or makes us understand, in the *Preface*, at least the following three things: (a) that they are what the *Tractatus* fundamentally deals with as a logico-philosophical work: "The book deals with the problems of philosophy" (TLP: p. 3); (b) that what is shown in the *Tractatus* is that "the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood" (TLP: p. 3) and that, precisely for this reason, they do not belong to that type of problems, the problems of natural science, which testify that our knowledge of the world (or of reality) or of some part or sphere of it is inadequate, partial or even completely absent; that is why, as we shall see,

the solution to the problems of philosophy can never depend on a better or more extensive knowledge of the world (of reality); ^[7] (c) that for these problems he believes he has found, in the *Tractatus*, "on all essential points, the final solution" (TLP: p. 4), although he declares himself, in the end, convinced that one of the two values of his book consists, precisely, in having shown "how little is achieved [e.g. in the perspective of the man of science or in the eyes of the philosopher who considers philosophy a science] when these problems are solved" (TLP: p. 4).

What is stated in the *Preface* could perhaps be clarified by saying that solving the problems of philosophy means or implies that one recognises and accepts that the problems of philosophy are not, strictly speaking, problems, i.e. that, in the proper sense, problems are only and exclusively the problems of natural science, i.e. problems such as those expressed by questions such as "How far is the planet Mercury from the Sun?"; "When was the last ice age?"; "What kind of gas is helium?"; "What is inflation due to?", etc. As these examples suggest, a problem of natural science is one that one can try to solve by making this or that conjecture or hypothesis (cf. TLP: 4.1121) about "*how* things are in the world" (TLP: 6.44) and ascertaining whether they are, in fact or really, so. After one has solved one of these problems, one would say, one knows more about the world and one can, eventually, use this new knowledge to refine our techniques, to try to satisfy, thanks to them, our various needs, desires, etc. For example, a correct answer to the question "What is the cause of inflation?" can enable us to devise effective economic policies that are useful in counteracting inflation or controlling it or, when appropriate, promoting it. Seeking an answer to the questions of science means, in short, aspiring to a better or more extensive knowledge of the world, whether this is done, let us say, for the sheer sake of knowledge or in view of the practical effects and technical acquisitions that can be obtained from it or for any other reason (personal affirmation, enrichment, etc.).

Of course, it is one thing to be interested in glaciations, quite another to be interested in gases or inflation or the solar system, just as it is yet another thing to be interested, as the science that is psychology is, in the various states or mental processes (human or animal). But there is something that unites all these interests in so many different ways, and that is that what the geologist like the psychologist or the chemist, the astronomer, etc. has to deal with are, precisely, problems. And this means that their eventual resolution depends, as we said, on ascertaining "*how* things are in the world" (TLP: 6.44). Let us assume that the answer to the question "When did the last ice age occur?" is, as in fact it is, "The last ice age began 110,00 years ago and ended 11,700 years ago". Well, for this proposition one must say what, according to the *Tractatus*, applies to every proposition, namely that in order to tell whether it "is true or false we must compare it with reality" (TLP: 2.223), it being impossible to tell from the proposition alone "whether it is true or false" (TLP: 2.224). Like any other proposition, "The last ice age began 110,00 years ago and ended 11,700 years ago" cannot be "true a priori" (TLP: 2.225), i.e. before or independently of its comparison with reality.

Of course, the manner or methods of this comparison or contrast may be different, even very different. For example, the manner and methods by which the economist tests his conjectures and hypotheses is different from the manner and methods by which the geologist or astronomer does so. But it is not to this diversity of methods and object that Wittgenstein turns his attention in the *Tractatus*. For example, geology seems, in method and object, to have very little to do with psychology, yet both are, according to the *Tractatus*, natural sciences, psychology as much as geology. Indeed, as can be read in the *Tractatus*, “[p]sychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science” (TLP: 4.1121a).

Note that Wittgenstein’s intent when he states that psychology is just one of several natural sciences is not to claim the natural (material or physical) character of its object. It is not to claim, for instance, that the real object of psychology as a science is the brain and not the mind or, still less, the soul. As the third paragraph of proposition 5.641 shows very well, psychology is and remains, according to Wittgenstein, one of the natural sciences, whatever the object assigned to it: “the human being”, as non-dualist psychologists may believe, or “the human body”, as materialists or behaviourists may think, but also “the human soul”, as Cartesian dualists may believe.

Suppose, for example, that the object of psychology is considered to be the human soul, as distinct from the body or, more specifically, the brain. Well, what Wittgenstein wants us to understand is that this does not mean that psychology would cease to be a natural science; like any natural science, it would continue to treat its object as a part of the world (cf. TLP: 5.641c), i.e. as something that, even when it is exactly as it is described, “could be other than it is” (TLP: 5.634c). Even for a possible science of the soul what applies to any other science would apply, namely that none of its propositions would be true a priori.

It should then come as no surprise that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would go so far as to consider the problem of “the temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say of its eternal survival after death” (TLP: 6.4312a),^[8] as a problem of natural science, that is, as a problem which, even if it were solved,^[9] would not solve, as suggested by the two clearly rhetorical questions Wittgenstein asks himself and us, that riddle which is life: “...is some riddle solved by my surviving for ever? Is not this eternal life itself as much of a riddle as our present life?” (TLP: 6.4312a). Let us dwell briefly on this point, not least because the considerations Wittgenstein proposes here are anything but obvious.

That life is a riddle means, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest, that it is not at all clear what its sense (or meaning) is or, even more radically, that it is not at all clear whether it has any sense at all (cf. TLP: 6.521b). Life is a riddle if and when we live without knowing why we live or why it is worth living (cf. TLP: 6.4b). Note that Wittgenstein is not referring to those situations in which we might wonder, for example, what the sense of life is, given all the physical pain and illnesses that afflict us or

all the injustices and violence that historically characterise it. Indeed, if medical science were to succeed in progressively freeing us from pain and disease, this would not solve the riddle of life. Of course, we could recognise that a life without pain and illness is better than a life marked by pain and illness, and we could praise medical science for the results it has managed, through the efforts of generations of researchers, to achieve. But even once we have eliminated pain and illness from our lives, we might continue to wonder, or someone might (legitimately) continue to wonder, whether life has sense or whether it is really worth living. This means that, according to Wittgenstein, no fact (not even the fact that there are no more illnesses and pains) can, as such, constitute an answer to the problem of life or a solution to the riddle that it is. As he writes, "[t]he facts all contribute only to setting the problem, no to its solution" (TLP: 6.4321).

Returning, on the basis of the preceding considerations, to the first paragraph of prop. 6.4312, we can begin by noting how evident it is for Wittgenstein that the length of our life has little or, rather, nothing to do with its sense, and thus with the solution of the "riddle" or "problem of life" (TLP: 6.521a). The life of a centenarian has no more or less sense than the life of someone who died long before that venerable age. He who has lived longer has simply lived longer. "Did he die a centenarian," we might also say, is in no way an answer to the questions, "Did he solve the problem of life?" or "Did he find the sense of life?" That he died a centenarian is a fact and, as we have seen and it is useful here to reiterate, "[t]he facts all contribute only to setting the problem [of life], not to its solution" (TLP: 6.4321). The conclusion that these considerations imply is easy enough to draw: if the sense of life does not depend on its temporal duration, then neither can it depend on its eternal (indefinite) duration in time. Adding infinite years to the years already lived makes no difference, at least as far as the solution to the riddle or problem of life is concerned. Indeed, a life that lasts in(de)finately in time may remain in(de)finately a problem or riddle for those who live it. That is why the question of whether the human soul is immortal, i.e. whether it lasts in(de)finately in time, is, strictly speaking, a scientific problem, i.e. a problem of natural science. But, as Wittgenstein points out in the second short paragraph of prop. 6.4312, when it comes to sense or value, "[i]t is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required" (TLP: 6.4312b).

What is a riddle? How is a riddle resolved?

As we have seen, a scientific problem is one that requires, in order to be solved, that we compare our answers with reality (cf., for example, TLP: 2.223 and 4.05). For example, if I ask you "How many pages does the book you are reading have?", what I am asking is, to all intents and purposes, a scientific question. Trying to answer it requires you to count the page number or check the table of contents or flip through the book to the last numbered page. Even if you were to answer immediately and without any hesitation "This book has 125 pages", it would not be this, i.e. your

certainty and lack of hesitation, that would make your answer true. It is true if and only if that book actually has 125 pages. Understanding the proposition “This book has 125 pages”, after all, means just that, that is, knowing that if it is true, then the book has exactly 125 pages. That is why, if someone tells me “The book I am reading has 125 pages”, I attest that I have understood what he has told me by counting the pages or checking their numbering and not by looking in the back cover for an indication of its price. As Wittgenstein wrote in the *Philosophical Remarks*, “[w]hen I tell someone that tomorrow will be fine weather, he attests to his own understanding, not by seeking *now* to verify my statement” (Wittgenstein 1980: §27g).

Obviously, it can happen that it becomes impossible to establish how many pages the book in question has. For example, it may be that you have never happened to check the number of pages and that the book is stolen before you can do so and that the publishing house that published it has long since destroyed all copies and that no copies of the book exist any more, etc. However, it remains established that “That book has 125 pages” is the true or correct answer if and only if that book has 125 pages and that it is in the book, and not elsewhere, that one must look for the answer. As Wittgenstein writes, “[i]f a question can be framed”, then it must also be “*possible* to answer it” (TLP: 6.5c), even when it is, in fact, i.e. given these or those circumstances, impossible to do so. And this is because understanding a question means knowing where the answer is to be sought. The question “How many pages does the book you are reading have?” can only be answered by looking in the pages of the book and establishing, if it is in fact possible, how many they are. Any other answer would not be an answer. Put somewhat crudely, “The book costs 15 euros” can never be an answer to the question “How many pages does that book have?”, although knowing that it costs 15 euros may be more important to me than knowing that it has 125 pages. A few years after the *Tractatus*, exactly in 1930, Wittgenstein will effectively explain by once again raising the question “What is a question?”:

What is a question? It is a request to look for something. A question introduces a movement of thought, as it were, at the end of which the answer is to be found. The direction of that movement is determined by the logical place of the answer. If no answer exists, then there is no direction in which you can look for anything; hence there is no movement of thought, and that means that there is no question (Waismann 1979: p. 245).

But there is also something else that must be emphasised here, namely that what applies to every other proposition also applies to “This book has 125 pages”: in order to tell whether it “is true or false we must compare it with reality” (TLP: 2.223). Of course, it can certainly happen that the book has exactly the number of pages I claim it has, i.e. that it has 125 pages. But everything that happens to the book (or of the book) belongs to the world, i.e. to the “sphere of what happens and is the case”, i.e. to the sphere of the accidental. Indeed, as Wittgenstein writes, “all that happens and is the case is accidental” (TLP: 6.41b). Certainly, our propositions interrogate reality and force it, when they are really such,^[10] to give an

answer. As Wittgenstein writes, with what seems almost a reference to the Gospel, "[a] proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no" (TLP: 4.023a). What a proposition can never do, however, is to answer "yes or no" instead of reality. It is also in this sense, or especially in this sense, that it is impossible to tell from the proposition alone "whether it is true or false" (TLP: 2.224). But we will return to this in the last section of this essay.

We finally come to the question of the riddle. What does Wittgenstein mean by "riddle"? The answer is, at least in part, provided to us by the first and third paragraphs of prop. 6.5, which frame, as it were, the second paragraph and its peremptory statement: "*The riddle* does not exist". In a preliminary way, we can say that, according to Wittgenstein, the riddle, if it existed, would be a kind of *monstrum*: a question that does not know what it is asking; a question, as we might also say, that knows nothing about the answer; a question without "movement" and "direction" (Waismann 1979: p. 245). But, as we know, such a question, a question that does not move towards the answer, is not a question. In a "verificationist" spirit, he will go so far as to write in the *Philosophical Remarks* that "[t]he meaning of a question is the method of answering it" (Wittgenstein 1980: §27a), whereas in the *Tractatus*, in the proposition devoted to scepticism, which, as we know from the decimal numbering, is a comment on our proposition 6.5, we can read, in terms less compromised with verificationism, that a question exists "only where an answer exists" (TLP: 6.51a).

Let us then consider what Wittgenstein writes in the first paragraph of prop. 6.5: "When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words". Here Wittgenstein is referring polemically to all those who think that, just as one can ask what the capital of Norway is, one can also ask, for example, what the sense of life is (cf. 6.521b). For them, there are no limits or constraints or obstacles to the questions we can express or formulate. While it may be more or less difficult to answer, one can always ask. There are, in short, no questions that cannot be "put into words". So, like the question about the capital of Norway, the question about the meaning of life can also be "put into words", but unlike the former, this second question is one that not only does not yet have an answer, but perhaps never can. Perhaps the answer to the question about the sense of life can never be "put into words". Once again, we have a question without "movement" and "direction" (Waismann 1979: p. 245), thus a non-question.

What Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting is that it is precisely these questions that philosophy has always considered the most precious profound (cf. TLP: .003c), precisely because they are the hardest and most difficult. Harder and more difficult than the hardest and most difficult questions of science. Unlike those of science, in fact, the questions of philosophy are riddle. It is certainly no coincidence that many philosophers seem to have thought that the task of philosophy was not so much to unravel these riddles as to preserve and pass them on. How many times have we not heard it repeated that in philosophy,

unlike in science, it is the questions, and not the answers, that count? Well, it is precisely this that Wittgenstein disputes. As he will say in the *Philosophical Remarks*, in clear continuity with the *Tractatus*, there are no expectations^[11] “in the void” (Wittgenstein 1980: §28h); “[e]xpecting is connected with looking for. I know what I am looking for, without what I am looking for having to exist” (Wittgenstein 1980: §28a). If this were not the case, he asks himself, taking up a question already posed by Plato, how could I know “that I have found *that* which I was looking for? (That what I expected has occurred, etc.)” (Wittgenstein 1980: §28d).^[12]

Well, according to Wittgenstein, the question about the sense of life would be, to use the terminology of the *Philosophical Remarks*, a question “in the void” (Wittgenstein 1980: §28h); a question without any connection to the search (cf. Wittgenstein 1980: §28a); a search without knowing what one is looking for. But, as we have seen, if one does not know what one is looking for, one cannot even know whether what one finds is what one was looking for (cf. Wittgenstein 1980: §28d). In short, to put it succinctly, “in the void” (PR: §28h) there are no questions. This means that “[t]he riddle does not exist” (TLP: 6.5b).

Not recognising this exposes us to two consequences, both deleterious. On the one hand, assuming that the riddle exists preserves, despite everything, the idea that philosophy is a science. Certainly, its questions are riddles, but they are and remain to all intents and purposes questions, indeed fundamental and indispensable questions, even if one does not know how and where to look for an answer. Searching not knowing what, where and how to search seems, in short, to be the very essence of the science that is philosophy. For another, a question such as the question of the meaning of life, however enigmatic it may be, assumes that there is something to be sought, that is, that the meaning is still something, even if, as Wittgenstein wrote in the *Philosophical Investigations*, something that appears to us so extremely subtle that “we are quite unable to describe with the means a tour disposal. We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers” (Wittgenstein 2009: §106). From this point of view, what Wittgenstein suggests in prop. 6.5 on the riddle is very reminiscent of what he will observe several years later in the first lines of the *Blue Book*, regarding questions of the form “What is...?”, for example questions such as “What is length?”, “What is meaning?” or “What is the number one?”. These questions, he says, “produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)” (Wittgenstein 1975: p. 1).

The preceding remarks can serve as a background to prop. 6.52, one of the most quoted in the *Tractatus*, which constitutes the second comment to prop. 6.5. Here Wittgenstein refers to a feeling that, by using the pronoun “we”, he wishes to share with the reader he evokes at the beginning of the *Preface*.^[13] “We feel – we read, in fact, in the first of the two statements that form it – that even when all *possible*

scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (TLP: 6.52). We might immediately note that here the adjective "scientific" is redundant. As we know, there are no questions that are not scientific. A question, if it is such, is a scientific question; which does not mean that it belongs to this or that science (physics, biology, etc.), but that it, like its possible answer, belongs to "what can be said" (TLP: 6.53); to what can be "put into words" (TLP: 6.5a). The same clarification applies to the identification found in the prop. 6.53 between "what can be said" and "propositions of natural science" (TLP: 6.53). According to Wittgenstein, what he elsewhere calls "the propositions of our everyday language" and of which he states that they are, "just as they stand, [...] in perfect logical order" (TLP: 5.5563a) are, like the propositions of physics, biology, etc., "propositions of natural science" (TLP: 6.53).

But perhaps it is not accidental that prop. 6.52 speaks of "scientific questions". Wittgenstein is probably referring here to that "modern conception of the world" (TLP: 6.371) or to that "modern system" (TLP: 6.372b) which is characterised by the conviction that, with its research, discoveries and inventions, science can provide, if not now, at least in the future, an answer to "the problems of life" (TLP: 6.52). For the modern conception of the world, in short, it is only science that can solve "the problems of life" (TLP: 6.52; cf. also 6.521a where the problem of life is spoken of in the singular) or that can dissolve the riddle that is life (TLP: 6.4312). Now, if we think, as Wittgenstein seems to think, that the problem of life has to do with its sense or value (cf. TLP: 6.41e 6.521b), what Wittgenstein is denying here is that there can ever be a scientific (or technical-scientific) answer to the problem of life's sense or value, even in the ideal case in which science had answered all its possible questions. To take the most obvious example, one we have already used: even if medical science had made possible, with its research discoveries and inventions, a life without pain and illness or even death (cf. TLP: 6.4312), even then the problems of life would remain "completely untouched" (TLP: 6.52).

We note, almost parenthetically, how it is probable that in composing this part of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had Tolstoy in mind, the same Tolstoy who, as Max Weber observed in his 1917 lecture *Science as Vocation*, had raised in his short stories and essays "in the most principled form" that question to which Max Weber draws all our attention: "[T]his process of disenchantment,^[14] which has continued to exist in Western culture for millennia, and, in general, this 'progress', to which science belongs as a link and motive force, do they have meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical?" (Weber 1992: p. 88). Tolstoy's answer to this question had been negative, as Max Weber again reminds us, quoting a passage in which Tolstoy states, in the most direct and explicit manner, that "[s]cience is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question that is important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" (Weber 1992: p. 93).^[15] For his part, Max Weber, reflecting on the question raised by Tolstoy, arrives

at a conclusion that sounds, so to speak, very Wittgensteinian: “Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we must do if we wish to master life technically. It leaves quite aside, or assumes for its purposes, whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so” (Weber 1992: p. 94).

We have so far only considered the first statement of prop. 6.52. For the present considerations, the second is at least as important. In the first statement, as we have just seen, we read that, “even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched”. Or, at least, this is what Wittgenstein feels and assumes his readers “scattered throughout the corners of the globe” feel (CV: p. 9).^[16] Prop. 6.52 continues: “Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer” (TLP: 6.52). Once all possible scientific questions had been answered, any illusion that the problems of life are problems that depend on our ignorance, i.e. on the fact that science has not yet explained and discovered all that there is to be discovered and explained, would fall away. For then we could no longer say, as we often say today, “When we would know more, then...”, because we would already know everything there is to know. What we would “discover” is that knowing everything there is to know means knowing nothing about the sense of life and that, therefore, the sense of life does not depend on what we know (or do not know).

As should be evident, these last considerations are closely connected to what Wittgenstein remarks, in prop. 6.53, about what would really be “[t]he correct method in philosophy”, namely “to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science” (TLP: 6.53). We note immediately that we are here far removed, in spirit, from what today would be called “scientism”, but also from what we might call “irrationalism”. Wittgenstein, in short, is not here inviting us to shed the threadbare and useless robes of the philosopher in order to put on, so to speak, the sober and functional gown of the scientist. But neither is he suggesting to us some flight into the irrational. In fact, what, in perfect harmony with prop. 6.52, Wittgenstein is telling us is that “to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science” (TLP: 6.53) is the most correct way, indeed the only correct way, for philosophers^[17] to give an answer to the problems of life.^[18] Wittgenstein’s idea is, to put it a little too directly, that one can do science without being subject to “the modern conception of the world”, which “tries to make it look as if [by science] *everything* were explained” (TLP: 6.372).

Neither riddle nor a priori truth

As we have seen in the previous sections, a riddle would be a question “in the void” (Wittgenstein 1980: §28h), a question that does not know what exactly it intends to ask and, therefore, what it could accept as an answer. Put a little differently, a riddle would be a question that we could understand, even if we did not know what would make the possible

answer true (or false). For a riddle, in short, what we read in the first paragraph of prop. 4.024, namely that "[t]o understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true" (TLP: 4.024a) would not apply. Thus, just as understanding the proposition "On the table there are three books" means understanding that, if it is true on the table there are three books, in the same way understanding the question "How many books are there on the table?" means knowing that "In the table there are three books" is a possible answer, which is true if and only if there are three books in the table.

We can clarify what is at stake by comparing the alleged question "Was Socrates identical?" (the example can be found in TLP: 5.4733c) with the question "Was Socrates Athenian?". Here, according to Wittgenstein, one can be tempted as a philosopher to argue that the former is, like the latter, a question, as if one only had to put a question mark or use some other grammatical expedient to have a question. The difference between the two questions is that, while we know what would allow us to answer positively (or negatively) to the question "Was Socrates Athenian?", we do not know what would allow us to answer positively (or negatively) to the question "Was Socrates identical?". We do not know, in fact, what would the case if the answer were positive (nor what would the case if it were negative). Therefore, we cannot say that we understand the answer "Socrates was identical" if, as we have seen, "[t]o understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true" (TLP: 4.024a). But here's the point: if we do not understand the answer, we do not understand the question either. Remember: "When the answer cannot put into words, neither can the question be put into words" (TLP: 6.5a). In short, "Was Socrates identical?" is not a riddle, but a non-question. What, according to the *Tractatus*, we should do, when confronted with someone to whom "Was Socrates identical?" appears as a riddle, is to ask him whether the sign "identical" has really been given meaning by him (cf. TLP: 6.53). Indeed, "the reason why 'Socrates is identical' [as the related question] says nothing is that we have not given *any adjectival* meaning to the word 'identical'" (TLP: 5.5733c).^[19] Obviously, he could say that he gives or has given "identical" the meaning of "bearded"; in this case, we would understand both the question and the possible positive (or negative) answer, but, equally obviously, any appearance or impression of enigmaticity would be lost.

But just as the riddle does not exist, neither, according to the *Tractatus*, does what we might consider its exact opposite: an a priori true proposition. Indeed, it is repeatedly stated in the *Tractatus*, against what we might conveniently call "rationalism", that no image, thought or proposition is true or correct a priori. With regard to pictures (and, consequently, also those pictures that are propositions)^[20] Wittgenstein states, as we have already noted, that "[i]t is impossible to tell from the picture [proposition] alone whether it is true or false" (TLP: 2.224); this means that "[t]here are pictures [propositions] that are true a priori" (TLP: 2.225). Indeed, "[i]n order to tell wheter a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality" (2.223). What we read

about thought is no different.^[21] Here Wittgenstein observes, that a thought “correct a priori” would be “a thought whose possibility ensured its truth” (TLP: 3.04). This would mean that its truth would be “recognisable from the thought itself (without anything to compare it with.)” (TLP: 3.05). If we recall what we said about the riddle, we might then conclude that an a priori truth is, as we said, the exact opposite of the riddle: a question that, as it were, contains within itself the truth of its answer. Asking and answering would be the same and identical thing; one and the same movement. Well, if against the riddle the *Tractatus* asserts that “[i]f a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it” (TLP: 6.5c), against rationalism he argues that the truth of the answer is never contained in the question. The question is directed towards the answer, but it is not the answer.

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Notes

[2]According to Klagge 2002: pp. 293-294, when speaking of “riddle” Wittgenstein may have had in mind an aphorism by Karl Kraus or what the German physicist and physiologist Emil Bois-Reymond had observed about “world riddles” (Welträtsel) in an 1880 speech to the Prussian Academy of Science.

[3]For the abbreviation used in quotations from the *Tractatus*, see the final bibliographical note.

[4]On point (d) I will limit myself to a few considerations that are certainly not exhaustive.

[5]"Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. / For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said" (TLP: 6.51); "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer" (TLP: 6.52); "The correct method of philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy - and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person - he would not have feeling that we are teaching him philosophy - this method would be the only strictly correct one" (TLP: 6.53); "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises 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.). / He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (TLP: 6.54). It cannot be avoided here to point out how two of the *Tractatus* most well-known and controversial propositions, prop. 6.53 and 6.54, are part of the comments to proposition 6.5 on the non-existence of the riddle.

[6]As we know, prop. 6 exhibits what Wittgenstein calls 'the general form of a proposition' (TLP: 6).

[7]Cf. TLP: 4.003: "Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. / [...] / And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all".

[8]Wittgenstein distinguishes between two meanings of "eternity", eternity as "infinite temporal duration" and eternity as "timelessness" (TLP: 6.4311b).

[9]Indeed, as Wittgenstein notes in brackets, "[i]t is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required" (TLP: 6.4312b).

[10]As Wittgenstein writes, in order to "restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no", the proposition "must describe reality completely" (TLP: 4.023ab). For instance, but this is only an example, the proposition 'In my garden there are seven trees' would not describe reality completely if it left the distinction between tree and shrub undetermined, so to speak.

[11]Here, the word "expecting" can easily be replaced by the word "question".

[12]"The event that replaces the expectation, is a reply to it. / But for that to be so, necessarily some event must take its place, and that of course implies that the expectation must be in the same space as what is expected" (PR: §28fg).

[13]"Perhaps this book will only be understood by someone who has already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts. – So it is not a textbook. – Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it' (TLP: p. 3). Proposition 6.5 (with its comments) is one of the places in the *Tractatus* that confirm its author's idea that "[i]t is not a textbook".

[14]According to Max Weber, disenchantment is the effect of the "process of intellectualisation [...] created by science and by scientifically oriented technology". That the world is disenchanted means "that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. [...] One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to

master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualisation means” (Max Weber 1992: pp. 87-88). As is evident, it is difficult to resist the temptation to juxtapose these lines by Max Weber with the following propositions of the *Tractatus*: “The whole conception of world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena” (TLP: 6.371); “Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. / And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained” (TLP: 6.372).

[15]Max Weber is probably referring to Tolstoy's 1886 text *What then must we do?* (cf. Tolstoy 1935).

[16]In a *Sketch* for a Foreword in 1930, Wittgenstein, after acknowledging his foreignness and lack of sympathy for “the prevailing European and American civilization”, observes that he is “really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe” (Wittgenstein 1998: pp. 8-9).

[17]This is an indispensable clarification that serves to underline how Wittgenstein's interlocutors are philosophers and all those who, starting with Wittgenstein himself, have felt the seductive force of philosophical temptations.

[18]In the final propositions of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein seems to identify the problems of philosophy with the problems of life (of its meaning and value).

[19]It is worth quoting here the whole of proposition 5.7733, which, moreover, anticipates and serves to better understand the following proposition 6.53: “Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents. / (Even if we think that we have done so.) / Thus the reason why 'Socrates is identical' says nothing is that we have not given *any adjectival* meaning to the word 'identical'. For when it appears as a sign of identity, it symbolises in an entirely different way - the signifying relation is a different one - therefore the symbols are also entirely different in two cases: the two symbols have only the sign in common, and that is an accident”. On the distinction between sign and symbol and on that between mode of signification and meaning cf. TLP: 3.321, 3.322, 3.323. On these distinctions see, for a first significant orientation, Johnston 2007.

[20]“A proposition is a picture of reality” (TLP: 4.01a).

[21]Remember that, according to the *Tractatus*, a thought is “[a] logical picture of facts” (TLP: 3); “a proposition with a sense” (TLP: 4).

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