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Like an Eye in its Visual Field: Tracing the Noetic Quality of Mystical Experience to the Minimal Self of the Tractatus

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Like an Eye in Its Visual Field

Tracing the Noetic Quality of Mystical Experience to the Minimal Self of the *Tractatus*

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Master Philosophy 60 EC

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Introduction

A common experience in reading Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* might be described as follows: the innocent reader makes their way through the numbers 1–4 of the book and gradually develops the impression that what is being communicated is a theory of language and of the nature or structure of the world. Somewhere along the way, however, a feeling emerges that something might be off. Increasingly, the work stipulates rather strict criteria for meaning, criteria that even its own sentences do not seem to meet. This is ultimately confirmed by the book's penultimate statement, which notoriously declares its own sentences nonsensical:

My propositions elucidate when someone who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical by using them to climb up, over, and out of them. (They must throw away the ladder, so to speak, having used it to climb up.)

They must get over these propositions, and then they see the world correctly. (TLP 6.54)¹

The demands that the *Tractatus* imposes on a proposition to be meaningful set clear limits on what we can say. A proposition, TLP 4.023 asserts, fixes reality to only two possibilities: yes or no. This means, for instance, that when we speak of a spot in the visual field, we can very well say that it is red or green, for such a statement is either true or false. What we cannot say is that the spot has a colour. This is not because the latter statement is untrue; it is because there is no scenario thinkable in which it is not (2.0131). That objects have a colour (or rather simple objects, in Wittgenstein's early philosophy) is a condition for them to appear in the visual field at all. For it to be any different, or for there to be two different colours at the same place simultaneously, "is excluded by the logical structure of colour" (6.3751). Likewise, we cannot meaningfully say that a proposition shares its logical form with the situation that it represents (4.12). Here, again, logical form is a condition for there to be a world and language to begin with, and thus our propositions cannot deal with it. Logical form instead shows itself in language or mirrors itself in it: "What expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by means of language" (4.121). In this sense, it seems that most, if not all, of the book's own remarks concern what cannot be put into meaningful propositions: they try to gesture towards the conditions for there to be a world, and for language to represent it at all. "Logic," 5.552

¹ All references of the form x.xx are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921] 2023, translated and edited by Michael Beaney (Oxford: Oxford University Press). The abbreviation "TLP" is added in front only when clarity demands it.

tells us, “is prior to the how, not prior to the what.” But since it is logical form that underlies any possible configuration of our propositions, this “what” eludes straightforward statement. This, in turn, brings into view what is probably the most enigmatic element of the *Tractatus*: the mystical. As 6.44 famously states: “Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical.”

What makes the experience of reading the *Tractatus* so peculiar is that, while one can fully understand the reasoning behind why even, or especially, the book’s own propositions are ultimately meaningless, a lingering sense remains that something deeply profound has been conveyed. Strictly speaking, it should not even be possible to learn from the book *that* its sentences are nonsense, for this is curiously communicated by the nonsensical sentences themselves. Nevertheless, one is left with the feeling that, owing to the book, one now has *learned* something about how language and world hang together, or about what it is for there to be a world at all.

Bringing the *Tractatus* into contact with theories of knowledge is slippery, not because the book never speaks of knowledge—it does, for instance, in its remarks on what it is to “know” an object (2.0123)—but because it is not a work of epistemology or philosophy of science. It is easy, therefore, to import distinctions and terms that do not quite fit. Still, the sense that one has “learned” something from the *Tractatus* is a persistent one, and many of its observations, despite their self-confessed nonsensicality, have entered the canon of contemporary philosophy, as if representing a body of knowledge. This raises the question how we are to understand the kind of “knowing” that seems to be at stake here. The book itself draws a sharp line between what can be said and what can only be shown. We cannot meaningfully assert that a spot in the visual field must have a colour, or that a proposition shares its logical form with the situation it depicts, yet we do not hesitate to speak as if we grasp these things. There appears to be a form of insight that is not straightforwardly propositional, yet not reducible to a mere feeling either. One might reach for familiar distinctions—Russell’s knowledge by acquaintance, or Ryle’s contrast between knowing-that and knowing-how—but under Tractarian constraints, such categories sit uneasily.

Without diving deeply into theories of knowledge—a task that would easily exceed the scope of this thesis—we can broadly say that knowledge can be understood in three ways: as a state (the condition of knowing something), as content (something that is known), and as factivity (we cannot know something unless it is true). If we speak of knowledge as a *state*, we might still be able to frame what we get out of the *Tractatus* as knowledge: we do not find it odd to say that we know that spots in the visual field must have a colour. When we speak of knowledge as *content*, things already become more problematic, because the *Tractatus* seems

to object to treating something that sets the very conditions for the world as content. Finally, speaking of knowledge as *factive* is especially problematic, since it entails that we cannot claim to know something if it is not true. Yet we cannot, on Tractarian terms, say that it is *true* that a spot in the visual field must have a colour—for it to count as true, it would have to be at least imaginable that it did not. This, in turn, makes it difficult to frame this as knowledge in the factive sense at all.

Perhaps, then, the curious experience that we *learn* something from the *Tractatus*, despite its self-professed nonsensicality, can be illuminated by a closer examination of its remarks on the mystical and Wittgenstein's well-documented interest in mysticism. As it would be impossible, within the scope of this introduction, to give an exhaustive characterization, let alone a definition, of mysticism upfront, I shall proceed on the assumption that mysticism is best considered a family of worldviews that share certain, though not necessarily all, features. One such feature, consistently mentioned in both reference works and philosophical treatments of mysticism, is a belief in a form of knowledge that resists articulation, or the grasp of the intellect altogether. Oxford Languages defines mysticism as the belief in “union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute,” accompanied by a “spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect.” Richard Jones and Jerome Gellman, in their entry on mysticism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, propose a definition of the mystical experience as:

A purportedly nonsensory awareness or a nonstructured sensory experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of ordinary sense-perception structured by mental conceptions, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection. (Jones and Gellman 2022, sec. 1)

In the context of this definition, they describe *non-structured sensory experience* as consisting of “phenomenological sensory content [that] lacks the conceptualization normally structuring sense-perception,” and *acquaintance* as the subject being “putatively aware of one or more realities in a way that overcomes the normal subject/object duality” (Jones and Gellman 2022, sec. 1). A similar structure appears in classic philosophical treatments. Bertrand Russell, in *Mysticism and Logic*, identifies as two of his four marks of mysticism the belief in a form of non-discursive insight (“revelation or intuition”) and the belief in unity expressed in the refusal “to admit opposition or division anywhere” (Russell [1914] 1999, 115). Finally, William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, also identifies four features of the mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity

(James [1902]1982, 380–81). All James’s features, in their own way, emphasize the limited grasp the intellect has on the experience or its putative content. *Ineffability* entails the impossibility of conceptualizing it or expressing it in propositional form; *noetic quality* treats the sense of insight as belonging to the character of the experience rather than being the fruit of intellectual effort; *transiency* expresses the mind’s inability to hold on to it; and *passivity* suggests that, rather than resulting from deliberate reflection, the insight imposes itself involuntarily. What is remarkable about all these characterizations—except for James’s, perhaps, though his examples make up for it—is that, in connection with the belief in an immediate or non-discursive insight, another feature consistently appears: the experience of the world as unified, or of the subject’s sense of becoming one with God or nature. The *Tractatus* seems to move in synergy with this, insofar as the assertion following 6.44 speaks of the world as a whole as well.

6.44 Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical.

6.45 Viewing the world sub specie aeterni is viewing it as a—limited—whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.

Of all these versions of the same idea, of an insight unmediated by the intellect, *noetic quality* might very well be the most useful in approaching the puzzling experience of the *Tractatus*. James describes it as setting apart mystical states from mere states of feeling. While it may match the intensity of feelings like being in love or artistic rapture, the mystical experience also asserts itself as insight.

Although similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. (James [1902] 1982, 380–381)

What makes James’s concept attractive for the purposes of this thesis is that it seems to leave room for something in between knowledge in the conventional, factive sense and mere subjective experience: it allows that there can be such a thing as a *knowledge-like quality* to an experience. Such a quality might well account for our sense that we cannot shake off the impression that the nonsense of the *Tractatus* is, in some way, instructive nonsense, and we might even push this further and say that certain experiences associated with the book—whether in reading it or in confronting the limits it describes—are *noetic*. However, the

promise this seems to hold immediately dissipates if all we can do is explain how this noetic quality comes about. Especially given the strong sense that the *Tractatus* does teach us something, one would also wish to argue that one is, for one reason or another, *entitled* to experience certain states or outlooks as noetic.

Such an aim is delicate. When we talk about propositionally stated beliefs, one can reasonably be expected to *justify* them; in the case of a noetic sense or feeling attaching to an experience, it seems that the most we can hope for is to explain what causes it—or to show under what circumstances, or by which standards, its characterisation as noetic is *appropriate*. While this would already be an interesting project, it is, unfortunately, unsatisfying for the present purposes. What I will look for is a basis on which we can say that the experience is not only authoritative to those inside it, but also one that allows those on the outside to judge: perhaps this person is in some way “right” to say that their experience is noetic. Despite not constituting knowledge as we normally understand it, the experience may nevertheless *disclose* something to them.

Several existing strategies can be identified that could grant the noetic quality of certain experiences this authority, and I will cite some of them in general terms rather than attributing them to particular philosophers. One option, already rejected above, is to hold that the noetic quality of an experience stems from a sense of *aptness*: the experience feels insight-like because it presents our stance toward the world as somehow fitting. On this understanding, we already have a certain attitude towards the world that is at times challenged, and the mystical experience then shows us the world in a way that finally reaffirms that attitude, thereby disclosing it as the appropriate one. Another view is that the noetic feel reflects, instead, a *reorientation*: the experience is significant not because it conveys information, but because it alters how we apprehend ourselves or the world. Yet another approach is *phenomenological*, according to which the noetic character is a feature of the way the experience presents itself—its very mode of appearing is what vindicates the sense of insight.

The approach taken here connects this question more directly with an important element of the *Tractatus*: what it calls the metaphysical subject, or the self as a limit of the world. The suggestion is that the authority of the noetic aspect of certain experiences—especially those that involve a sense of the world as a unified whole—can be made intelligible if we take seriously the thought that “the world is my world.” As will be touched upon in Chapter One and developed further in Chapter Four, it is impossible for the self of the *Tractatus* to have knowledge of itself in the ordinary, object-directed sense; it can

therefore disclose itself only as an altered experience of the world. My suggestion then, is that the mystical experience is noetic not because it delivers further facts, but because it reorganises how self and world stand to one another, and in doing so discloses something about that standing. The aim of the thesis is not to resolve the *Tractatus*'s central paradox in 6.54, but to show how its conception of the subject and the mystical might help to understand how an experience can be both non-discursive and yet legitimately described as noetic.

Two questions guide the present inquiry:

- 1) *In what way does the Tractatus establish a connection between two recurring features of the mystical—the belief in a form of immediate, non-discursive insight and the experience of union with the world, God, or nature?*
- 2) *How can the Tractarian conception of the subject as the limit of the world—as expressed in the thought that “the world is my world”—be used to account for the noetic quality of mystical experience?*

The thesis proceeds as follows. Its first half aims to develop, as organically as possible, an understanding of mysticism and of the mystical in the *Tractatus*, without aiming at a final characterization or definition. These chapters are largely historical and interpretive, yet contribute philosophically by situating Wittgenstein's remarks within a broader family of mystical outlooks and preparing the ground for the second half, where the main argumentative work is done.

Chapter One draws out an initial “mystical image” from Tolstoy, the wartime notebooks, and the later sections of the *Tractatus*, with particular attention to the experience of the world as a unified, “limited” whole and to the thought that the self is the limit of the world. Its exploratory nature is deliberate: it mirrors how we often approach a complex domain, beginning from a shared but vague image and only then moving to more articulated, contested descriptions.

Chapter Two takes a more analytical approach. It sets this image against features of mysticism identified in the literature, examines the three explicit mentions of the mystical in the *Tractatus*, and clarifies in what sense we may speak of a “mystical outlook” in a

Tractarian context without smuggling in a doctrine the text itself would reject.

Chapter Three turns to the Tractarian conception of the subject as the limit of the world. It argues that this does not amount to a no-subject view but instead to a minimal or thin notion of the self. It then uses this notion to argue that mystical experience is noetic not by reporting information, but by making perspicuous the first-personal limitation in virtue of which the world is given to me at all.

Chapter Four takes up two worries about the hypothesis developed in Chapter Three: first, that it may collapse under a resolute reading of the *Tractatus*; and second, that it entails commitment to a transcendental self.

Finally, the **Conclusion** reviews how far the guiding questions have been answered, sums up the main moves, and briefly indicates the limits of the thesis and directions for further work.

As the roadmap above might already suggest, the thesis draws on sources remote from Wittgenstein and ventures into areas of philosophy not usually treated as directly bearing on questions of knowledge. But this seems defensible for a thesis that looks for an answer to a question in one area in what is conventionally taken to belong to another. If the features of mysticism described above are accurate, then the least we might say is that it proposes an alternative route to knowledge—one that is taken to bypass the intellect and to concern the unity of the world rather than its divisions. Attitudes to this claim predictably range from embrace, through openness and scepticism, to outright dismissal.

The stance of this thesis towards mysticism is one of agnosticism and pragmatism. Agnosticism, because given its incommensurability with the rational and empirical outlooks dominant in contemporary philosophy, it is of limited use to argue for or against the mystical worldview in any straightforward sense. Pragmatism, because the aim here is not to prove that there is such a thing as non-discursive mystical knowledge, but to make intelligible how such a claim might be articulated with the help of the *Tractatus*, and how it might hang together with its conception of the subject and of the world as a whole. While it may be impossible to demonstrate the accuracy of any “mystical” approach, it may nevertheless be shown to be internally coherent, and perhaps to offer one illuminating way of reading certain tensions in the text. If so, it depends on the reader’s orientation whether the view on offer here is a serious candidate for adoption, or merely one presented in a philosophically responsible way.

Chapter One: The Emergence of a Mystical Image

Take out its three explicit references to the mystical—in 6.44, 6.45, and 6.522—and the *Tractatus* would still possess an unmistakably mystical character. Its mysticism, however, is neither doctrinal nor woven into a sweeping narrative; rather, it emerges as an image—initially somewhat hidden, yet impossible to overlook once recognised. I ask the reader to picture a kind of postcard briefly fashionable in the 1990s, patterned with a uniform design of flowers, smileys, or bits of candy. If one stared long enough, a hidden 3D figure would surface, standing out from, or hovering above, the two-dimensional pattern. It took patience—squinting, shifting one’s focus—and some never saw it at all. But once perceived, the image could not be unseen. So too with the mystical image that emerges from the *Tractatus*: I do not start by claiming that the book is, by any final definition, a work of mysticism, only that once its mystical image presents itself, it becomes difficult to ignore. The aim of this chapter is to bring that image into view—not by fixing too hastily a definition of mysticism, but by inviting the reader to adjust their gaze until it takes form. Only then can the following chapters give it philosophical weight and relevance.

As mentioned in the introduction, mysticism is best understood as a family of worldviews sharing certain, though not necessarily all, features, two of which are a belief in a form of immediate, non-discursive insight and the experience of unity with the world, God, or nature. For the purposes of this chapter, it will suffice to call an idea “mystical” when the sources themselves—a letter from Russell, a biography of Wittgenstein, or an account of fin-de-siècle Vienna—treat it as such. This procedure is no less legitimate than our everyday use of terms like “science” or “art”: their boundaries are contested, yet it is precisely our shared, if imprecise, sense of them that makes such debates possible in the first place.

1.1 Mystical currents in Wittgenstein’s Vienna

We know of Wittgenstein’s mystical inclinations from several sources—among them a now-famous letter from Bertrand Russell and the testimony of Rudolf Carnap. Russell, in December 1919, wrote to Ottoline Morrell that to his astonishment, Wittgenstein had now “become a complete mystic,” and read people like James, Kierkegaard, Angelus Silesius, but most importantly Leo Tolstoy (Russell [1919] 2001, 198–99). Carnap, upon meeting Wittgenstein with the members of the Vienna Circle, realized that he had misread the *Tractatus* as expressing a positivist outlook akin to his own.

I had not paid sufficient attention to the statements in his book about the mystical... His point of view and his attitude toward people and problems were much more similar to those of a creative artist than of a scientist; one might almost say, to those of a religious prophet or seer. (Monk 1991, 243–44)

Carnap's report goes on to note how Wittgenstein, when pressed on a point, did not offer a chain of explicit reasons but seemed to undergo an inward struggle—"as though he tried to penetrate from darkness to light"—until a remark finally emerged. Once it did, Carnap recalls, "any sober, rational comment or analysis of it would be a profanation" (Monk 1991, 244).

As Ray Monk relates in *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Wittgenstein, though returning enthusiastic from a private meeting with Moritz Schlick, was reluctant to discuss the *Tractatus* with the wider Circle (Monk 1991, 241–42). When he finally agreed to meet them in 1927, it was only after Schlick reassured him that their gatherings need not be philosophical. Taking this invitation literally, Wittgenstein surprised the group by reading poetry by Rabindranath Tagore (Monk 1991, 243). He deeply admired Tagore, especially his play *The King of the Dark Chamber*, an allegory of spiritual enlightenment in which the Queen's longing to see her unseen husband ends in the realisation that true power must remain hidden (Monk 1991, 408). For Schlick and Carnap, it must have been unsettling that a supposed ally of their programme could be drawn so strongly to such mystical literature—though in 1920s Vienna this was hardly eccentric.

Fin-de-siècle Vienna, as Karl Baier (2020) points out, teemed with Theosophy, Anthroposophy, occult societies, psychoanalysis, and Lebensreform movements. Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin (1973), by contrast, emphasise an ethical mysticism centred on the purification of the will, exemplified by Tolstoy. Both currents sought to move beyond religious dogma in search of a hidden spiritual truth: the occultist through initiation into the unseen, the Tolstoyan through direct awareness of the moral law within. Wittgenstein may have encountered the occult strain indirectly—such ideas could hardly have failed to reach the Wittgenstein household salon—but his own sensibility aligns much more clearly with the Tolstoyan movement. At its core was the belief that spiritual truth is realised only through transforming everyday life: through work, chastity, honesty, and the refusal of coercion or violence. Stripped of dogma and miracles, the movement may appear almost secular, yet Tolstoy does not abandon God; he relocates God to the human conscience. The "Kingdom of God" becomes a state in which the self ceases to live for itself and becomes transparent to the

good (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, xv–xxiii). Janik and Toulmin describe how many of Wittgenstein’s most idiosyncratic life choices reflect this influence—his renunciation of wealth, his temporary retreat from academia to do “humanly useful” work, his refusal to eat at Trinity’s High Table (Janik and Toulmin 1973, 205). Above all, however, Wittgenstein may have seen in Tolstoy’s austere mysticism a way to reconcile the philosopher and the seeker within himself, as the following section aims to show.

1.2 The wartime notebooks: two converging inquiries

Wittgenstein’s encounter with Tolstoy’s *The Gospel in Brief* (first published in 1885, in English) is one of the few anecdotes in modern philosophy that carries an air of myth. He seems to have found the book at precisely the right moment—just before boarding a patrol ship for his first mission in the First World War. He took the book aboard the *Goplana*, where it became his talisman (NBP 11.10.14).² Personally—an educated young man struggling to find his place among rougher comrades—he held to it with near-religious devotion, later claiming that it had saved his life (Perloff 2022, 23). In the preface to *The Gospel in Brief*, Tolstoy describes how, during an existential crisis, he came to believe that Jesus’s teaching—distorted by Church tradition—must be understood anew. Belief in an external God, he argues, should give way to an ethical understanding of life: one must live fearlessly in the present and in service to others. God is no distant authority but the spiritual source of life common to all, manifest within each person (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, xx–xxii). The book’s central conviction is that true life begins when one ceases to live for oneself and recognises one’s shared origin with others. Its recurring theme—that “temporal life is the food for the true life” (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, xvii)—expresses the shift from fear and self-concern to a life “outside time,” lived selflessly in the present (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 104). Tolstoy’s claim that “man is powerless in the flesh and free in the spirit” (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 5) reinforces this without committing the reader to some metaphysical notion of the soul.

The precise extent of Tolstoy’s influence on the *Tractatus* is uncertain, and it would be an exaggeration to view the numbers 6 of the book as a more philosophically disciplined restatement of Tolstoy’s ethics. The parallels are nonetheless striking. Tolstoy’s *Gospel* equates belief in God with an understanding of life and the world, something Wittgenstein

² All references abbreviated “NBP” are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Private Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. Marjorie Perloff (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2022), cited by date of entry. References to the editor’s introduction and commentary are cited as “Perloff 2022.”

might have experienced as confirmation that his logical inquiry and his search for meaning were soon to converge. These initially separate pursuits are recorded on facing pages of the same wartime notebooks: on the recto he worked on logic; on the verso, written in private code, he recorded his most personal reflections. From these notes—published only in 2022 by Marjorie Perloff—it appears that Tolstoy’s *Gospel* initially served as a beacon through a profound crisis. Amid fear of death, the deeper crisis is one of self-disappointment: he feels unable to bear the “crudity, stupidity & malice” of his fellow soldiers (NBP 15.8.14), struggling, as he writes, to “recognise the *human being* within the human being” (NBP 21.8.14). He considers himself a worm and calls on God to make him a man (NBP 4.5.16) but also notes that the proximity of death restores in him the will to live (NBP 29.7.16). He repeatedly recalls Tolstoy’s claim that “man is helpless in the flesh but free in the spirit,” at one point citing the line verbatim (NBP 12.9.14). From 11 June 1916 onwards, a distinctly Tolstoyan spirit begins to spill over from the verso pages into the logical notes as well. On that day he records the now famous entry:

What do I know about God and the purpose of life? I know that this world exists. That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field. That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning. That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it. That life is the world. (NB 11.6.1916)

Here the two halves of his notebook begin to converge more frequently, as the same passage reappears in the private notes on 4 July 1916. That the passage first occurs on the recto pages is significant however: Wittgenstein treats these thoughts as continuous with his logical investigations. This becomes explicit in the entry of 2 August 1916: “My work has extended from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world” (NB 2.8.1916).³

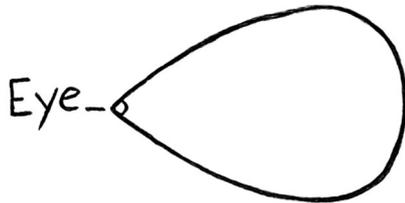
While the 11 June 1916 entry may not at first appear distinctly Tolstoyan, later notes complete the picture. Wittgenstein, who privately expresses a more innocent belief in God or “spirit,” struggles to find a place for such notions within his emerging philosophy. By the summer of 1916, this struggle reaches a temporary resolution: “to believe in God,” he writes on 8 July 1916, “means to see that life has meaning.” He has already concluded by then that the world’s meaning lies outside it; in this sense, we must understand the supernatural. We feel that the world has meaning, though no such meaning can be found within it. Connected

³ All references abbreviated “NB” are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), cited by page number.

to this is his image of the human subject as situated in the world “like [an] eye in its visual field.” The philosophical problem the entry of 11 June gives rise to is *why* the claim “that life is the world” would follow directly from the idea that the world’s meaning lies outside it. I would argue that the best way to understand this implication is through what the *Tractatus* later calls the “metaphysical subject” or “philosophical self” (TLP 5.641). What, then, does the self, as it looks into the world, share with the eye as it looks into its visual field? The 5s of the *Tractatus* include a well-known diagram illustrating this relation—showing, importantly, what the visual field is *not* like:

5.633 Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You say it is just like the case of the eye and the visual field. But you don’t actually see the visual eye itself. And nothing in the visual field lets you infer that it is seen by an eye.

5.6331 For the visual field does not have a form such as this:



The diagram conveys two points about the eye that also clarify the nature of the subject. First, the eye is not itself part of the visual field; second, nothing in the field’s form reveals that it is seen by an eye. By analogy, Wittgenstein suggests the same of the subject: it is nowhere *within* the world, and nothing in the world shows that it is experienced by a subject. This is precisely what the *Tractatus* affirms:

If I wrote a book, ‘The world as I found it,’ then this would also have to report on my body and say which parts of it obey my will and which not, etc.; for this is a method of isolating the subject, or rather, of showing that, in an important sense, there is no subject—for of this alone could there be no talk in his book. (TLP 5.631)

The subject, therefore, “does not belong to the world but is a limit of the world” (TLP 5.632). Wittgenstein’s notebooks already anticipate this, noting that the subject never appears as an object to itself.

NB 5.8.16 The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious!

NB 7.8.16 The I is not an object... I objectively confront every object, but not the I. So there really is a way in which there can and must be mention of the I in a *non-psychological sense* in philosophy. (Cf. TLP 5.641)

What makes Wittgenstein's treatment of the subject relevant in the context of this thesis is the often-made observation that mystical experience is either caused or characterised by a fundamental shift in the relationship between subject and world, where the subject comes to know the object not by distancing itself from it but by giving way to, or merging with, it—what Robert Forman calls “knowledge by identity.” The subject knows something “by virtue of being it” (Forman 1999, 118). Wittgenstein's remarks on the subject open up space for this, since the self being a limit of the world paradoxically implies the identity of self and world.

1.3 The paradox of solipsism and the union with life and world

A somewhat daring parallel now suggests itself. For Tolstoy, one must live for the spirit rather than for the flesh—a selfless life lived wholly in the present. In Wittgenstein, a structurally similar attitude emerges: when the self “shrinks to an extensionless point,” life and world are seen as one, and with this comes a radical acceptance of whatever is the case. His conception of the self at the limits of the world can be read as a remarkably subtle reworking of Tolstoy's “spirit.” It allows him to follow Tolstoy's injunction to live for the spirit instead of the flesh, where the flesh denotes the human body as it appears within the world and the illusory self projected into it. This works without commitment to any metaphysical notion of self, because Wittgenstein's formulation is strictly negative: the self does not appear in the book of the world, and whatever does appear cannot, on honest reflection, be the self. At this stage it matters less whether we regard the subject at the limits of the world as a transcendental condition, as a peculiar way of formulating a no-subject view, or as some metaphysical placeholder, than what follows from the image. What matters are the direct consequences of this picture—above all that “the world is my world” (TLP 5.641) and that “the world and life are one” (NB 24.7.16). As the self “shrinks to an extensionless point and what is left is the reality coordinated with it” (TLP 5.64), identification with any particular self within the world becomes impossible; one instead identifies with life and world as a whole. This peculiar form of solipsism—“I am my world”

(TLP 5.63)—leads not to self-centredness but to the dissipation of the self as one object among others.

1.4 Conclusion

By now a mystical worldview, however suggestive and in need of further substantiation, has begun to stand out from the *Tractatus*. On this view, the belief in union with the divine or the absolute is realised in a distinctive way: through the recognition that nowhere in the book of the world can the subject itself be found. Still, “the self enters philosophy through this, that ‘the world is my world’” (5.641). The self is revealed to itself by the appearance that “I am my world” (5.63). If the self really “shrinks to an extensionless point,” and all that remains is life or the world, then this life and this world nevertheless still appear as *my* life and *my* world. The view, as so often in the *Tractatus*, entails paradox. Wittgenstein, on the one hand, denies the existence of a subject insofar as the subject cannot be found within the world; on the other, he posits the self as a structural limit that shapes the very way the world presents itself. Chapter Three will take up this paradox and argue that Wittgenstein’s notion of self amounts not to a no-subject view but to a minimal or thin notion of self. First, Chapter Two will take a step back and bring the picture developed here into contact with more conventional accounts of mysticism, clarifying which elements hold up under closer scrutiny and which require refinement.

Chapter Two: Characterising The Mystical

In Chapter One, an image was drawn from the *Tractatus*—that of a mystical worldview. That chapter acknowledged its speculative nature; the present one aims to substantiate its suggestions and to take a more analytical approach. Two tasks follow. First, it asks what it means to regard the *Tractatus*'s outlook as “mystical” at all, and how this relates to standard characterisations of mysticism. Second, it prepares the ground for the hypothesis of the thesis: that the mystical experience receives its noetic quality from its point of departure, the self as a limit of the world. Chapter Three, after interpreting Wittgenstein's self as a minimal self, will develop this hypothesis. The question of whether this hypothesis is compatible with the so-called “resolute” interpretation—according to which the *Tractatus* ultimately refuses any metaphysical content—will then be taken up in Chapter Four. In the current chapter I proceed from a more traditional reading that allows us, at least provisionally, to treat the relevant remarks as expressing a determinate outlook, even if the book later invites us to “throw away the ladder” (6.54).

As emphasised in the introduction, the thesis does not begin from a full characterisation of mysticism, but from two minimal markers loosely associated with the domain. Constructing a strict set of necessary and sufficient conditions would risk forcing the *Tractatus* into a frame that does not fit it. Our ordinary use of “mysticism” is looser and more image-driven: we think of certain authors, motifs, and claims—union with the divine, a hidden dimension of reality, resistance to propositional articulation—without demanding an exhaustive definition. The more promising approach for this chapter is therefore to begin from the *Tractatus* itself, to see how its remarks on the mystical have been interpreted, and to situate these interpretations within a broader landscape of accounts of mysticism.

2.1 A relatively straightforward reading

There are only three explicit references to the mystical in the *Tractatus*, all near the end. Their placement makes it tempting to treat them as afterthoughts. For this reason, the previous chapter sought to show that even if these explicit mentions did little work on their own, a mystical current would still run through the text.

6.44 Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical.

6.45 Feeling the world as a (limited) whole is the mystical feeling.

6.522 There is, though, the ineffable. This shows itself, it is the mystical.

If one permits a relatively straightforward reading of 6.44–6.552, it seems far from impossible to infer what the mystical is taken to concern. I will sketch such a reading as it features in the secondary literature, while simultaneously providing a non-exhaustive list of relevant contributions. Angela Breitenbach reads 6.522 as tying the mystical to those features of language and reality that cannot be said but only shown, such as logical form and the internal properties of objects (Breitenbach 2008, 71–72). Rodrigo César Castro Lima tentatively speaks of a “logical mysticism,” in which the ineffable, and by extension the mystical, concerns the logical structure of language and world (Lima 2024, 4–6). “A proposition can represent the whole of reality,” 4.12 asserts, “but not what it must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it: the logical form.” P. M. S. Hacker, in “Was He Trying to Whistle It?”, provides a catalogue of further features of language and world deemed inexpressible by the *Tractatus* (Hacker 2000, 253–54), among them the internal properties of objects, where it is understood that Wittgenstein refers to his enigmatic simple objects, posited to form the substance of the world (2.021). The reason we cannot meaningfully speak about these properties is that, for a proposition to have sense, the *Tractatus* requires it to be contingent: it must fix reality to two possibilities, yes or no (4.023). If we take a spot in the visual field, we can say that it is red or that it is blue, since this could have been otherwise. What we cannot say is that it has the property of being coloured, for an object’s appearing in visual space already presupposes that it must have *some* colour; it is impossible for it to appear without one (2.0131, 6.3751). It seems, then, that while we can speak about how things stand in the world by means of logical form, there are conditions that make logic and language possible at all—and of these, we cannot speak. On a relatively straightforward reading, this is what the mystical concerns: “not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical” (6.44).

More obscure is 6.45’s claim that “feeling the world as a (limited) whole is the mystical feeling.” Dieter Mersch emphasizes the impossibility of the standpoint in relation to the world such a feeling presupposes: “viewing the world *sub specie aeterni*” would mean looking at it from a standpoint outside the very conditions that make there be a world at all (Mersch 2009, 33–34). As I would put it, 6.45 seems tied up with the book’s opening statement that “the world is everything that is the case” (TLP 1), and more closely with 1.11: “the world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts.” The latter seems to invoke an impossibility: that one could determine the number of actual facts. This is not only epistemically but categorically impossible. To say that the world consists of *n* facts would be to speak as though we were referring to a subset of facts *within* the world. But we are not, for

what we call the world is the totality of *all* facts. The impossibility of stepping outside logical space is a recurring theme. In the Preface, Wittgenstein writes that we must draw the limits of thought within language, since thinking about these limits would require us to place ourselves, with our thoughts, outside thinking. Likewise, 6.4311 declares that “our life is endless in the way that our visual field is limitless.” We know that our life unfolds between birth and death, yet we cannot situate ourselves either before or after them—just as we cannot look at the boundaries of our visual field from outside it. On the relatively straightforward understanding sketched here, the mystical in the *Tractatus* concerns everything “outside” or “at the limits of” the world. What makes it mystical is that all concepts we might try to apply to it have meaning only *within* the world, so that we are left without words and with nothing but a mystical feeling.

2.2 Features of the mystical

A textbook example of a traditional understanding of the mystical in the *Tractatus* is developed in Hans-Johann Glock’s *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. In his entry on “Mysticism,” Glock presents the mystical as “a handle” for contrasting empirical propositions with both unsayable features of language and the higher domains of value—ethics, aesthetics, and religion (Glock 1996, 251). He notes how 6.44 echoes 5.552, where Wittgenstein writes that the “experience” needed to understand logic is not that such and such is the case, but that something *is*, and that “logic is prior to the *how*, not prior to the *what*.” The mystical thus concerns the substance of the world—its simple objects and their internal, ineffable properties (Glock 1996, 252). Glock adds that it also includes: (1) the “problems of life” in 6.52, which remain when all scientific questions are answered; (2) the feeling of the world as a limited whole (6.45); (3) ethics and aesthetics as the acceptance of the world; and (4) the idea that death is not an event in life (6.43). He concludes by noting the relative underdevelopment of the mystical in the *Tractatus*, and by pointing to a tension between the claim that the existence of the world precedes logic and the claim that salvation lies in accepting the world as it is (Glock 1996, 253).

In this respect, Brian McGuinness’s 1966 paper “The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*” is central. His main question is whether Wittgenstein was justified in grouping together a range of logical, ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical themes under “the mystical,” and whether they can be understood as expressions of a single attitude or experience (McGuinness 1966, 307). The paper takes as its reference point Bertrand Russell’s essay “Mysticism and Logic,” which

Wittgenstein may or may not have read, but which is close enough to serve as an instructive comparison, especially given Russell's testimony about Wittgenstein's interest in Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, and Angelus Silesius.

Russell characterises the mystical attitude by four features: first, the conviction that intuition grants a more direct access to reality than intellect; second, the unity of the world and the unreality of plurality and division; third, the unreality of time; and fourth, the insubstantiality of good and evil (Russell [1914] 2001, 115). To illustrate the first, he turns to Henri Bergson's contrast between absolute and relative knowledge, where intuition alone accesses the absolute (Bergson [1903] 1912, 6–7; cf. Russell [1914] 2001, 118). For the second, he cites Parmenides' denial of non-being, Plato's Good, and Hegel's dialectical synthesis. The third and fourth he treats more briefly, invoking Parmenides on the impossibility of change and Heraclitus's claim that "good and ill are one" (Russell [1914] 2001, 126). McGuinness argues that all four marks appear, at least implicitly, in the *Tractatus*: direct access to reality corresponds to the idea that some things, though inexpressible, can nevertheless *show* themselves; the unity of the world parallels the feeling of the world as a limited whole (6.45); the unreality of time aligns with the claim that eternal life belongs to those who live in the present (6.4311); and the insubstantiality of evil echoes the view, expressed in 6.4, that all propositions are of equal value (McGuinness 1966, 309–10).

While McGuinness's account is persuasive in tracing these correspondences, something in Russell's own characterisation of the mystical seems off-target. Russell is entitled to his scepticism of the mystic's claim to direct, unmediated insight into reality, however, his somewhat hasty dismissal may stem in part from his reliance on Bergson. Bergson holds that the intellect cannot be trusted, because it evolved for survival; but as Russell himself notes, it is unclear why the same objection would not apply equally to intuition:

It is true that intuition has a convincingness which is lacking to intellect: while it is present, it is almost impossible to doubt its truth. But if it should appear, on examination, to be at least as fallible as intellect, its greater subjective certainty becomes a demerit, making it only the more irresistibly deceptive. (Russell [1914] 2001, 119)

Russell is obviously right that one should not mistake the compelling character of an experience for its reliability, but Bergson's image of an intuiting subject entering the inexpressible uniqueness of an object offers an easy target. As touched upon in several places

above, the mystical experience is often presented as at least as inaccessible to an “active” subject as it is to the intellect. In James, this appears as the feature of passivity; in Jones and Gellman’s definition, as in Forman’s work, the insight arises only with the dissipation of the subject–object division altogether, with Forman speaking of “knowledge by identity.” Bergson, while calling on the subject to relinquish its stubborn tendency to observe and categorise from a distance—something he admits is extremely difficult (Bergson [1903] 1912, 69)—does not fundamentally rethink the relation between subject and object. In Chapter Three, I will argue that, for Russell’s first mark of mysticism to be coherent, one needs an analysis of the subject–object relation far more rigorous than anything offered by either Bergson or Russell. McGuinness appears to recognise the importance of this element, adding to Russell’s four marks a missing fifth that is found only in the *Tractatus*: the metaphysical subject at the limits of the world—Wittgenstein’s distinctive form of solipsism (McGuinness 1966, 307). The difficulty with Russell’s account, however, is not simply that he rejects mysticism as a genuine source of knowledge, but that he does so by invoking precisely the standards the mystic calls into question or at least wishes to complement—the analytical and empirical criteria Russell takes for granted. This should raise concerns about incommensurability, where two views differ not only in their content but also in the very criteria by which they consider a view to be true or valid. A more fruitful, and more generous, line of inquiry would ask instead: in a scenario where the mystical experience does *indeed* carry with it a sense of insight beyond the reach of the intellect, what could account for this insight- or knowledge-like character?

The belief of those who undergo a mystical experience that they have not merely felt but also learned something is what William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, calls its *noetic quality*:

Although similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. (James [1902] 1982, 380–381)

James—who identifies three further features of the mystical experience: ineffability, paradoxicality, and transiency—records a range of reports about what is felt to be learned in such states. Some speak only of a sense that everything has meaning, while others describe more radical experiences: the progressive disappearance of space, time, and sensation, or

even the dissolution of one's ordinary self into what feels like a "pure, absolute, abstract Self" (Symonds, quoted in James [1902]1982, 380–85). The question to be answered is on what basis such subjects might be entitled in their claim to have learned something, rather than merely undergone a subjective state. Given the *Tractatus*'s constraints on meaningful statements, it is clear that they cannot claim to have acquired propositional knowledge. This is why the second half of James's term is important: rather than conveying factual knowledge, the experience is suggested to have a knowledge-like quality or flavour.

2.3 Features building a coherent worldview

The task now is to consider how the suggestive image drawn from the *Tractatus* in the previous chapter—and the Tolstoyan view to which it seems related—touches on the more analytical outline of the mystical worldview just sketched. This is where the chapter risks doing what it has pledged to avoid: imposing on the *Tractatus* a final definition of mysticism and then expecting perfect correspondence. What follows should be seen instead as part of a picture that will sharpen over the course of the thesis, whose central element—Wittgenstein's peculiar solipsism—has yet to be examined. While Russell's four marks—presuming they are well chosen—are far from an exhaustive definition, McGuinness's use of them makes a case that, taken together, they can form a coherent worldview shared, at least in part, by Wittgenstein, Tolstoy, and other sources. This worldview becomes easier to grasp once we see that its apparently distinct features—direct access to reality, the unified world, the unreality of time, and the insubstantiality of evil—tend to imply one another. If plurality is illusory, then so is linear time, and with it any strict opposition between good and evil. The relation between the first and second marks raises a similar question: is unity perceived because the rational mind recedes, or does the unity of reality impress itself on the mystic with such force that conceptual distinctions collapse? Rather than isolating elements that resemble Russell's features, I will treat Tolstoy's and Wittgenstein's visions as wholes that, taken *in their entirety*, correspond to the *totality* of Russell's joint features.

The previous chapter discussed how in Tolstoyism, religious doctrine is displaced by what *The Gospel in Brief* calls the "true life." Tolstoy never defines this notion in a way that would satisfy philosophical standards and even argues that "everyone already knows the life of the spirit," so that asking for too much of an explanation merely evades one's commitment to it (Tolstoy 2011, 71). His aim is not argumentative. What matters is that, for him, the ethical life depends not on adopting a doctrine but on acquiring an understanding of the

world. On this understanding, “God” does not refer to an external being but to a common source of all life, and “Man is the son of God” (Tolstoy 2011, xvii) implies participation in this source. Tolstoy’s point can be summarised in a short passage:

No one has ever seen and no one can know the external God, and therefore the service of an external God cannot govern life. The path of life can only be seen when one recognises that the knowledge located within, as it arises from the source of all knowledge, is the basis of everything. (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 3)

This line of thought implies two ideas of central relevance to this thesis: first, it suggests a form of understanding that is embedded within the structure of the world; second, it approaches a form of immanence in which God and world are no longer strictly separable. In relation to the first idea, it is worth noting how the notion of truth features in *The Gospel in Brief*. Tolstoy likens it to a light capable of illuminating everything but itself. “There can be no proofs of my teaching,” Tolstoy has Jesus say. “It is light. And just as it is impossible to shine a light onto light itself, it is impossible to prove the truthfulness of truth” (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 79). On this view, whatever knowledge one might gain from Tolstoy’s book cannot be factive, since any truth found within it is certainly not truth as presentation. With regards to the immanence of God, what matters is its ethical consequence: if all beings share, or participate in, a common origin, one must treat others accordingly. To work for the spirit rather than the flesh is to place oneself in the service of what is common in every person (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, xvii) and, by extension, in the service of one’s fellow beings. Why this should imply entering a “life outside of time” becomes intelligible if we take the experience of time to be bound up with the pursuit of selfish aims and with the fear of death. For Tolstoy, living from the spirit means living in the present, without orienting oneself toward a future in which one will finally act or become what one ought to be. The true human being, on this view, does not measure out life between a beginning and an end but simply lives in the present, without asking when one was born or when one will die (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 104).

Analytically unsatisfying though it may be, Tolstoy’s picture illustrates the earlier point that Russell’s four marks of mysticism function together rather than as isolated features. Tolstoy’s “knowledge of life”—which replaces belief in an external God (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 3) and manifests as an ethical attitude—has the mark of immediate insight (Russell’s first feature), in that it arises not through deduction but through a recognition of the shared origin of all life (Russell’s second feature: the unified world). This also entails a life outside

time (the third mark), because the experience of time is tied to selfish striving and to the denial of what is common in everyone; and it softens the opposition between good and evil (the fourth mark), which for Tolstoy belong only to the “false life” that refuses to acknowledge the shared origin of all things. In God, by contrast, there is neither death nor evil (Tolstoy [1885] 2011, 159).

The parallels with the *Tractatus* are striking enough that the numbers 6 can seem like a more philosophically disciplined rendering of Tolstoy’s vision. In Wittgenstein, the image of truth as a light unable to illuminate itself finds its analogue in logical form: what makes our expressions possible, yet cannot itself be expressed (4.121). In the *Tractatus*, the limits of thought are drawn in language: we cannot have a meaningful propositional thought about logical structure, for it is precisely this structure that makes our propositions possible. Whether this implies that our grasp of logical form bypasses the intellect altogether depends on how broadly one understands ‘intellect,’ but an element of immediacy is present in that logical form expresses *itself* in our sentences—it shows itself (4.121). Similarly, we know that a spot in the visual field cannot have two colours at once (6.3751), but this knowledge is already contained in our grasp of colour itself. No one needs explicit instruction to reject the idea that a single pixel could be both red and green at the same time, for such a configuration “is excluded by the logical structure of colour.” These conditions for anything to appear in logical space—conditions that are ineffable because they are non-contingent and therefore cannot be asserted in a proposition—are inseparable from the mystical feeling of the world as a limited whole. What we call “the world” is the logical space bounded by these conditions. Yet this introduces a difficulty: ordinarily we call something limited because we can view its limits from the outside; but in the case of the world, no such standpoint exists. Here we reach one of the *Tractatus*’s central tensions, where “the solution to the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time” (6.4312).

The text does mention things outside the world or at its limit—death, God, the meaning of the world, and the self. But these do not lie outside it spatially or temporally; rather, confronting them means reaching the limits of our understanding. Direct references to time in the *Tractatus* are few. TLP 2.024–2.026 state that substance “is what persists independent of what is the case,” while “space, time, and colour are forms of objects,” implying that time has no existence independent of the simple objects that constitute the world (2.021). TLP 6.3611 reinforces this: “we cannot compare any process with the ‘passage of time’—there is no such thing—but only with another process.” These remarks suffice to show how Russell’s third mark, the unreality of time, however underdeveloped, can be traced

in the *Tractatus*. His fourth mark, the insubstantiality of evil, appears more explicitly: since all propositions are of equal value, ethics cannot be grounded within the world, and good and bad willing concern not the facts but our relation to the world as a whole (6.4–6.43).

2.4 Conclusion

This concludes the second chapter, whose purpose was to give philosophical substance to the suggestive image outlined in the previous one. The discussion required a more analytical treatment, while still allowing for a certain generosity toward the intuitive character of the views under discussion. If the principal aim of this thesis were to offer a characterisation of mysticism, or of the mystical in the *Tractatus*, the next step would be a more thorough examination of the principles introduced here. Instead, the aim of the thesis is to use the mystical in the *Tractatus* to illuminate two questions: first, whether and how the book establishes a connection between two recurring features of the mystical—the belief in a form of immediate, non-discursive insight and the experience of union with the world, God, or nature; and second, how the Tractarian conception of the subject as the limit of the world, expressed in the thought that “the world is my world,” can be used to account for the noetic quality of mystical experience.

While a full evaluation is reserved for the conclusion of this thesis, the first two chapters have already taken steps toward answering the first question. The *Tractatus* provides a distinctive account of the unity between subject and world—namely, that the absence of any self within the world leads to an identification with the world as a whole. The second aspect, that of a reality inaccessible to the intellect, appears in the idea that there is a structure to reality that we may grasp, though not in the form of propositional thought, since it is the very structure that shapes our propositions. What might further add to the immediacy and non-discursiveness of such insight is that, if the subject “retreats” to the limits of the world—which can only refer to a realisation, as it was never in the world to begin with—nothing remains but the world, potentially making room for what Forman calls knowledge by identity. Chapter Three will develop what was identified as the missing fifth feature in Russell’s account of mysticism: the role of the subject. It does so by bringing Wittgenstein’s conception of the self as the limit of the world into contact with other minimal notions of the self in philosophy, leading to the central hypothesis of the thesis: that the mystical experience derives its noetic quality not from containing knowledge of the world, but from expressing a realisation about the place of the subject. Chapter Four will then examine two possible

concerns about my view: first, that it might collapse under a so-called resolute reading of the *Tractatus*; and second, that my account of Wittgenstein's metaphysical subject commits me to a transcendental self.

Chapter Three: Minimal Selfhood and Noetic Quality

The preceding chapters have, in different ways, prepared the ground for the present one. Chapter One assembled what I called a mystical image from Tolstoy, the wartime notebooks, and the later sections of the *Tractatus*. Its focus lay on two elements that appeared together with some insistence: the experience of the world as a unified, “limited” whole, and Wittgenstein’s claim that the self does not belong to the world but is its limit (5.632–5.633). These remarks were placed within the family of mystical outlooks by treating them as a Tractarian version of the mystic’s sense of unity with the world. Wittgenstein’s metaphysical self was briefly likened to Tolstoy’s spirit, not in order to reintroduce a ghostly entity, but to highlight that imagining the self as a limit yields something like the mystic’s unitive experience: the opposition between “I” and world gives way—“I am my world” (5.63).

Chapter Two took this image and sought to substantiate it in a more analytical way. It considered the three explicit mentions of the mystical in the *Tractatus* and discussed how relatively straightforward readers bring these together into a coherent outlook. It then turned to Russell’s dismissal of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect and traced part of its force to the model he inherits from Bergson. Bergson asks the subject to adopt a different, more sympathetic attitude toward its objects, but he does not fundamentally rethink the subject–object relation and thus leaves it unclear how the mystic’s experience could point beyond itself. Precisely for this reason, his account proved instructive: it brought into view what McGuinness identified as the fifth feature of the *Tractatus*’s mystical outlook—its localisation of the subject.

The present chapter continues from there. It argues that Wittgenstein’s metaphysical self need not raise fears of Tolstoy’s spirit reanimated and does not amount to a no-subject view. Instead, it will present the Tractarian self as a minimal or thin self, where the self takes the form of what, in a more phenomenological vocabulary, we might call the “first-person givenness” of experience, and which the *Tractatus* formulates as the world appearing to me as “my world” (5.641). If the chapter succeeds, it will show how the notion of the self as a limit provides a more convincing case for the mystic’s non-discursive knowledge than Bergson’s, and with it an account of the noetic quality of the mystical experience. The next chapter will then bring this result into contact with contemporary readings of the *Tractatus*, especially those that are reluctant to speak of any “mystical knowledge” at all.

3.1 The no-subject view and its limitations

Before the main hypothesis can be developed, I must aim at a deeper understanding of Wittgenstein's notion of the self as a limit. TLP 5.631 appears straightforward in asserting that "there is no thinking, representing subject." Yet the remarks that follow complicate this picture, most notably the comparison of the subject to the eye in its visual field (5.633): one would have to agree that, while no eye appears within the visual field, there is nevertheless an eye—so if the analogy is meant to show that there is no subject at all, I would say that it is skewed. 5.641 then introduces the "metaphysical subject" as the "limit of the world," and states that the self enters into philosophy through the fact that "the world is my world," while 5.64 adds that although "the self of solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point," it nonetheless leaves a "reality coordinated with it." This raises the question how anything—in fact, an entire reality—could be coordinated with an extensionless point.

One altogether unsatisfying response would be to make the familiar move that for Wittgenstein it is of no importance what the self (or anything) might be metaphysically; what matters to him is how the concept functions within our language. This would help only if the difficulties arising from the notion of self were indeed resolved within language. Instead, however, a paradox emerges: 5.631 denies the subject as an entity, while 5.632–5.641 go on to assign it a structural role—the role of a limit—and have the world appear as "my world." Intuitively, it would seem convenient if Wittgenstein's stance unambiguously amounted to a no-subject view, as this would probably sit most comfortably with current commitments in the philosophy of mind and self. Unfortunately, however, ambiguity abounds, since Wittgenstein both grants the self no place within the world *and* makes it essential to the way the world presents itself. It would therefore be wholly incorrect, I argue, to claim that Wittgenstein endorses an outright no-subject view, unless one accepts that he is making a rather unconvincing case for it. In what follows, I will argue instead that his remarks are best understood as offering a minimal or thin conception of the self, and I will try to substantiate this claim by discussing two more outspoken versions of such a notion, keeping in mind the ultimate purpose of this exploration—namely, to account for the noetic quality of mystical experience in a way that fits the Tractarian picture.

I begin my exploration with the no-subject view in its most familiar form, as given by David Hume. Hume writes:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain

or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. [...] If any one, upon serious and unprejudic'd reflection thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls himself; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me. (Hume [1739] 1975, Bk.1 Ch.4 sec. 6)

At first sight, most would grant to Hume that when one looks “inwards,” nothing resembling a subject is indeed encountered. What people generally report instead is an inner narrative: a loosely organised bundle of memories, character traits, projects and roles that hangs together as if it were a single thing. While this narrative is highly convincing in giving off the appearance of a solid self—especially when our attention is not consciously directed at it—once we make it the object of scrutiny, its elements turn out to be far more loosely connected than they feel in everyday life. In fact, one may notice that whatever was previously taken to be part of oneself begins to appear eerily external, as if occupying precisely the same space as everything normally experienced as being outside our bodies and minds. This space, in Tractarian terms, is the book mentioned in 5.631: *The World as I Found It*. I would identify as a weakness in Hume’s account its implicit assumption that for any subject to exist, this is where it must be found. This is what I take to be precisely the assumption Wittgenstein calls into question: the “I” is not a character in the book; if it exists at all, then only as the one who reads it. If it were possible, even in principle, to locate the self within the world, then Hume’s failure to find it would constitute a convincing argument for its non-existence. But if it is categorically impossible for the self to appear as an entity in the world—because, like the eye in 5.633, it cannot appear to itself—then Hume’s observation does not provide any argument at all. What is telling in Hume’s own presentation is that the subject remains omnipresent in it; along the lines of the *Tractatus* we might say here that the self *shows* itself in the way Hume reports the experience. What it shows itself in is the first-person perspective from which the account is given: Hume writes, “when *I* enter most intimately into what *I* call myself ...”. For analogous reasons, minimal accounts of the self maintain that we require at least a notion of self *as thin as possible*—one that, at the very least, shows itself in what the phenomenologist would call the first-person givenness of our experience of the world, but which, in the context of this thesis, we had better describe as the world appearing to us “as my world.” On such an understanding, Hume may very well be encountering himself in his

experiment, not as an object of awareness but in the form of his report being formulated as *his*.

3.2 The Tractarian subject as a minimal self

This observation leads to my discussion of what I take Wittgenstein's self to be: a minimal self. As immediately adopting the rather remote vocabulary of phenomenology attached to the notion would be somewhat abrupt, I will first turn to a more familiar voice. Thomas Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere*, observes that the world is occupied by many persons or selves. These persons—when imagined from some detached or elevated standpoint—can be said to appear to him as objects inside the world. One of them, however, is distinct: although he can also regard this person with some distance as an object of awareness, this one, by some mysterious circumstance, is *him*. He then poses the question: why, out of all the possible persons he could have been, is he this person and not another? Nagel argues that this question reveals that even if he were to give a complete and exhaustive description of Thomas Nagel, the fact that this Thomas Nagel is *him*—or that *he* is Thomas Nagel—would not be a property of Thomas Nagel at all. Indeed, if we were to give a description of the entire world—including TN and all the other persons that occupy it—the fact that TN is him rather than someone else is left out from this description. The question, then, is whether his being TN can even be called a fact at all (Nagel 1986, 55).

What Nagel's observation shows is that there is an element present in the assertion "I am TN" which is absent in the statement "there is a person, TN." The I in "I am TN" is neither a property of TN nor part of any description of TN, however complete it may be. In other words, Nagel draws out a distinction between TN and the self that is TN. Nagel calls the self that is TN—the self that does not appear in any description of TN or of the world—the "objective self." There are various concerns one might have about Nagel's line of argument—for instance, the question "why am I this person rather than another?" might already presuppose a distinction between oneself and the person one is. In other words, that I, the author of this thesis, am GS and not TN may not be the contingent fact Nagel seems to take it for. Yet this leaves untouched the nontrivial phenomenon that the sense of self—or the sense of "me-ness"—that, for me, is part of GS is not a property of GS at all, for in everyone else's description of GS this quality does not feature. Thus, Nagel's argument shows that we need at least a concept of the self that enables us to say that one is this person and not another. Nagel's objective self may be regarded as a minimal or thin conception of the self,

for it has no property beyond being coordinated with one reality or perspective rather than another. Nothing further can be said about it, since any quality we might wish to ascribe to it in fact belongs to the person this self is mysteriously coordinated with. Returning now to the language of the *Tractatus*, Nagel's objective self is easily imagined as a limit of the world: from there, it witnesses a certain person TN, LW or GS within the world and wonders why it is their reality it is coordinated with and not another's.

From the more familiar voice of Thomas Nagel, I now turn to the minimal self as it is discussed in phenomenology: a thin conception of selfhood that consists in nothing but the first-person character of experience. On this view, the self is not something over and above experience but shows itself in the fact that experience is given as mine. This concept of self can be seen as complementary to narrative accounts, which picture the self as the imaginary construct touched upon above—woven from memories, opinions, and private sensations, a biographical thread that seems to provide continuity. The minimal self marks what such accounts leave untouched: regardless of how illusory the narrative may be, it appears to me as *my* narrative; it has a flavour of “for-me-ness,” and so does my experience as a whole. Dan Zahavi appeals to Nagel's famous notion of the “what-it-is-like-ness” of experience: there seems to be something to our consciousness besides its content and its faculties, there is something *it is like* to see red, taste an orange, or to be in ecstasy or pain. Zahavi maintains that this “what-it-is-like-ness” always appears as what the world is like *for me* (Zahavi 2017, 193). In this sense, the minimal self presents itself in the form of experience carrying a first-person, or “for-me-like,” quality. From here, it seems only a small step to Wittgenstein's assertion that “the self enters philosophy through this, that ‘the world is my world’” (TLP 5.641).

What my exploration has yielded is three different ways of arriving at a minimal or thin notion of the self. Nagel asks a question: why am I this person and not another and then arrives at a minimal notion of selfhood that we need to at least express this curious fact. Zahavi notices that there is not only something it is like to have an experience, but that this what-it-is-likeness always comes in the form of what it is like for me. Wittgenstein notes that the self is not in the world, but nevertheless the world appears as my world.

3.3 From the world “as my world” to noetic quality

My discussion of three ways of arriving at a minimal notion of self has now supplied the ingredients for my account of noetic quality as not only intelligible but, to some extent,

legitimised. The proposal turns on what appears, in Wittgenstein, as the world being my world and, in phenomenological accounts of the self, as the first-person quality of experience. Two central themes emerged from this exploration: on the one hand, the first-person givenness of experience (the world being my world); on the other, the gravitational pull of the narrative self, which continues to exert its force even as it unravels under closer scrutiny. In mechanics, a centre of gravity exists as the single point at which we treat all the weight of an object as acting, so that we can predict when the object will balance, tip, or fall. But it would be ludicrous to say that this point has any independent existence, hence Daniel Dennett's concept of the self as a "center of narrative gravity," essentially posed as an illusory construct (Dennett 1986, 275). This seems to be the self Hume describes when he reports only thoughts, feelings, and sensations on looking inwards, assigning to them no solid sense of self. What we do not find in Hume, however, is anything analogous to the kind of unsettling report William James collects in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Here, he cites the poet J.A. Symonds:

It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. (Symonds, in James [1902] 1982, 385)

It seems, then, that there are two ways of observing the unraveling of the narrative self as an illusion. In one, it is recognised with a certain analytical distance, as if one were observing something of little consequence to one's own position in relation to the world. In the other, the subject experiences this unraveling as deeply consequential, thereby undergoing a radical—and potentially unsettling—shift in their orientation towards the world. While we have no reason to doubt the authenticity of Hume's report, he also gives us no indication that this observation has such an unsettling or transformative effect on him. This suggests that it is perfectly possible to grasp, at a rational level, the illusory nature of the inner narrative and yet, in complete opposition to this insight, to continue living as identified with it as one was before. There must, therefore, be an explanation for the immense gravitational pull of the narrative self, and the best one we can give, I argue, is that if experience indeed comes with an internal character of first-person givenness, then the first candidate for this for-me-ness to attach itself to will be the narrative self.

This is the first step in my proposal for explaining the noetic quality of the mystical experience. Ordinarily—and I can only rely here on the recognisability of the experience—we find the first-person givenness of our experience attached to an illusory construct: the narrative self. We might read Hume or Dennett daily and be fully committed to their versions of the no-subject view, yet still go through life referring to ourselves as if we were this inner narrative. Even when we recognise the illusory nature of this bundle of memories, opinions, ongoing projects, and so on, its pull continues to exert itself on us by virtue of this first-person givenness, and in moments that it does not, we might even start to question our sanity. However, there seems to be an experience in which one can see through the illusion at a much deeper level (deeper at least experientially) than the analytical gaze of Hume and Dennett. In such cases, the unraveling of the illusion has the effect that the first-person givenness loosens its grip on the narrative self (an illusory character in the book of the world) and extends itself to the world as a whole. In other words, what Wittgenstein describes as a self that “shrinks to an extensionless point” and leaves nothing but the reality coordinated with it, we might describe in phenomenological terms as the “for-me-ness” now extending to the world in full, such that self and world are one—“I am my world” (5.63). This is the second step of my proposed solution. The third step is that it is not that, because of this “redistribution” of for-me-ness (or the shrinking of the self to an extensionless point), one learns something about the *world*; rather, the mystical experience gets its noetic quality from something being learned about the self—namely, that it is not the narrative existing within the world, but a limit from which the world is experienced.

Chapter One cited the *Notebooks* in observing that “the I is not an object” (NB 7.8.16), and that we “objectively confront every object. But not the I” (NB 11.8.16). The *Tractatus* complemented this by observing that the subject does not feature in the book of the world (5.631). As a result, one might ask whether it is even possible for the self to have any realisations about itself, since it cannot appear to itself as an object. This, however, furthers my explanation of the noetic quality of mystical experience: nothing factual is disclosed in it, but it may be the only way in which an insight of the self into itself can exert or manifest itself. Treating noetic quality in this way might help us understand why mystical experiences bear both the mark of being just that—experiences—and of being noetic. If the world were indeed one, or if time and evil were indeed illusory, these observations would not constitute facts, since they do not refer to possible situations in the world. Yet the experience is nevertheless noetic, because it informs the one who has it—however subjective and non-factual—of a fundamental shift in their relationship to the world.

The observation that the mystical experience changes nothing about the facts of the world yet can change everything about the world as a whole is illustrated by the following report from Forman's *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*:

The only thing that remained with me was my surprise at how good I felt, for months thereafter. All my questions had gone away. All these things that seemed like these impossible problems were no longer there. I mean like nothing had changed. All the things that were bugging me before were still present, but they somehow weren't bugging me. That was the astonishing thing. (Forman 1999, 27)

The quotation above, which concerns not the experience itself but its aftermath, is remarkably different in character from that of Symonds in James's book, in that it expresses quiet relief rather than unsettlement. While almost disarmingly ordinary, it maps strikingly well onto the late numbers 6 of the *Tractatus*, as it seems that here someone has found the "solution to the problem of life [...] in the vanishing of the problem" (6.521). Nothing about the facts has changed, but nothing bugs them either, which might be completely accounted for by the idea that "the facts pertain only to the problem, not to the solution" (6.4321). The conclusion might be that the person in question has had a powerful and reassuring subjective experience and nothing more (or less). Alternatively, however, their experience may be a realisation of a subject that no longer searches for itself in the world, one that—analogueous to how the structure of our sentences can only show itself in them—can only manifest itself as a specific flavour of experience, thereby making it genuinely noetic.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has taken Wittgenstein's notion of the self as a limit of the world to express not a no-subject view, but a minimal or thin conception of the self. On that basis, it proposed the hypothesis that the mystical experience derives its noetic quality not from disclosing any new fact, but from the quiet realisation of the subject's true position—its "shrinking to an extensionless point." Chapter Four addresses two concerns or potential objections: first, that the solution presented above betrays a commitment to the so-called traditional reading of the *Tractatus* and would therefore collapse immediately under a resolute reading; and second, that the notion of self I attribute to Wittgenstein is a transcendental self. To respond to the first concern, the chapter begins with a brief exposition of the debate between these two rival readings.

Chapter Four: Two possible concerns

The original aim of this chapter was to briefly address a wider range of possible objections to the hypothesis developed in Chapter Three—for example, that it draws too heavily on remote vocabularies (Nagel, Zahavi), or that, under the guise of a thesis on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, it in fact engages questions that belong more properly to theology, phenomenology, or the philosophy of mind and self. I now consider it more valuable to simply hint at my awareness of these possible criticisms and to concentrate in greater detail on the two objections that seem to me more pressing: first, that the thesis has not done enough to dispel the impression that it implicitly embraces a so-called traditional reading of the *Tractatus* and that, for this reason, its central hypothesis would collapse immediately under a resolute reading; and second, that it has not succeeded in shaking off the suspicion that it remains committed to a view of the self as transcendental. I treat both suspicions as related in a loose sense, since the notion of a transcendental self seems to fit particularly poorly with a resolute reading. The first suspicion is, I think, entirely understandable, since it was a deliberate strategic choice to begin from what I called a “relatively straightforward” understanding of the mystical: it is plainly easier to start from an approach that does not, from the outset, problematise any direct engagement with the content of the *Tractatus*. The second objection is likewise intelligible, as Chapter Three in particular employed language that is at least compatible with a transcendental conception of the self. The next section sketches the debate between resolute and traditional readers, in order to prepare the ground for the subsequent discussion, which aims to dispel the notion that my view would collapse immediately under a resolute reading. The third and final section addresses the suspicion that the self sketched in Chapter Three is a transcendental self.

4.1 Two understandings of nonsense

This section offers a relatively coarse-grained overview of the two dominant readings of the *Tractatus*, usually called the *traditional* or metaphysical reading and the *resolute* or anti-metaphysical reading. As space is limited, the good news is that I do not need to set out both views independently. The label “traditional reading” was never introduced by adherents of that approach; it was coined by resolute readers in order to mark out the cluster of interpretations of the *Tractatus* they take themselves to be correcting. This means that by describing the core *negative* commitments of resolute readers—each articulated as a critique

of what they call the traditional view—one thereby automatically characterises the position they oppose. At the centre of this dispute lies the paradox posed by TLP 6.54, the book’s penultimate remark, which notoriously declares its own sentences nonsensical.

My propositions elucidate when someone who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical by using them to climb up, over, and out of them. (They must throw away the ladder, so to speak, having used it to climb up.) (TLP 6.54)

Resolute readers define themselves by taking 6.54’s declaration of nonsensicality as seriously as possible, even if it means discarding the book’s purported content in its entirety.

Traditional readers, by contrast, put *upfront* their intuition that the book must be communicating at least some substantial content, and only *then* turn to the problem of how to accommodate its final act of self-refutation.

One way of drawing out the difference between the two views is to ask how each of them understands the nonsensicality of the *Tractatus* to arise. This is a highly contested issue, even among adherents of each view, so what follows can only be a very broad-brush exposition of both approaches, one that is still highly vulnerable to criticism from both directions. In a very general sense, however, traditional readers of the *Tractatus* tend to trace the nonsensicality of its sentences to a categorial misuse of expressions that *do* have determinate sense in ordinary propositions: on their view, Wittgenstein combines such expressions into apparent propositions that are meant to state something about logical form itself. The simple signs are taken to retain the meanings they have in ordinary propositions, but the resulting sentences are held to be nonsensical because, although grammatically in order, they attempt to use those same signs to say what logical form is—something which, according to the *Tractatus*, cannot be expressed in propositions at all, for reasons discussed in Chapter Two (Hacker 2000, 364-65). Resolute readers, by contrast, locate the source of the nonsense in a more flat-out failure of representation: in such cases no coherent conditions of truth are fixed for the sentence, so its apparent constituents fail to represent objects or elements of states of affairs at all (Conant and Diamond 2004, 59). As a consequence, a traditional reader would hold that it is indeed necessarily true that a spot in the visual field has *some* colour, but that any attempt to say this in a proposition inevitably results in nonsense. Resolute readers, on the other hand, would insist that an assertion like “a spot in the visual field must have a colour” is nonsense—and no less nonsensical than “gugugaga”—because no determinate use has been fixed for it; it is a mistake to think that its apparent simple signs have any meanings independent of the configuration in which they figure. In this

respect, they can appeal to TLP 3.3, which asserts that “only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning.”

While this might seem like nitpicking to an outsider to the debate, the distinction has far-reaching consequences for the extent to which one takes the nonsense to preclude serious engagement with the book. On the traditionalist stance, according to which individual signs retain their meanings even in illicit constellations, it is much easier to imagine that one still grasps the underlying intention of a nonsensical—because ill-formed—proposition. On a resolute reading, by contrast, there is no such residual grasp: no meaning is retained at all, since individual signs can have meaning only within the context of a meaningful proposition. Why this matters for the central aim of this thesis is that one might conclude from it that any engagement with the mystical in the book—and indeed with any of its apparent content—is possible only on the basis of a commitment to a traditional reading. On a resolute reading, 6.54 seems simply to render the whole book, without remedy, plainly nonsensical. If that is right, my hypothesis concerning noetic quality, which makes use of a purported insight into the self conveyed in the book, would collapse under a resolute reading. The next section is meant to suggest that this assumption is persuasive only on a surface-level understanding of the debate.

4.2 Worries concerning my view under a resolute reading

First impressions might confirm the suspicion that resolute commentaries make no room for the mystical as a significant topic in the *Tractatus*. *The New Wittgenstein*, a collection of essays with a broadly resolute bent edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read, contains only six occurrences of the word “mystical”. One of these occurs pejoratively in Cora Diamond’s contribution (Diamond 2000, 169); the other five are in P. M. S. Hacker’s essay, tellingly the only one in the volume to defend a traditional reading of the *Tractatus* (Hacker 2000). (Crary and Read 2000). However, even if resolute readings do preclude an explicit treatment of the mystical, this does not rule out their treating it implicitly, or even adopting a general attitude that one might, to some extent, characterise as mystical. It is important to realise, in this context, that the resolute reading—at least in its early form—is a negative programme aimed at rejecting certain commonly shared assumptions of earlier readings (Bronzo 2012, 53), and thus does not, as such, impose any shared positive commitments. According to Silver Bronzo, no more than three commitments are needed to call oneself a resolute reader: (1) the rejection of the idea that the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* convey any such thing as ineffable

truths or insights; (2) the dismissal of the view that any special Tractarian theory of meaning is needed in order to detect its nonsense; and (3) the refusal to accept any such thing as “rich” nonsense, a distinctive kind of nonsense as opposed to any other plain nonsense (Bronzo 2012, 53). Anyone who adopts these three negative commitments can count as a resolute reader and is, therefore, still entirely free to formulate their own positive account of what it means, for example, to say that certain things in the *Tractatus* cannot be said but only show themselves. The saying/showing distinction is tied to the paradox in 6.54 in that, on a reading which does not take 6.54 to preclude engagement with the book’s content altogether, it is tempting to think that whatever the *Tractatus* can still convey despite its nonsensicality must do so by showing rather than saying. It is also intimately tied to the mystical through 6.522: “There is, though, the ineffable. This shows itself; it is the mystical.”

On the saying/showing distinction, Cora Diamond has criticised traditional readers *not* for taking it seriously, but for taking it *not seriously enough*. Resolute readers, she claims, do not object to the notion of showing as such, but to the tendency to construe it “on the model of saying,” as if showing were some special way of saying. Instead, she argues, we must make the distinction *sufficiently deep* (Conant and Diamond 2004, 65). Several commentators have taken up her challenge of deepening the distinction. Jean-Philippe Narboux, for example, has argued that it is due to an unfortunate translation error that we think the *Tractatus* takes what shows itself to be “ineffable.” Rather, 6.522 speaks of the “unutterable” (*Unaussprechliches*), claiming that it deals with something that expresses *itself* rather than being expressed by *us*. This, he argues, can “hardly be said to be ‘inexpressible’ since it is precisely to the extent that it ‘expresses itself’ (*sich ausdrückt*) that what shows forth cannot be said” (Narboux 2014, 207). This is quite different from a much earlier proposal of Michael Kremer, in his 2001 paper “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense.” Kremer argues that the mystical in the *Tractatus* refers to an attitude rather than a kind of content: the goal of the book is *spiritual* or *therapeutic*, and the aim of the nonsensical propositions is first to tempt and then to crush our drive for metaphysical and ethical justification. He compares this to the paradoxical rhetoric of Augustine and St Paul, treating the book’s final act of self-refutation as the shattering of Augustinian pride (Kremer 2001, 50). Diamond herself has proposed that the nonsense in the *Tractatus*, while in the *logical* sense plain nonsense, still serves a *psychological* purpose in that it is “transitional”: it employs a certain vocabulary *provisionally* for the purpose of climbing the ladder that is ultimately thrown away—and the vocabulary with it (Diamond 1988, 9–10). These and other ways of treating the saying/showing distinction, as well as the nonsensicality of the

Tractatus, in ways that depart slightly from what a more coarse-grained understanding of the resolute reading would suggest, open the way—via 6.522’s linking of the mystical and the ineffable—for a framing of the mystical that is fully compatible with resolute readings of the *Tractatus*. Most significant in this context, I suggest, is Diamond’s remark that we should not try to model showing on saying; by analogy, one should not construe mystical knowledge on the model of empirical or theoretical knowledge. An example of an account that does so is Bergson’s treatment of intuition as a form of “intellectual sympathy,” briefly discussed in Chapters Two and Three: because it does not fundamentally reimagine the subject–object relation, his notion of intuition never fully escapes what we might call the sphere of the intellect. By contrast, a case of mystical knowledge not modelled on scientific or philosophical knowledge is Forman’s “knowledge by identity,” mentioned in Chapters One and Two, where the subject comes to know something by virtue of being it. I take my hypothesis to deepen the distinction between mystical knowledge and knowledge in the factive sense, in that it does not claim that the noetic quality of mystical experience concerns any fact—not even “the fact” that the self is a limit, since this cannot be a fact. Rather, it is precisely because it cannot be a fact that the self is a limit to the world—or, more strictly, cannot be a fact within the world—that the realisation of this manifests itself in the experience, thereby entitling the person who has the experience to regard it as noetic. In virtue of this—and because it would be a misreading to say that, on my account, the experience is noetic because it points to “the fact” that the self is not in the world—I argue that, although further work would be needed to defuse some of its terminology, my view need not collapse under a resolute reading.

4.3 Worries that my view is “transcendental”

This section addresses the worry that my hypothesis in Chapter Three, while clearly not endorsing an ontologically thick notion of self, nevertheless betrays a hidden commitment to a transcendental or noumenal self. While I must admit that I would take slightly less offence at accusations of Kantian idealism than many writing in the analytic tradition probably would, I do not take this to be a necessary conclusion. Instead, all that my view requires is the following modest claim: if there *were* a self over and above either the illusory bundle of ideas and memories Dennett calls a “center of narrative gravity” or the quality of “for-me-ness” of which Zahavi speaks, *then* this self would not be among the things it could possibly encounter. This, I suggest, is the minimal assumption needed to make sense of Wittgenstein’s

image of the eye as a limit to its visual field and constitutes the most natural reading of his remarks in the *Notebooks*—that “the I is not an object,” and that “I objectively confront every object, but not the I” (NB 7.8.16). Certainly, one can throw at it—and with some justification—the notion of a *transcendental* or *noumenal* self, but doing so would invite a whole body of vocabulary and ideas that the *Tractatus* precisely excels at avoiding. Instead, it presents, in a more elegant form—namely as a paradox—the thought that the ontological status of the self is in a certain way irrelevant, in that its existence or non-existence cannot, in any case, be established *empirically*. Irrespective of whether we take there *to be* or *not be* such a self, any way of speaking about it that remains available to us will therefore be in what I would call a “metaphysically avoidant” way, of which Nagel’s objective self, Zahavi’s form-ness, and Wittgenstein’s self as a limit are but some examples.

Contemporary interpreters of the *Tractatus* have proposed various ways of understanding Wittgenstein’s idea of the self as a limit that is neither ontologically robust nor a transcendental necessity. I will confine myself to two, in order to bring out my own position more clearly. Michael Potter takes as his point of departure an earlier 1916 version of TLP 5.631—now reading “there is no thinking, representing subject”—, in which the solipsism passage ends in a more blunt denial: “The subject that thinks and entertains ideas, there is no such thing” (Wittgenstein 1916, in Potter 2024, 118). He reads the later remarks about a “metaphysical subject at the limit of the world” as giving expression to a temptation towards transcendental idealism rather than as questioning this earlier denial. On his reconstruction, Tractarian solipsism is a structural claim about the coincidence of the limits of “my language” and “my world,” and serves only as a “staging post” towards a clearer account of the relation between thought and world, once one recognises how insubstantial the self that “owns” the world has become (Potter 2024, 117–20).

Maria van der Schaar takes Wittgenstein’s method in the *Tractatus* to be first-personal: the projected book *The World as I Found It* and the remark “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” indicate that philosophical clarification begins from the standpoint of the “I” whose language it is, rather than from a neutral observer. On this view, the first person is internal to sentences, judging and thinking, but does not mark a separate psychological subject or an object in the world. This shapes her reading of the solipsism remarks: if the ego were simply “me”, we would indeed get metaphysical solipsism. Following David Bell, however, she reads “I am my world” from left to right, so that it is the “I” that disappears; “solipsism, strictly carried out, coincides with pure realism” (TLP 5.64). What drops out is any “I” that could be counted among the things in the world:

the first-person pronoun, on this reading, has no substantial content and cannot function as a referring expression (van der Schaar 2024, 136–37, 140).

Potter’s view aligns with mine only in refusing to attribute any substantive ontological status to the “I.” Where I part ways with Potter is that he ultimately seems to incline towards a no-subject view, treating the later remarks about the self as a limit of the world as a temptation to a transcendental reading, whereas I take them to express a minimal or “thin” notion of self. Van der Schaar likewise denies any substantial “I,” stressing that, as a concept, it cannot be used to refer to anything in the world. Her adoption of Bell’s proposal that “I am my world” should be read from left to right—so that it is the I that disappears and the world that remains—fits well with my hypothesis of the for-me-ness spreading from the narrative self to the world as a whole. Yet this affinity is, at most, analogical, since van der Schaar’s treatment is clearly methodological, whereas mine is phenomenological. Van der Schaar confronts the “demon” of transcendentalism in the *Tractatus* directly, arguing that because Kant insists that nothing can be said about the transcendental self, it already appears “as empty as the I in the *Tractatus*” (van der Schaar 2024, 140). My account so far has not shaken off its air of transcendentalism quite as successfully. Chapter Three, for example, suggested that, if the I exists at all, then it must be the one who reads the book of the world, and elsewhere in that chapter it was treated as self-evident—albeit with an appeal to Wittgenstein’s diagram of the eye—that the self cannot appear to itself. Such language, which I *am* committed to, has an undeniable transcendental ring to it.

One way of trying to dissolve this suspicion—still implicitly operating on the assumption that being charged with transcendentalism is a defect—would be to lean more fully into mystical language and maintain that, when Wittgenstein calls the self a limit, he means that it neither does *not* exist nor *does* exist. To say that the self is not within the world is to say that our concepts do not apply to it, *including* the concepts of existing and not existing. This is mystical language *pur sang*, as expressed, for example, in the words of Angelus Silesius—the mystic whom, as Russell notes, Wittgenstein read. The following quatrain is from his *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, first published in its final form in 1657:

Was Gott ist, weiss man nicht. Er ist nicht Licht, nicht Geist,
 Nicht Wahrheit, Einheit, Eins, nicht, was man Gottheit heisst,
 Nicht Weisheit, nicht Verstand, nicht Liebe, Wille, Güte,

Kein Ding, kein Unding auch, kein Wesen, kein Gemüte. (Silesius 1657, quoted in Heiler 1954, 170)⁴

Silesius has no difficulty here in calling God neither a thing nor a non-thing, a plausible interpretation being that if the concept “thing” does not *apply* to God, then neither can we say that he is a non-thing. A full-blown mystical solution to my predicament would then be to add another entry to the “metaphysically avoidant” ways of talking about the self (in Nagel, Zahavi, and Wittgenstein): since the self, like God in Silesius’s quatrain, does not appear within the world, none of our concepts apply to it, and thus we cannot even say whether it exists or not. While such a “mystical argument”—if one can call it that—can do very little philosophical work, it may at least help to articulate a reading on which Wittgenstein’s self is both transcendental and completely empty: empty in the sense that no concept we might throw at it will stick, since our concepts have meaning only within the world.

Since it seems impossible to argue either for or against a view on which the self neither exists nor does not exist, I would instead appeal to what I take to be a phenomenological way of conceiving the transcendental self: the self is “transcendental” only from within experience, that is, from the first-person perspective. A person looks within and, like Hume, finds nothing that could straightforwardly be called a self, yet also finds that they cannot shake off the persistent for-me-ness of experience, the sense of the world as “my world.” From this person’s perspective, it seems that their world—whether conceived as constituted by their language or by their experience—*does* imply a self, as if, at the very limit of their world, there must be—or rather, they themselves must be—such a self. On this picture, it is then already built in that this self can never appear to itself as an object.

⁴ “What God is, one does not know. He is not light, not spirit,
Not truth, unity, the One, nor what is called divinity.
Not wisdom, not understanding, not love, will, or goodness,
No thing, nor non-thing either, no being, no mind.” My translation.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to trace the purported noetic quality of mystical experience to Wittgenstein's notion of the self as a limit of the world. Its aim was not only to account for why such experiences present themselves as noetic, but also to show—in a modest sense—how one might be entitled to take them to be so. Nor was the link between the *Tractatus* and noetic quality arbitrary: one might even describe the experience of reading the *Tractatus* itself as noetic, since its sentences ultimately diagnose themselves as meaningless, yet can nevertheless leave us with a sense that something was conveyed or disclosed by them. On a relatively straightforward reading, what the *Tractatus* claims we cannot say concerns not the facts within the world but the conditions that make the world possible. The introduction—and, in more detail, Chapter Two—sketched these conditions as the terrain of the mystical.

From this connection between the *Tractatus* and the noetic quality of mystical experience, two guiding questions emerged:

1. *In what way does the Tractatus establish a connection between two recurring features of the mystical—the belief in a form of immediate, non-discursive insight and the experience of union with the world, God, or nature?*
2. *How can the Tractarian conception of the subject as the limit of the world—as expressed in the thought that “the world is my world”—be used to account for the noetic quality of mystical experience?*

My answer to the first question was developed over the course of Chapters One and Two—first by way of a suggestive image, and subsequently from a more analytical angle. The connecting element between these two approaches is Wittgenstein's self at the limits of the world, captured by the comparison between the eye and its visual field. The union between self and world is reached through a retreat of the self to its limit, to the point that it “shrinks to an extensionless point” and, as 5.64 puts it, leaves only “the reality coordinated with it.” This opens the door to what Forman calls “knowledge by identity” (Forman 1999, 118), in that the self gains insight into the world by virtue of becoming it.

My answer to the second question was developed in Chapter Three and began from the question of how we should resolve Wittgenstein's seemingly paradoxical depiction of the

self: should we understand it as pointing toward a no-subject view, or toward a minimal notion of self? I argued for the latter, drawing on Thomas Nagel's notion of the objective self, Dan Zahavi's "for-me-ness" of experience, and Daniel Dennett's idea of the self as a "center of narrative gravity," and I translated these notions back into Tractarian vocabulary. The thesis's solution was to explain the noetic quality of mystical experience in terms of a shift in where, in phenomenological terms, for-me-ness "lands." Ordinarily, first-person givenness attaches itself to the narrative self and sustains its "gravitational pull" even when one has intellectually accepted (with Hume or Dennett) that the narrative is an illusion; in mystical experience, by contrast, the illusion unravels in a way that is lived as consequential, and for-me-ness loosens its grip on the narrative and extends to the world as a whole—so that the self "shrinks to an extensionless point" and "I am my world." The experience is noetic not because it delivers facts about the world, but because it discloses that the self is not an item within the world's inventory but the limit from which the world is experienced, and that this may be the only way such an insight into the self can manifest itself at all. Formulated more austere in Tractarian terms, the experience is noetic not by reporting information, but by making perspicuous the first-personal limitation in virtue of which the world is given to me at all.

The hypothesis developed in Chapter Three raised two worries: that it would not sit well with resolute readings of the *Tractatus*, and that it failed to shake off suspicions of transcendentalism. Chapter Four addressed these worries after a brief exposition of the debate between resolute and traditional readers. It argued, first, that the resolute reading—at least in its original form as a strictly negative programme—leaves room for a version of showing that is not construed on the model of saying, and, by parallel, for a conception of mystical knowledge that is not modelled on empirical or theoretical knowledge. It then conceded that my hypothesis does betray a certain kind of transcendentalism: one on which, at least from within first-person experience, one senses a need for a thin or ontologically empty self.

This brings me to the limitations of this thesis. With more space, I could have developed in greater detail what would be required to make my view more than merely "not strictly incompatible" with resolute readings, and to reformulate it so that it remained entirely within the *Tractatus*'s "metaphysically avoidant" idiom. Most importantly, however, a thesis of larger scope could have taken up again an aim included in an earlier draft: to extend the hypothesis of Chapter Three to the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* itself. The introduction already gestured at the thought that reading the book could itself be understood as a noetic experience, but it would be disappointing if this led only to a psychological

account of noesis in the *Tractatus*. This is why the earlier draft explored the idea that what these sentences carry is not a noetic quality, but rather a noetic *imprint*: the suggestion that a sentence or utterance can be noetic not in virtue of what it represents, but in virtue of the place from which it is uttered. I did not include this idea in the present thesis because, within the space available, I could only see myself arguing for it by way of metaphor, which would have tilted the thesis too far toward the suggestive register of Chapter One. The metaphor I have in mind is that the book communicates less like a sentence describing a situation than like a film being projected onto a screen: we do not say that the image on the screen represents the images on the film roll, but that it is a projection of them. By analogy, I would argue that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are noetic because of the place from which they are uttered or “projected”: the self as a limit.

This potential move from the noetic quality of mystical experience to that of the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* reconnects the thesis with the book itself, and with the question of what—if anything—it ultimately contributes to how we are meant to read it. What, the reader might ask, has this inquiry shown about the *Tractatus*? My answer is that it has made, with some degree of success, two points. First, the mystical in the *Tractatus* is not confined to the three explicit remarks in the later numbers six. Chapter Two, with the help of Tolstoy, drew from the *Tractatus* a mystical image that would stand even without those remarks. This matters, as if a mystical current runs through the book as a whole, then its potential to illuminate—and possibly resolve—the *Tractatus*’s notorious paradox in 6.54 deserves serious consideration. Second, and most importantly, the thesis can be read as a contribution to discussions of the self in the *Tractatus* and its importance for understanding the mystical in early Wittgenstein, and—by extension—related notions such as the ineffable and the saying/showing distinction. The thought that giving the self a more central place in the book might invite worries about metaphysical robustness, or about sliding into a transcendental conception of the self, need not be a reason to shy away from it. On the contrary, it may indicate that there is something to be gained here: quite possibly, it suggests that we have not yet developed quite the right vocabulary to speak of the self in the *Tractatus*.

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