Philosophy as *Sprachkritik.* The Palimpsest of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

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Abstract

In his logical-philosophical treatise published in 1921, Ludwig Wittgenstein defined "all philosophy" as *Sprachkritik*, "but not in the sense of Mauthner" (TLP 4.0031). This strange tribute to Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923) undoubtedly contributed to marginalise him as an illustrious and unknown outsider, even if Wittgenstein's later philosophy, interpreted as a turn from logical language to ordinary language analysis, has been considered to be much in line with Mauthner's semantic and pragmatic reflections on language as a human activity. This interpretation of a turn in Wittgenstein's philosophy and the related presentation of Mauthner as a "precursor" of Wittgenstein's late philosophy should be questioned. I suggest that the seemingly negative reference to Mauthner's *Sprachkritik* in Wittgenstein's definition of philosophy as language critique in the *Tractatus* is more complicated than it seems and that it represents a key to understanding the continuities in Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as critical activity and language analysis. Rather than merely identifying common motives of Mauthner and Wittgenstein, which are particularly significant in the latter's posthumous *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953), the aim of this paper is to question, from the very text of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and its subtext, what it means to define philosophy as critique of language, and what such a conception implies concerning the nature, method and purpose of philosophy as a unique kind of theoretical activity.

"*Alle Philosophie ist 'Sprachkritik'. (Allerdings nicht im Sinne Mauthners.)*" Wittgenstein's unexpected reference to Fritz Mauthner in the proposition 4.0031 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is an enigmatic hapax and contrasts, in its elusiveness, with the few names recurrently mentioned in the *Tractatus*, those of the logicians Frege, Russell and Whitehead. Mauthner's name appears as a rebuttal, without any further clarification. Wittgenstein's elliptical exclusion presupposes that there are different ways of understanding the critique of language, and that Mauthner's understanding of it is marginal, perhaps even alien to philosophy. All philosophy is *Sprachkritik*, but is all *Sprachkritik* philosophy? To understand in what sense philosophy is, or should be, a language critique, Wittgenstein provides only one key, in the form of a non-clue: the name "Mauthner." What does this name mean? How to explain the ambiguity of this citatory gesture, which both eludes and highlights Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*?

Although crucial, Wittgenstein's definition of philosophy as *Sprachkritik* and the negative reference to Mauthner have been relatively neglected in the

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literature (see however Haller 1974; Bastianelli 2011; Nordmann 2013). Comparisons between Mauthner and Wittgenstein, based on doctrinal reconstructions of their respective epistemological positions, tend to oppose the two authors (Janik & Toulmin 1973; Gabriel 2013), or on the contrary to identify them, by emphasizing later developments of Wittgenstein's philosophy as analysis of ordinary language (Weiler 1958, 1970; Leinfellner 1969, 1995; Kampits 1990). Yet the very question of the unity and consistency of Wittgenstein's philosophy cannot be decided without questioning this puzzling reference in the frame of the *Tractatus* itself. I argue that Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*, as an immanent critique of language use, or its interpretation as an activity oscillating between the two poles of sceptics and mystics (Landauer 1903), constitutes an invisible or rather unspoken canvas of the *Tractatus*. I therefore propose to read the *Tractatus* from what it ostensibly excludes and try to determine what it shows, negatively. To read it from its end and reconstruct some steps of the ladder that Wittgenstein enjoins the reader to reject. Beyond the historical interest of this issue for Wittgenstein studies, the aim is to clarify both the meaning and the scope of a controversial mutation of philosophy into language analysis or linguistic philosophy.

The reference to Mauthner's *Sprachkritik* is intriguing in its very form. The compound *Sprachkritik*, put between quotation marks, is followed by an autonomous parenthesis, referring to Mauthner's concept and at the same time denying the reference: in inverted commas, the well-known or the so-called *Sprachkritik*; in parenthesis, and as a wink to the reader (*allerdings*), Mauthner's name and its outright rejection. In the polemical rubric "*Sprachkritik*" of his *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Mauthner presented his own language critique as a new philosophical discipline and mocked the academics of his time, who were ostensibly trying to distance themselves from him while at the same time adopting his concepts (W2: 442ff.). In the *Tractatus*, Mauthner's name is side-lined, but his concept of *Sprachkritik* maintained, in place of the more neutral expression "*Kritik der Sprache*." Assuming that Wittgenstein had a first-hand knowledge of Mauthner's writings, how should his split use of the term "*Sprachkritik*" be understood?

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Mauthner's immanent concept and practice of *Sprachkritik* contrast with the prescriptive understanding of it, including the nationalist and conservative *Sprachkritik* aiming at linguistic purism, but also artificial and universal language projects, aiming at a more logical or standardized language (Roure 2019, 2022). Mauthner's *Sprachkritik* does not consist in improving language use or developing a meta-language, but in continuing to use the same language, both object and medium of his criticism, in a way that exposes the non-reflected, implicit meaning of conventional language use. *Sprachkritik* must be performed in and through language and supposes to find a way to "kill the bedbugs without killing the Pope" (B1: 2f.), to keep on using language, while defusing its dogmatic potential. Mauthner's philosophical *Sprachkritik* managed to do it through modes of irony and parody and can be read, stylistically, as a continuation of his literary criticism (Roure 2015). Lutz Danneberg's remark that literary "*Sprachskepsis*" does not usually lead to the silence of the writer can be applied to Mauthner's prolix work and its reception: "*Die gelegentlich als inkonsequent kritisierte, oftmals als Selbstwiderspruch begrüßte Fortsetzung des Schreibens muß weder ohne Folgerichtigkeit sein noch eine unbeabsichtigte Selbstwiderlegung darstellen* ." (Danneberg 1996: 1539).

The proposition 4.0031 identifies "all philosophy" with language critique, referring "in the same breath" (Weiler 1958: 83) to Mauthner's irrelevance and "Russell's merit" (Kremer 2012). If philosophy is language critique, but not in Mauthner's sense, then in what sense is it such? Moreover, how should we interpret the universal quantifier used there? Is philosophy as *Sprachkritik* what philosophy should be, a method that rejects as nonsensical the propositions of a pseudo-philosophy staying at the surface of language, as the reference to Russell and the "logical form" seems to suggest? But in that case, would the language of critical philosophy, based on a correct understanding of the logic of "our" language, also be nonsensical? Or is the definition only descriptive of what philosophy has ever been, a nonsensical language trying to say what can only be shown, and therefore distinct from Mauthner's conception of *Sprachkritik* understood as an immanent, self-reflexive criticism of philosophy?

In the architecture of the *Tractatus*, 4.0031 is the unique extension of 4.003, which qualifies "most of the propositions and questions written on

philosophical things" (*philosophische Dinge*) as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), i.e., neither true nor false; "Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language." How can a proposition be nonsensical? Using Frege's terminology, Wittgenstein identifies as nonsensical "metaphysical" propositions, that are logically well formed but possess no "sense" (*Sinn*), because their author omitted to provide certain signs with "reference" (*Bedeutung*) (TLP 6.53). The lack of reference, however not considered as a lack of attribution by the speaker, characterizes what Mauthner calls "pseudo-concepts" (*Scheinbegriffe*), which unlike the "real concepts" (*Realbegriffe*) are not abstracted from any reality. Mauthner writes that "many of our philosophical concepts" are *Scheinbegriffe*, i.e., "substantival concepts" deprived of any "adjectival" effects. The danger of these metaphysical concepts lies in their psychological power: they "do exist in the human language or thought, as representations, and as such they can motivate actions, which very often have led to murder and manslaughter (religion wars, witch-burning)" (W1, xcv).

Mauthner regards the idea of a projective relation of language to the world, conceived as a correspondence between the isolated word and the thing it names, as a "word superstition" (*Wortaberglaube*). Just because a word exists does not mean that something real must correspond to it (B1: 159). However, language always refers to the real world, but "metaphorically," i.e. through the distorting filters of experience and memory. The most abstract concepts can always be reduced to something material. Considering the verb "*bedeuten*," Mauthner refers the meaning of meaning to the action of indicating (*hinweisen*), suggesting by showing something (*durch Hindeutung etwas veranlassen*): "The pointing of a sign to a future event or to a hidden fact" (B1: 158). To mean something is to show it, but the meaning is constantly changing through discrete semantic shifts -from the observable to the unobservable, from the empirically ascertainable to the essence, from the act of showing to that of saying and naming. Originally deictic, language is essentially metaphorical, since words convey more meaning than what is meant or experienced; metaphors in that sense are not true or false in itself but tell something about our representations of the world (Roure 2013).

In 4.003, the quantifier "most" suggests that some of the propositions and questions of philosophers are not nonsensical. Does this mean that philosophy

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contains apophantic statements and significant questions? If so, what would be their status and their relationship to the truths of science, and to logic? In the *Tractatus*, a proposition that has sense (*Sinn*) can be said true or false, since it relates to a possible *Sachverhalt*. In that sense, a significant proposition is "a picture of the reality" (TLP 4.06) or "a model of the reality as we think it is" (TLP 4.01). The "totality of true propositions is the total natural science [...]" (TLP 4.11) and true propositions, as well as hypothesis in natural science (e.g., the Darwinian theory), have "nothing to do with philosophy" (TLP 6.53 and 4.1122). Propositions of natural science are not the opposite of nonsensical proposition, but of tautologies or contradictions, which are "without sense" (*sinnlos*) since they are either always true or always false (TLP 4.461), expressing the modalities of the necessary and the impossible.

Philosophy "is not one of the natural sciences" (TLP 4.111) but an activity drawing the limit of "the disputable sphere of natural science" (TLP 4.113). How, then, should philosophy be situated in relation to the sphere it delimits, encompassing this sphere without being included in it? Is it as a demarcation from the outside that philosophical propositions are nonsensical, but perhaps useful, or temporarily true, in the process of doing philosophy? How should the nature of philosophy be understood, in regard to Wittgenstein's assertion that the reader, who has understood him correctly, must eventually recognise the TLP's propositions as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), after having "climbed out through them, on them, over them" to "see the world rightly" (TLP 6.54)? As an activity, philosophy shouldn't assert propositions but keep to the descriptive task of clarification (TLP 4.112), which can be interpreted as a logical but also semantic analysis of science.

The Pyrrhonian ladder metaphor (Marek 1979) symbolises also in Mauthner's *Beiträge* the performative paradox of the *Sprachkritik*. The first occurrence of this metaphor expresses the historicity of the empirical acts of speech (see the "mobile steps" by Bréal 1897: 199): the deactivation of the dogmatic character of language takes place as the writing proceeds, making the positivity of the content elusive and fugitive (B1: 1f.). The *Tractatus* deploys another sceptical strategy, by completing the construction and rejecting the whole scaffolding afterwards, mirroring Mauthner's portrait of the philosopher-clown:

"Tragicomic would be the clown who climbed to the top of a free-standing ladder in the circus, and then tried to pull his ladder up to himself. He would share the fate of the philosophers and fall down." (B3: 632f.)

The conception of philosophy as a self-reflexive activity with a therapeutic vocation (Mauthner compares the disease he calls "*Logismus*" to alcoholic dependence (B1: 43)), is sceptical in the sense of an epistemological attitude (*Skepsis*), not of scepticism (*Skeptizismus*) as philosophical doctrine (B3: 617, TLP 6.51). Mauthner's position is that the language of natural science does not reflect a "demonstrable worldview" (*Weltanschauung*), but only temporary "pictures of the world" (*Weltbilder*). In his posthumous work on the *Drei Bilder der Welt*, we read that mystic (*Mystik*), "if it does not prefer to remain silent, still talks about gods, spirits, forces and things, but it knows that gods like things have only a symbolic being, are only in human thought or in language;" The mystical is also an attitude, a feeling toward the world, unlike metaphysics or ontology, in which the "things of thought" (*Gedankendinge*) are "like auxiliary terms of mathematics," that "must disappear if the result of the calculation is to have any sense" (DBW: 77f.). Ontology is "an obsolete term that encompasses all sterile disputes about the reality of ideas, about essence [...], about being, in short, about the ineffable (*Unsagbare*)," but ontology is never mystical, it "always wants to be logic" (W2: 294).

If we go up another notch up in the architecture of the *Tractatus*, 4.003 and 4.0031 are embedded in a definition of the thought (*der Gedanke*) as "the significant (*sinnvoll*) proposition" (TLP 4). They are preceded by two fragments conceptualizing language, defining it as "totality of propositions" (4.001) and describing the relations between language and thought as those between the "clothes" and the "form of the body" (4.002). Wittgenstein considers "human languages" as well as "colloquial" or "everyday language" (*Umgangssprache*), which is, as a "part of the human organism," complicated and not restricted to the logical propositional language: "The silent adjustments to understand colloquial language are enormously complicated." The same fragment defines language as "the clothing of the thoughts," a definition that echoes Russell's distinction between the real and apparent logical form of a proposition (4.0031) and suggests a distinction between logical and human languages. However, as humans, we cannot express the logical form: "Propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the propositions." (TLP 4.12).

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The "logic of language" (*Sprachlogik*) is "humanly impossible (*menschenunmöglich*) to gather immediately" from the colloquial language, and it is precisely through a misunderstanding of the "logic of our language," i.e., human language, that Wittgenstein explains nonsense.

Human language, however, does not require logical reform or improvement. Everyday language is "logically completely in order" (TLP 5.5563). Mauthner also considers that language works well as medium of communication (*Verständigungsmittel*), despite all ambiguities (B3: 240, see TLP 3.323), because language uses are always involved in an intersubjective situation of speech (*Gemeinsamkeit der Seelensituation*) and are never restricted to the logical propositional language. Mauthner ironizes the fact that "only philosophers of language suffer from the deficiency of languages," so that the "healing of grammar is not such an urgent task as, say, a good workers' legislation" (Mauthner 1906: 36). These remarks highlight the non-corrective and non-reductionist dimension of *Sprachkritik*, including in the *Tractatus*.

The aim of the *Tractatus* is defined in its preface as follows: to "draw a limit to thinking, or rather not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense." This is the aim of philosophy itself which, according to 4.114, "should delimit the thinkable (*das Denkbare*) and thus the unthinkable (*das Undenkbare*). It should limit the unthinkable from the inside through the thinkable." The aim of philosophy is therefore to signify the unspeakable (*das Unsagbare bedeuten*) by clearly showing what can be said (TLP 4.115).

In a similar way, Mauthner links his conception of philosophy to the limit of what can be said or thought, identifying both activities: "*Denken ist Sprechen* [...] *Philosophie ist die Grenze der Sprache selbst, der Grenzbegriff, der* limes*: ist Kritik der Sprache, der Menschensprache. In Engelszunge können wir nicht reden.*" (B3: x). Through his definition of philosophy as *Grenzbegriff*, he inscribes in the tradition of Locke and Kant, rejects explicitly a position of exteriority and overhang. Language critique is a human activity like any language: "we cannot speak with the tongues of angels." Mauthner's definition

of philosophy as a limit aims to show the "senselessness" (*Unsinn*) of a *Sprachkritik* that would misunderstand, either by praising or denigrating it, the human nature of our language and therefore the human, "hoministic" character of our philosophies and "pictures of the world."

These considerations on proposition 4.0031 show that the usual interpretation of it as a criticism or as a disdainful rejection of Mauthner's *Sprachkritik* is not self-evident and deserves to be re-examined on the basis of a rigorous reading of the *Tractatus* itself and a discussion of the difficulties and potentialities that the text presents. What is at stake here is not a question of precedence in the chronology of the history of ideas, nor of a confrontation between two authors whose approaches and places of discourse production are totally different. The point is rather to make the comparison productive by questioning the redefinition of philosophy as critical analysis of language: what conception of language, what conception of critique? It is generally considered that in his later works, Wittgenstein rectified the point of view adopted in the *Tractatus*, moving from the "crystalline purity" of logic to the "rough ground" of "everyday language," what allowed Elisabeth Leinfellner to argue that Wittgenstein's critique of language ends up being "in Mauthner's sense." If Wittgenstein's concept of a logical world-picture gives way in his later work to the idea that logic is a "*Luftschloss*" lacking something essential, i.e., a theory of the meaning of language use, this can be read in continuity with what the *Tractatus* shows without affirmatively expressing, and as an attempt to refute from within a dogmatic understanding of language critique.

Taking seriously the dialogue between Mauthner and the young Wittgenstein also has a historical dimension that remains to be investigated. Mauthner's definition of philosophy as activity at the limit of language and the associated *topos* of nonsense appeared in the preface to the second edition of the third volume of the *Beiträge* on grammar and logic, dated 1913 -the year in which Wittgenstein decided to leave Cambridge and started working on the *Tractatus* . Mauthner mentions there again the negative reception of his *Sprachkritik* among scholars, with few exceptions including Ernst Mach. In this context, he recounts his discussions with a "young philosopher" he met in 1907 -the year Wittgenstein was studying in Berlin-, who was enthusiastic about his critique

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of language and developed the plan to write a doctoral thesis on it. The young philosopher, Mauthner tells, visited him later in Freiburg and asked him to formulate the "guiding principles" (*leitende Gedanken*) of the *Sprachkritik* in a few words. Mauthner "warned" the apprentice philosopher that, if he were not an "enemy of all -isms," he could have called his doctrine "*Hominismus*," to avoid the anthropolatry associated in his view to the term used by F.C.S. Schiller as the "catchword of Anglo-American pragmatism," *Humanismus*. The young philosopher, Mauthner writes, was "in a hurry to make up his mind and told me, he wanted to heed my warning and disavow (*verleugnen*) me in his doctoral dissertation, but instead write soon another book entitled 'From Humanism to *Sprachkritik*.' I had a hard time getting the ambitious philosopher to promise that he would not write this nonsensical book either." That Mauthner may allude to Wittgenstein in this humorously malicious anecdote is a conjecture worthy of investigation. Yet Mauthner's portrait of this young philosopher is striking, and it reminds us that it is at least possible to read the *Tractatus* as a subtle response to Mauthner's warning on the nonsense of a doctrinal system of *Sprachkritik*, which would neglect the human nature of our language world-pictures.

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