

*General Problems of Political Conceptology***THE INADVERTENCY PRINCIPLE:
WITTGENSTEIN'S *TRACTATUS*
AND POLITICAL INADVERTENCY****D.J. Lacey***College of Humanities and Social Sciences
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In ancient times the political was conceived of as a natural if not cosmological notion; to belong to a polis was part of the natural human condition and even defined the human as such, as is seen, most notably, in Aristotle's famous formulation that the human is a political animal. With early modern political thinking, however, a division is made between the natural human condition, on the one hand, and the need for political administration to better that condition, on the other. This transition is evident in Hobbes, for while the natural human state is the basis for the advent of societal organization via a political model, still the distinction between a state of nature and the rule of law is firmly grounded. With Wittgenstein, as I intend to show here, this distinction can be seen to fall subject to a more drastic division, namely that the political as such only exists in representational form, and thereby excludes the possibility of there being a political fact in the world. The status of the political, in this regard, can itself only be described by an account that incorporates the relationship between propositions and facts, which in turn can be adequately conceived according to what we will call a principle of inadvertency. With this principle, we can realize how a factual event must aim to be political, but that in so doing it cannot be a political fact, save through its representation as such. On the other hand, however, this wider division between natural and representational conditions may in turn reposition the political again within a natural context, for the status of a *Bild* or representation is itself that of a fact, i.e., a representational fact in the world. Hence, the wider division described above would not mean that between nature and representation or custom, but rather a distinction between two kinds of natural or worldly facts, namely between what we might call on the one hand facts of occurrence, and on the other hand facts of representation.

When we ask ourselves what we mean by 'politics', we can generally agree that we mean something that somehow pertains to matters of the *polis* or the state. The question arises, however, as to what this thing is which we call a 'state'? From

this question, moreover, another perhaps less immediate question likewise follows, namely, what function does the state serve? The latter question is can be understood as a question not so much regarding what the state is, but rather how it is, i.e., how does it exist and what does it do? Another way of inquiring into the nature of a state that follows from asking about how it exists or what its function might be, is to ask what is its purpose, what is the state for? With this last way of phrasing the question, we can notice quite clearly that something else emerges besides the state—something for which the state itself exists, which would imply that the state is not an end in itself. If this is the case, namely that the state exists for something else, then even if we do not as of yet know what that something else might be, we can say that all things which posit politics and the state as their end are acting inadvertently, for while they aim toward politics and the state, they nevertheless hit upon (or fail to hit) another, possibly unknown target.

In this regard, we will here discuss Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in order to explore not simply how the polis is represented in language, but rather how the polis itself may be representational in the same way as language; and moreover, that just as language can only show the logical form of its representation, but cannot represent that form itself, so too may the polis show that which it itself cannot represent in its own political terms. This phenomenon is can be understood by examining the difference that Wittgenstein draws between showing and saying. A proposition is intended to say that which it says, but any proposition that has sense also shows its logical form. This showing, however, cannot itself be articulated or said; even when Wittgenstein himself says that a proposition shows its logical form, that very statement shows such form without being able to articulate or say such showing. Yet if sense is derived from that which is shown, then it is not simply through indirection that a sensible saying shows, but rather through inadvertency.

The difference between indirection and inadvertency reduces to that between intention: indirection is intentional both in terms of what it appears to intend, and also in terms of what it actually intends through such appearance. Inadvertency, on the other hand, can only intend what it appears to intend, otherwise that which it actually achieves would not be inadvertently achieved, but rather advertently achieved, hence its apparent goal would be merely indirect, rather than inadvertent. This difference will become clearer once we examine some passages from Wittgenstein's text, after which we will then be able to compare the difference between saying and showing in propositions to a similar if not the same difference in our conception of the consequences this has for politics and the political.

First, then, let us consider passages dealing with the basis for this difference, namely those concerning the notion of a 'picture' as Wittgenstein presents it:

2.171 The picture can represent every reality whose form it has . . .

2.172 The picture, however, cannot represent its form of representation; it shows it forth.

2.173 The picture represents its object from without (its standpoint is its form of representation) . . .

2.174 But the picture cannot place itself outside of its form of representation.

2.18 What every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all—rightly or falsely—is the logical form, that is, the form of reality.¹

If we allow ourselves a flexible application of this notion, *das Bild*, then we can immediately recognize a possible feature concerning the realm of politics, namely, that anything that is seemingly in fact political, when recognized as such, is therefore also already a picture, *ein Bild*, of the political itself. Yet if we accept Wittgenstein's argument that a *Bild* cannot represent its own representing, then a political fact cannot, in the same way and at the same time, also be a representation of the political, or more specifically it cannot represent itself as such, for to do so would be a political fact representing itself as political, i.e., for it to represent its own representing. The conclusion that we can draw from this possibility is simply that what is represented as political, is not itself political at all, but must rather be understood as a fact of a different kind. Perhaps any kind of fact can in turn represent the political, but it is also possible that only certain kinds of facts can form such a representation, or perhaps only one kind of fact; either way, the kind of fact that a thing is must be different from what represents it.

The task before us, then, is to determine, according to the principle of inadvertency, what kind or kinds of facts can be represented as political. To do this, we can develop the notion of inadvertency with the following initial idea: something is inadvertent when, in aiming to achieve one objective, it achieves something else. In this sense, then, a fact that aims to achieve a political objective, and thereby itself be a political fact, would inadvertently achieve another kind of objective and thus be a fact of a different kind.

It is of course crucial to remember that Wittgenstein does not himself speak of the political, but rather that here we are applying his analysis of language and thought to that concept. In so doing, we can experiment with different possibilities of such application, one of which is to understand 'political' as a "name" (*Name*). A name when situated within a proposition, according to Wittgenstein, is an "element" and "simple sign" of the proposition (3.144 – 3.202). As a preliminary example of the political as a name, we can utilize a definition of the term 'politics' given by Vittorio Hùsle from his work *Morals and Politics*. Hùsle writes:

I use the word "politics" to refer to acts that are directed toward the determination and/or implementation of state goals in the context of power struggles. What goals are involved can remain an open question here. Protection from civil and foreign violence is certainly such a goal, but not the only one. Since the determination of goals is a theoretical task, this definition implies that public concern with questions of political philosophy must also be considered political [. . .] In any case, it would be a serious mistake to believe that political action is possible only through organs of the state.²

¹ These and all other quotations of Wittgenstein's text are taken from: Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, with an Introduction by Bertrand Russell (New York: Routledge, repr. 1990).

² Vittorio Hùsle. *Morals and Politics*, trans. Steven Rendall (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), p. 68.

When we combine this definition with certain aspects of Wittgenstein's treatise, we begin to see a kind of continuity that may allow us to better ascertain the nature of the political. Indeed, we already find an option for the kinds of facts that are represented as political, i.e., these facts or facts of occurrence are understood as "acts that are directed toward the determination and/or implementation of state goals in the context of power struggles." Two added elements from Wittgenstein's account are that the term 'political' is itself also a fact, namely a fact of representation, and moreover it occurs alongside the definition as itself an object. Accepting the soundness of Hulsle's definition, which in my estimation is quite good, our attention upon the 'political' is redirected toward actions informed according to state goals, and therefore pertains to a notion of what the state itself is, which was the question we raised above. Indeed, if the determination of state goals is itself a theoretical task, and if in this sense a thing is defined according to its end, then the goals of a state determine what the state is, implying that the state is theoretically defined. Yet no state is simply theoretical; nor, for that matter, are the goals of a state completely reified or existent qua theory once the state in question already exists. Therefore, both the state, which is determined according to its ends, and those ends themselves, are likewise means to some other end.

At this point we may turn to a different aspect of Wittgenstein's treatise, one that involves a set of propositions involving our subjective and ethical relation to the world. One explicit point that Wittgenstein makes is that the consequences of an action are irrelevant to the ethical value of that action:

6.422 The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form "thou shalt . . ." is: And what if I do not do it? But it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense. This question as to the *consequences* of an action must therefore be irrelevant. At least these consequences will not be events. For there must be something right in that formulation of the question. There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself.

(And this is clear also that the reward must be something acceptable, and the punishment something unacceptable.)

This idea, coupled with the preceding inferences regarding the goals of a state, implies that a state cannot identify ethical versus unethical actions as such. Instead, a state can administer reward or punishment as a consequence to a given act, but reward and punishment cannot be used to evaluate whether the action is itself ethical or unethical. Indeed, Wittgenstein goes further than this, and states:

6.42 Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.
Propositions cannot express anything higher.

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.
Ethics is transcendental.

The problem here is that either the ethical value of an action lies in the action itself, or else even actions as such cannot have ethical value. Or, perhaps there is a middle

ground, so to speak, whereby the action itself does have ethical value, but neither the action nor any proposition about that action can be an expression of anything ethical. Indeed, we can make this more philosophically familiar when we think of actions as always pertaining to particulars, as being particular events in the world, and therefore, insofar as ethics is transcendental, so too would the action, qua action, not be any kind of expression of ethics. The underlying problem, then, is not that there is nothing ethical, but rather that the ethical cannot be expressed, which is Wittgenstein's claim. Here, however, we have hit upon the meaning of the inadvertency principle, for insofar as a state *aims* to be ethical, so too can it not be ethical if ethics is transcendental.

How, then, can we evaluate the success or failure of a state, its constitution, and its laws if we do not have recourse to ethical evaluation? The answer to which lies in whether the state can be evaluated not according to ethics, but rather according to truth or falsity. Such, at least, is one path we might follow, which I will draw out in more detail momentarily. The other path, however, that Wittgenstein seems to offer involves the notion of happiness, which is nevertheless only briefly mentioned in Wittgenstein's text. The reason why happiness is relevant in this context pertains to the fact that, as far back as Plato and to a greater degree Aristotle, ethical virtue is tied together with happiness, for according to the latter the virtuous individual is one who performs virtuous actions, which in turn are actions according to a rational principle and are thus the source of real happiness insofar as happiness itself is just such an activity of the soul. Yet Wittgenstein removes our ability to identify virtue as such, whereas he preserves our ability, it seems, to be happy or unhappy:

6.43 If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language.
In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.
The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.

In a sense, this conception of happiness may coincide with Aristotle's last comments about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the activity of contemplation, yet the realm of action in the practical sense which Aristotle also upholds cannot factor into this account of Wittgenstein's. Thus, there must be for Wittgenstein an interaction or relation between that which is the case, or true, as it pertains to the world, and the notion of happiness as nevertheless outside of that world. Either, then, the facts of the world of the happy are different from the facts of the world of the unhappy, or the same facts of the world can somehow be different for the happy versus the unhappy. Yet Wittgenstein offers us little if anything by way of a definition of happy and unhappy, such that we must examine his notions of factuality and truth to determine whether or not facts and truth must always be the same, or instead whether facts can indeed change yet still be true.

Wittgenstein, of course, says many things about truth in the *Tractatus*, but we can sift through these many passages in order to identify those that most pertain to our concerns. Thus, again, in what follows we return to the notion of a picture or *Bild*:

- 4.05 Reality is compared with the proposition.
- 4.06 Propositions can be true or false only by being pictures of reality.
- 4.061 If one does not observe that propositions have sense independent of the facts, one can easily believe that true and false are two relations between signs and things signified with equal rights. One could then, for example, say that “*p*” signifies in the true way what “ $\sim p$ ” signifies in the false way, etc.

The point in this latter case is that one should recognize that propositions do have sense independent of the facts, precisely because they can only be true or false propositions insofar as they are pictures of reality. What, then, does it mean for a proposition to have sense and to be a picture of reality? Wittgenstein supplies us with a possible answer:

- 4.027 It is essential to propositions, that they can communicate a *new* sense to us.
- 4.03 A proposition must communicate a new sense with old words.
The proposition communicates to us a state of affairs, therefore it must be *essentially* connected with the state of affairs, and the connexion is, in fact, that it is its logical picture.
The proposition only asserts something, insofar as it is a picture.

From this passage together with what we have quoted above, we can already begin to draw what may seem to be rather dramatic conclusions, for example, that insofar as a proposition involves the political qua ethical, it therefore attempts to signify something that is not within the world, and thus cannot have sense. To clarify this conclusion, we can consider the definition of ‘political’ which directed us toward actions aimed at state goals, and from there the question regarding the determination of state goals as either pertaining to the achievement of virtue as coincident with happiness, or instead the notion that virtue and ethics are not in the world, whereas happiness can somehow still be separated from virtue and bear some kind of relation to the world. This leaves us as a remainder both happiness and propositions that refer to politics, such that, through an inadvertent notion of the state as pertaining to ethics, our propositions concerning the political are aimed at ethics while nevertheless pertaining to happiness, i.e., propositions involving the political are inadvertently ethical for the sake of happiness. If this is accurate, then the question remains as to what Wittgenstein means by happiness, as well as how happiness is, if at all, connected with sense, facts, and true or false propositions.

To put the matter succinctly, if the ethical cannot be said, and if ethics or moral virtue are still connected with happiness, then happiness cannot easily bear any direct relation to true or false propositions. Wittgenstein’s concluding passage of the

Tractatus seems to shed some light on how one should thus situate propositions altogether:

6.54 My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed upon it.)
 He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.
 Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

If we relate political propositions concerning the state with this latter conception, then they are inadvertent in the same manner as the ladder Wittgenstein describes. For one climbs the ladder with the ladder itself in mind, otherwise one could not climb it at all. Yet at some point, recognizing this very inadvertency as such, means to kick the ladder away. Of course, we cannot say that this means one ought to kick away the state or polis itself, but rather that one can recognize all things political as an inadvertent means toward “seeing the world rightly.” In this regard, if the *Tractatus* is also such a ladder, then the purpose of the text can be seen to mirror the purpose of politics and the state. How, then, is the *Tractatus* itself a means to happiness? Here we find assistance in the work of James C. Edwards’ *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*:

According to the *Tractatus*, the self is the limit of the world, not part of it (TLP 5.641). Since the world is already the world of facts, not of things (1.1), and since that means that the world is the world that shows itself in propositions, and since the self is a necessary condition of propositional representation, then the self is the necessary condition of the world itself. “The world is *my* world” (TLP 5.62). But this transcendently necessary self is merely the *limit* of the world, the seeing eye that is never a part of the visual field it surveys (5.633).

The philosophical self which limits the world is, however, also a center of ethical affection, or, as Wittgenstein puts it, a center of *will*. Not, of course, that the will is a faculty of agency, the metaphysical self is completely powerless to alter the world’s contingencies (6.373). The self is a center of will only in that it views the world with a certain (happy or unhappy) attitude (NB, p. 87).³ The world of the happy self is a different world from that of the unhappy (TLP 6.43). Will is a mode of the metaphysical self’s vision, staining the world with either despair or bliss; and the discovery of the sense of life—the answer to the ethical question—will be marked by the change in how the self’s willing allows the unhappy world to become the happy one.⁴

With this picture and understanding of the *Tractatus*, we can clearly situate politics and the state within the world of facts, i.e., a world that only “shows itself in propositions” and “propositional representation.” Hence it follows that one’s “metaphysical self” cannot interact with the political or the state as such, but rather marks the limit thereof. Therefore, no state and nothing political can itself produce happiness. The question remains, then, how does one evaluate a political system or anything political

³ Wittgenstein L. *Notebooks 1914-1916*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.

⁴ James C. Edwards. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1982), pp. 67-68.

at all? Surely the state has real consequences, and yet it would appear that one's will has no influence over anything political, but rather can only engage itself as a transcendental and unrepresentable attitude or disposition toward politics and the state. Thus, we once again seem to arrive at the notion that the political, qua propositional representation, must be evaluated not according to ethics, but according to propositional truth, i.e., sensible showing.

If this is the case, then we can conclude with the suggestion that one can only evaluate the propositions of a constitution, the propositions stated by politicians concerning matters of state, and all other political propositions, according to two standards, one being the principle of inadvertency, which reveals the sense in which such propositions cannot be ethical even though they are motivated, ultimately, by the attempt to achieve that which only the transcendental self can achieve, namely happiness, which in turn underlies the ethical project. The second measure for evaluating political propositions, then, would be to judge them as pictures of reality and examine their truth or falsity according to Wittgenstein's logical analysis. Finally, we can see how the 'ought' has been relegated to metaphysics, leaving even political propositions subject to the more classical standard of the 'is'. Hence, Wittgenstein's more radical split between the state and nature, whereby the state takes on an inadvertent and representational factuality, nevertheless returns political matters to the 'natural' analysis of truth and falsity in propositions. Such, indeed, is the world for Wittgenstein, politics included.

Up to this point we have attempted to outline the consequences and conclusions that can be drawn about politics when applying Wittgenstein's theory of representation and ethics. From a historical perspective what is most compelling is the manner in which the state is characterized as natural in the ancient sense, unnatural in the early modern sense, and then natural again qua representation in a modern or in any case Wittgensteinian sense. On a more practical level, however, we can now consider our own encounter with the state and politics according to this latter view, and likewise investigate the extent to which inadvertency may or may not accurately characterize our experience of the political. With the above analysis in place, we can formulate the issue in a much clearer manner by asking a few questions. One question is: how, exactly, does a 'state' act? In other words, as Husle mentions in the passage above, political actions do not only occur through "organs of state," and therefore we must also wonder how it is even possible that state entities can be said to perform actions at all. It seems that such action, i.e., the action of a state or state entity (ministry, department, etc.), is only a 'state' action according to the representational reality of the political itself. To put it bluntly, people perform actions, and they are only the actions of a state in a representational sense. The difference that Wittgenstein's thinking places on this scenario is that instead of simply calling the state a human construct, we now encounter the kind of reality or naturalness that representational facts actually have. Thus, if we ask, how is the state real? The answer in this case would be that it is real qua representation. The added element of our analysis is

that a representational reality is likewise an inadvertent reality. Thus, saying that the political is real qua representation does not lessen its reality, but rather further characterizes the nature of its reality and the manner in which it is real. How, then, do we understand this nature; what does it mean to be an inadvertent reality?

The purpose in emphasizing the notion of inadvertency here is so that we can move away from the notion that representation is somehow artificial or merely symbolic. Symbolism and inadvertency are not the same, and the structure of representation seems to coincide more with inadvertency than it does with symbolism. This is, perhaps, as simple as saying that when people perform actions in the name of the state, they are not acting symbolically as much as they are inadvertently. Their actions are intended as state actions, yet what those actions achieve goes beyond the state itself. It is in this way that representational/state actions are real as representational, yet therefore inadvertently also produce facts of occurrence that can never be reduced to facts of representation or the state even when they are only intended as state actions.

As an example we might consider the recent election of now U.S. President Barack Obama. Historically speaking the election, the voting process, and the inauguration mark significant and in certain ways very symbolic events. Yet politically speaking, nothing much happened – there was a peaceful transfer of power that corresponded with the same process that has characterized the U.S. political system for over two-hundred years. This process in and of itself cannot be called an action; instead, it was the people who voted, the people who were elected, and all of the individuals involved in making this come to pass, in short, a large number of individual humans, who performed any actions, and they did so not for the sake of the political itself, but rather that for the sake of which the political itself qua representational reality exists – in this analysis, this ‘for the sake of which’ is happiness. Thus, each individual action is direct and intentional, it contributes to the political process, but the political process as such is an inadvertent goal for the sake of happiness. The fact that happiness remains for Wittgenstein a subjective disposition only strengthens the role it plays in carving the difference between individual actions as facts of occurrence, and political ‘acts’ as inadvertent facts of representation.

There is little mystery in this account, for in a way it is little more than a realist reduction of the political to individual human actions. The importance of such a reduction, however, may lie less in its level of accurate description, and more in its consequences for ideological thinking. What Wittgenstein’s thinking seems to imply, when applied as it is here to the status and nature of the political, is that there can be no such thing as an actual ‘ideal’ state. By this I mean that the notion of a perfect political system ends up making no sense, save insofar as it is perfect in its functioning as an inadvertent means of representation for the sake of happiness. Put more emphatically, a government of any kind, when reduced to human actions, is one that does not exist – save insofar as it is indeed simply an inadvertent existence. If we reverse this suggestion it is easier to grasp: remove all individual actions from a gov-

ernment, and the government in question simply disappears. Where is the state, how does it exist, without the individual actions that exist as facts of occurrence which constitute such a state? The answer is that the state exists inadvertently, it is that for the sake of which such actions are performed, yet only insofar as the state itself exists inadvertently for the sake of happiness – and in this case, following Wittgenstein, it is a subjective happiness.

When we apply Wittgenstein's thought to politics we cannot really escape this conclusion, for we are forced, in terms of our ethical subjective selves, to reflect on the exact mode of existence a state might have in the world, and when we so reflect, we can only come back to ourselves in the world, and no part of us is in any factual way constituted by a state or political system. Even our actions cannot be so constituted, because then the ethical would have to be part of the actual world, and for Wittgenstein this cannot be the case. From a broader political-philosophical point of view, however, I would argue that there is much to be gained from eliminating the possibility of a perfect state. An action done for the sake of a perfect state is, it seems, different than action done simply for the sake of a state when it is not adorned with the trappings of perfection. An action done by someone who admits that the state for which the act is performed is still fallible, already recognizes that the state itself cannot be the ultimate aim of that action. Thus, there is a closer proximity to recognizing the state as an inadvertent goal in such thinking, than there is in an action done for a state because the state is perfect, or even for the goal of somehow perfecting the state. In other words, our critical ability is, it would seem, somewhat atrophied if we act for the sake of a perfect political system, whereas we seem to retain a greater distance and distinction between our actions and the political when we do away with the possibility of such a thing as a perfect government. Indeed, acting for the sake of a better government, or the improvement of a state, is a far cry from acting in the name of an already perfect system. In fact, the two notions are mutually exclusive, for how could one improve a perfect system?

In conclusion, Wittgenstein's thinking allows us to resituate the state as a natural phenomenon insofar as its actual existence is one of representation and inadvertency. His analysis of sense makes it impossible for facts of representation to be on a par with facts of occurrence, and his estimation of the status of the ethical as subjective and thus not part of the world makes it impossible for our actions to be constituted by politics. Furthermore, happiness, whatever that may truly mean for Wittgenstein, is also reintroduced into the political, as that for the sake of which the political is an inadvertent goal. Thus, we now, in at least these two senses, Wittgenstein's thinking brings the political back into more classical discussions, which centered around the polis as a natural phenomenon and a possible formula for the instantiation of happiness, yet the way in which the polis is natural is entirely modern, for it is a fact not of occurrence, but of representation, and it is an inadvertent means to an entirely subjective mode of happiness.