

Mauro Luiz Engelmann, *Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 74 pp.

The book, a volume of the “Elements in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein” series, appeared exactly hundred years after Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* was first published. In these hundred years Wittgenstein’s books received a plethora of interpretations that often gave rise of heated debates. It is safe to say that no other book in philosophy published in this period was thus intensively and so controversially discussed.

It cannot be a surprise, therefore, that the author starts with a comprehensive review of the variety of its readings. He classifies them in seven groups: (i) According to the positivistic reading, Wittgenstein’s elementary propositions are descriptions of immediate experience. (ii) In the late 1950s Elisabeth Anscombe developed an anti-positivist, Frege-centered logical reading of the book. (iii) At the beginning of the 1970s Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin suggested it an ethical interpretation: its style was inspired by Kierkegaard and Kraus. (iv) Also anti-positivist was the metaphysical interpretation formulated in the mid-1980s by Norman Malcolm, Peter Hacker, and David Pears. According to them, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein held that the structure of reality determines the structure of language. The Tractarian objects are metaphysical entities that compose the ultimate structure of reality. (v) As reported in the non-metaphysical reading of Rush Rhees, Brian McGuinness, and Hide Ishiguro, the real issue of the *Tractatus* was logic and language. (vi) The resolute interpretation of Cora Diamond and James Connant (Engelmann delineates two phases in it) claims that Wittgenstein’s objective was simply “to entice the reader with the illusion of a theory so that she eventually sees for herself that there is no theory after all” (p. 9). (vii) Around 2000 Marie McGinn, drawing on works of Rhees’ faction, developed the view that there is not Tractarian metaphysics but Tractarian ontology. The latter is not a hypothesis about the transcendental reality but articulates the logic of depiction, also inherent in the everyday language. It describes the logical order which is essential to the depiction of any possible world (p. 17).

Main point of Engelmann’s interpretation is that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein advanced a view according to which there is only one necessity and it is the logical, i.e. tautological necessity. There is no necessity in the real world and no a priori truths in it. However, and here the author joins Marie McGinn’s interpretation, language has ontological commitment which is connected with its intrinsically depictive character. This explains why in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein speaks about objects.

Wittgenstein supported this conception through new, tautological sign-language. To be more specific, the Tractarian logical symbolism “is an articulation of a priori rules that do not assert anything, but display schematically the unity of the structure of language” (p. 50). They show it. This makes the problem of showing central in the book. And since logic is “a mirror-image of the world” (6.13); “the essence of [the proposition] gives the clue for the essence of thought and world” (p. 40).

The author further maintains that Wittgenstein was working “within” Russell’s philosophy, not within Frege’s. His argument is that “in Russell’s works, Wittgenstein found an early agenda, a common project, and a set of shared philosophical problems” (p. 20). Correspondingly, he reads the *Tractatus* as a report on Wittgenstein’s refutation of Russell. I agree that one can speak about “joint philosophical Program of Russell and Wittgenstein”, in particular, between May and November 1912 (Milkov 2013). However, the *method* Wittgenstein follows in the *Tractatus* was mainly adopted from Frege. In other words, Wittgenstein worked on Russell’s ideas aiming to correct them, but he did this with the help of Frege’s project for perfect language or conceptual notation (*Begriffsschrift*)—a term Wittgenstein used six times in the book.

Engelmann correctly notes that “we could grasp just [Wittgenstein’s] symbolism alone without the help of the sentences of the book” (p. 51). In this sense they, the sentences of the book, are “nonsensical”. Unfortunately, he fails to mention that Wittgenstein followed in this Frege who clearly stated that “if your language was logically more perfect, we would perhaps have no further need of logic, or we might read it off from language” (1915, p. 252). Moreover, he downplays Frege’s decisive influence on Wittgenstein on this point with reference to that of Boltzmann and Hertz (n. 41).

My critical remark on this count is supported by Wittgenstein’s clear avowal in the “Preface” of the book that he is indebted to “Frege’s great works” and “to the writings” of Russell—he surely didn’t write it “tongue in cheek”. It also explains why the philosophical “honey moon” of Russell in Wittgenstein of 1912 abruptly ended after Wittgenstein visited Frege in December that year and “had a long discussion with Frege about our Theory of Symbolism” (Wittgenstein 1995, p. 21).

Still another problem is that the author makes mistakes in presenting Russell’s philosophy. He namely states that according to Russell, central problem of philosophy is the “grounding of the supposedly *true* necessary principles *a priori*” (p. 66). In fact, however, Russell knew that logic and mathematics cannot be grounded this way. Instead he followed the transcendental argument that there are objects in the real world simply because counting is

theoretically sound only if we assuming their numerical diversity (1959, p. 115). In other words, Russell really tried to justify logic and mathematics but he did not believe that their principles are necessary and priori true. In contrast, to Wittgenstein logic has nothing to do with the real world; it is necessary but tautological. Engelmann correctly formulates Wittgenstein's argument in defence of this claim: "nothing logically a priori prevent us from imagining worlds with only two, three, or four objects" (p. 32).

I am with Engelmann again when he maintains that Wittgenstein started (in the summer of 1915) to compose the *Tractatus* from propositions 1–6. From them follow all other sections of the book. (In fact, this way of viewing and reading the *Tractatus* was one of the most exiting insights in Wittgenstein's studies of the last few years.) Perhaps it is also the case that Wittgenstein followed this way of unfolding his ideas in order to make his conception easier to understand. However, I see it problematic to maintain, as the author of the book does, that one can call this branched logical-argumentative tree "ladder".

The problem is that with this assumption the author mixes the way the ideas of the *Tractatus* were unfolded with its famous section 6.54: "He who understands [the propositions of my book] eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the *ladder* after he has climbed up it.) He must overcome these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (italics added). The importance of this section is betrayed by the fact that it gave rise of the intense discussion of the "new" and "old" Wittgensteinians about is the book "gibberish" or not. Engelmann in fact claims that what Wittgenstein meant with "ladder" in 6.54—which, incidentally, was added in 1917, as one of the last addendum to the book,—was the "ladder" structure of the book he designed when he started composing the book in the summer of 1915. I see this as a clear case of over-interpretation. To be sure, there is no piece of evidence that supports this view. It is much more plausible that Wittgenstein here referred to the famous "ladder" metaphor of Sextus Empiricus' (PH I.27) that was cited by writers that clearly influenced Wittgenstein: Arthur Schopenhauer and Fritz Mauthner.

This critical remark is of importance since, according to the author of the book, "understanding Wittgenstein" "means understanding how the book is to be read grounded in its ladder structure and its symbolism, for both indicate why and how one throws away the nonsense" (p. 51). Moreover, he organizes his book around this thesis. In fact, two of its four chapters have the title "Ladder Lesson". I am with Engelmann in regard of the role of the symbolism in the *Tractatus* but not in regard of its alleged "ladder" structure.

I agree with Engelmann, however, that Wittgenstein's presentation of the general form of propositions in *Tractatus* 4.5n was followed by discussion of the philosophical status of logic, mathematics, science, ethics and the riddle of life. To be more explicit, he solved this problem analyzing the kinds of propositions used in these realms. This approach is justified since, according to him, "philosophy deals only with what is known a priori" (p. 55). However, Wittgenstein's investigation has already shown that "if something is known a priori, it is empty of content" (ibid.). And since there is no a priori knowledge in logic, mathematics, science, and ethics, there are no truths in them and there is also no riddle of life.

Take mathematics. Mathematical logic consists of calculus of tautologies, a theory of identity and a theory of classes. However, the latter two do not pertain to the "pure logic" (p. 56). The theory of classes, in particular, is superfluous in mathematics (6.031) "because numbers are defined as exponents of the general form of an operation that works on the general form of propositions" (6.01) (p. 57). Apparently, mathematics is not thus perfect as logic is. It is simply "a logical method" (6.2).

The conclusion Wittgenstein reached was that since "philosophy is silencing, the remainder is doing, which means: becoming a decent person" (p. 66). In this sense, the message of the book is ethical.

However, I am not convinced that Engelmann has proved, as he claims he did, that the *Tractatus* is not self-defeating or paradoxical since at the end of the book its affirmative sentences are declared nonsensical. Indeed, it clearly sets up theoretical propositions that have nothing to do with the already mentioned Tractarian objects which Engelmann interprets as ontological but not metaphysical. Here are a few examples I adduce from Waismann's "Theses" for brevity: "We picture facts in and to ourselves. The pictures we produce are our *thoughts*... Language is the method of so representing our thoughts that they can be perceived by the senses... By means of language we communicate." (Wittgenstein 1984, p. 235) These propositions are clearly not "gibberish": one can build coherent theories on them. And they were also not refuted by Wittgenstein's demonstration that there is no a priori knowledge.

By way of epilogue I would like to underline that Engelmann's short book is clearly written and presents the central arguments of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in good form. I recommend it for all those who try to understand this most intricate but also most influential philosophical work published in the last hundred years. My critical remarks only try to further clarify his interpretation.

References

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