Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus by Mauro Luiz Engelmann

Nikolay Milkov

Mauro Luiz Engelmann: *Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Elements in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. 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 logico-philosophicus* was first published. In these hundred years, Wittgenstein's book received a plethora of interpretations that often gave rise to heated debates. It is safe to say that no other book in philosophy published in this period was so intensively and controversially discussed.

It cannot be a surprise, therefore, that the author starts with a comprehensive review of a variety of its readings. He classifies them into 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 an ethical interpretation of it: its style was inspired by Kierkegaard and Kraus. (iv) Equally 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 Hidé Ishiguro, the real issue of the *Tractatus* is logic and language. (vi) The resolute interpretation of Cora Diamond and James Conant (Engelmann delineates two phases in its development) claims that Wittgenstein's objective was simply "to entice the reader with the illusion of a theory so that she eventu-

ally sees for herself that there is no theory after all" (p. 9). (vii) Around 2000, Marie McGinn 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 (cf. p. 17).

According to Engelmann, the main point of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is that there is only one necessity and that is the logical, that is, tautological necessity. There is no necessity in the real world and no *a priori* truths in it. However, and here the author subscribes to Marie McGinn's interpretation (p. 17), language has an ontological commitment that 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 to the book. And since logic is "a mirror-image of the world" (TLP: 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, Engelmann 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 followed 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 of a perfect language or conceptual notation (*Begriffsschrift*), a term Wittgenstein used six times in the book.

To be sure, 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, that is, 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" (Frege 1915, p. 252).

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 with Wittgenstein in 1912 abruptly ended after Wittgenstein visited Frege in December that year and "had a long discussion with Frege about our Theory of Symbolism" (CC: 21).

Still another problem is that the author makes a mistake in presenting Russell's philosophy: He states that according to Russell, the central problem of philosophy is the "grounding of the supposedly *true* necessary principles *a priori*" (p. 66). In fact, Russell really tried to justify logic and mathematics, but he did not believe that their principles are necessary and *a priori* true. He knew that logic and mathematics could not be grounded this way. Instead, Russell adopted the transcendental argument that there are objects in the real world simply because counting is theoretically sound only if we assumed their numerical diversity (cf. Russell 1959: 115). In contrast, Wittgenstein's 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* prevents 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 followed all other sections of the book as outgrows of each one of them. (In fact, this way of viewing and reading *Tractatus* was one of the most exciting insights in Wittgenstein-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 find it problematic to maintain, as the author of the book does, that one can call this a branched logical-argumentative tree "ladder" (p. 39).

The problem is that with this assumption the author mixes the way the ideas of the *Tractatus* are 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.) [Italics added]

The importance of this section is revealed by the fact that it gave rise to the heated discussion of the "new" and "old" Wittgensteinians about whether the book is "gibberish" or not. Engelmann in fact claims that what Wittgenstein meant with "ladder" in 6.54 was the idiosyncratic structure of the book he designed when he started composing it in the summer of 1915. I see this as a clear case of over-interpretation. It is much more plausible that Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that found expression in 6.45 later in the process of composing the work (cf. Milkov 2020) (it is a matter of fact that he added it in 1917 as one of the last addenda to the book); and that in 6.54 he simply referred to the famous "ladder" metaphor of Sextus Empiricus' (PH I.27) which was cited by writers who influenced Wittgenstein before he wrote the *Tractatus*: 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)

Accordingly, he organizes his book around this thesis. Two of its four chapters have the title "Ladder Lesson". I am with Engelmann in regard to the role of symbolism in *Tractatus* but not for its alleged "ladder" structure.

Also, I agree with Engelmann that Wittgenstein's set out 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 by analyzing the kinds of propositions used in these realms. This approach is justified since, according to Wittgenstein, "philosophy deals only with what is known *a priori*" (p. 55). And since there is no *a priori* knowledge in logic (logic is *a priori*, however it does not deliver knowledge but tautologies), mathematics, science, and ethics, there are no truths in them and there is also no riddle of life. The conclusion Wittgenstein reached was that since "philosophy is silencing, the remainder is doing, [which] means: becoming a decent person" (Hänsel 2012: 51; cited after p. 66). In this sense, the message of the book is ethical.

Finally, I am not convinced that Engelmann has proved, as he claims he has, that the *Tractatus* is not self-defeating or paradoxical (since at the end of the book its affirmative sentences are declared nonsensical). Indeed, the book 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 shall 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" (WWK: 235). These propositions are clearly not "gibberish": one can build coherent theories on them. And they are 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 well written and it presents the central arguments of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in good form. I recommend it for all those who try to understand this most influential but also most intricate philosophical work published in the last hundred years. My critical remarks only try to further clarify his interpretation.

University of Paderborn, Germany
nikolay.milkov(at)upb.de

References

Frege, G., 1915. "My Basic Logical Insights". In: B. F. McGuinness, 1979, ed., *Posthumous Writings*. Oxford: Blackwell, 251–252.

Hänsel, L., 2012. *Begegnungen mit Wittgenstein—Ludwig Hänsels Tagebücher 1918–19 und 1921–22*. I Somavilla, ed., Wien: Haymon.

Milkov, N., 2013. "The Joint Philosophical Program of Russell and Wittgenstein and Its Demise". *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 2, 81–105.

Milkov, N., 2020. "The Composition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: Interpretative Study". In: K. Lozev and M. Bakalova, eds., *130 Years Ludwig Wittgenstein*, Blagoevgrad: Bon, 67–87.

Russell, B., 1959. *My Philosophical Development*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Wittgenstein, L. 1984. *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*. B. F. McGuinness, ed., Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. 1995. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters. Correspondence with Russell, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa*. B. F. McGuinness and G H von Wright, eds., Oxford: Basil Blackwell.