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0521809363 - Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Dialectical Interpretation

Matthew B. Ostrow

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Wittgenstein once wrote, "The philosopher strives to find the liberating word, that is, the word that finally permits us to grasp what up until now has intangibly weighed down our consciousness." Would Wittgenstein have been willing to describe the *Tractatus* as an attempt to find "the liberating word"? The basic contention of this strikingly innovative new study of the *Tractatus* is that this is precisely the case. Matthew Ostrow argues that, far from seeking to offer a new theory in logic in the tradition of Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein from the very beginning viewed all such endeavors as the ensnarement of thought.

Providing a lucid and systematic analysis of the *Tractatus*, Professor Ostrow argues that Wittgenstein's ultimate aim is to put an end to philosophy itself. The book belongs to a new school of interpretation that sees the early Wittgenstein as denying the possibility of a philosophical theory as such. It is unique, however, in two respects. First, it is the only "nonstandard" reading that offers an extended account of the central topics of the *Tractatus* – the picture theory, the notion of the variable, ethics, the different sense of analysis, and the general form of the proposition. Second, it highlights the intrinsic obstacles to any kind of general or summary understanding of Wittgenstein's thought.

"... an original, detailed and highly compelling interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophical aims and central concerns. Ostrow shares Diamond's and Conant's sense of dissatisfaction with the traditional readings of the work, but the interpretation he offers is significantly different from theirs and represents the first book-length attempt to develop an alternative approach in a systematic way which engages fully the details of Wittgenstein's text."

– Marie McGinn, University of York

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# **Wittgenstein's *Tractatus***

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MATTHEW B. OSTROW

*Boston University*



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*In memory of my mother*

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## PREFACE

This book grew out of a larger project, an attempt to draw a philosophical connection between the early Wittgenstein and Plato. While I continue to believe that such a connection exists and that it can be interestingly drawn, the original study, as it stood, was too ambitious; over time, I have come to the (perhaps painfully obvious) realization that a serious attempt to come to terms just with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is more than enough for one book. Nonetheless, what initially motivated the project is what, at bottom, continues to draw me to Wittgenstein: the concern with the nature of philosophy itself. Indeed, I believe that for Wittgenstein – early, middle, and late – the question of philosophy's nature is *the* central question of all of philosophy.

Such a contention may seem surprising. For while Wittgenstein's reflections on the philosophical activity, particularly those in the middle of the *Philosophical Investigations*,<sup>1</sup> are among his most oft-quoted claims, we must acknowledge that these represent only a very small portion of his total writings. Moreover, in the *Tractatus*, the text with which we shall chiefly be concerned here, the issue is almost entirely absent, forming the subject matter of a mere eight remarks (TLP 4.111–4.116). In order to view Wittgenstein as placing such primacy on the question of philosophy, it might then seem that we would have to give extraordinary weight to just a few passages.

But this will not be our approach. Instead of seeking to privilege the meager store of Wittgenstein's general reflections on philosophy, we shall take as our starting point the complete set of remarks that make up the *Tractatus*. Such an approach makes it evident that Wittgenstein, as we shall read him, does not understand the question of philosophy's nature to be some “meta-issue,” but, rather, one that

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pervades what one ordinarily would think of as the content of the discipline. The traditional concerns of philosophy are, we might say, transformed by Wittgenstein into the means by which we can reflect on philosophy. It is the fundamental task of what follows to seek to bring out how this can be the case.

Many people have helped me, in one way or another, with the lengthy process of writing this book. First and foremost, I would like to thank the late Burton Dreben. I am thankful to him as a teacher: He showed me what it is to think about philosophy at the highest level. I am thankful to him as the keenest of critics and collaborators: He spent many hours with me working through the nuances of my reading of the *Tractatus*. And I am thankful to him as a friend: His kindness, humor, and interest in my work were invaluable to me. Nearly every page of this study reflects his powerful influence and I remain deeply indebted to him.

Charles Griswold also played a central role in the birth and development of this book. His subtle and imaginative reading of the Platonic dialogues provided part of the spark for the initial project. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful to him for his ongoing support, advice, and encouragement.

Juliet Floyd was exceedingly generous with her help and encouragement in nearly every phase of the writing process. Moreover, I have been very much influenced by her penetrating and original reading of Wittgenstein, and by exposure to the elegance of her philosophical style. I owe her a large debt of gratitude.

I would also like to thank Terence Moore and Matthew Lord of Cambridge University Press and my Production Editor, Laura Lawrie, for their assistance and support. I am grateful as well to the Earhart Foundation for the two years of financial support during the study that formed the indispensable background to this book.

Many others have contributed to this study – perhaps at times without even realizing it – and indeed deserve greater acknowledgment than I can offer here. I have had extensive and very fruitful conversations about the *Tractatus* with Rosalind Carey, Denis McManus, Joe McDonald, Andrew Lugg, and Anat Biletzki, and about philosophy more generally with Bruce Fraser, Thomas Woodard, Lawrence Pasternack, Phil Cafaro, Klaus Brinkmann, David Roochnik, and my brothers, Michael and Daniel Ostrow. Victor Kestenbaum took an interest in my work and offered his advice and encouragement at

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a time when these were sorely needed. David Stern provided very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

I have also had enumerable philosophical conversations with my wife, Theresa Reed. For that alone she would deserve my ample thanks, but, happily, her involvement with this study has extended far beyond that capacity, far beyond, in truth, what I can begin to express. Suffice it to say that this book would in no way have been possible without her.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, Seymour Ostrow, and my late mother, Judith Alling, who I dearly wish were still here to discuss it with me.