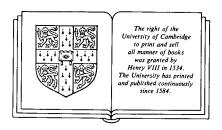The Metaphysics of the *Tractatus*

The Metaphysics of the *Tractatus*

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Contents

Abbreviations

TS   Carruthers *Tractarian Semantics* (1989b). References by chapter number.

FA   Frege *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1968). References by section number.

NB   Wittgenstein *Notebooks 1914–16* (1961b). References by page number.

PTLP   Wittgenstein *Prototractatus* (1971). References by section number.

TLP   Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) and (1961a). References by section number.

PR   Wittgenstein *Philosophical Remarks* (1975). References by section number.

PI   Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). References by section number.

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Preface

This work brings to completion my project of defending what can be
defended in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. His main
semantic doctrines were dealt with in an earlier book, *Tractarian Seman-
tics*, where I argued that they are not only defensible but mostly true. Here
I consider his views on metaphysics and their relationship to his concep-
tion of logic. What I shall show is that this aspect of *TLP* is at least a good
deal more plausible than is generally recognised.

(A) Aims and scope

The main aims of this work are two-fold: firstly, to make sense of the
metaphysical doctrines of *TLP* by showing how powerful arguments may
be deployed in their support; and secondly, to locate the crux of the dis-
agreements between *TLP* and *Philosophical Investigations*. Most
interpreters of *TLP* set it up as an Aunt Sally, attributing to Wittgenstein
doctrines and arguments which are both implausible in themselves and
easily knocked over by points made in the early sections of *PI*.[1] I shall
argue, on the contrary, that when *TLP* is properly interpreted it turns out
to contain a powerful set of doctrines, in contrast with which many of the
PI criticisms may be seen to be facile. But this is not to say that the two
works simply pass one another by. Indeed, the major premiss behind much
of the metaphysics of *TLP* and its associated programme of analysis is a
certain conception of the objectivity of logic and of logical relations, which
I entitle 'logical objectivism'. In Chapter 15 I shall show how this same
conception is the direct target of attack of the later Wittgenstein's dis-
cussions of rule-following. So *PI* does indeed contain a critique of his early
thought, which goes to its very foundations. But that critique is quite other
than what most commentators have believed.

x   Preface

Having outlined some of the main semantic doctrines of *TLP* in Chapter
1, the discussion thereafter will centre around four general themes:

1   The early Wittgenstein's view of the relationship between metaphysics,
     on the one hand, and semantical and logical investigations on the
     other; together with the question whether certain sorts of metaphysics
     are possible at all. This will form the topic of Chapters 2 and 3.
2   The question of the objectivity, or otherwise, of logical relations and
     of the principles of logic. This will form the topic of Chapters 4, 11 and
     15.
3   The nature and purpose of the *TLP* programme of analysis for ordi-
     nary language, together with the various constraints which Wittgen-
     stein imposes on the nature of elementary propositions. This will form
     the topic of Chapters 5–8, 13 and 14.
4   The various possible arguments for the existence of the simple objects
     of *TLP* ('Simples'), concluding with the one which constitutes my pre-
     ferred interpretation, which is very powerful. This will form the topic
     of Chapters 9, 10 and 12.

Finally, in Chapter 16 I shall draw together the main strands of my dis-
cussion, to locate the fundamental point of conflict between *TLP* and *PI*.
    These themes are linked together by the doctrine of logical objectivism,
which is initially outlined in Chapter 3 and then defended in Chapter 4. I
shall show that it is this which ultimately makes metaphysics possible, on
the *TLP* view. It is also what underlies and provides the rationale for the
TLP programme of analysis, which is to show how our ordinary prop-
ositions are really truth-functional compounds of elementary prop-
ositions. Furthermore, it will emerge that it is logical objectivism which
provides the major premiss of the argument to Simples. So if the critique of
logical objectivism mounted in *PI* is effective, as I shall argue that it is, then
all of these aspects of *TLP* will be undermined. Yet in so far as logical
objectivism may be seen as a plausible doctrine, the metaphysics of *TLP*
will have been shown to be defensible in its turn. Moreover, since the
underlying semantic system of *TLP* (outlined in Chapter 1 and defended at
length in *TS*) is independent of any commitment to logical objectivism, this
aspect of Wittgenstein's early thought will turn out to be largely unscathed
by his own later criticisms. So my overall verdict on the semantical and
metaphysical doctrines of *TLP* will be, respectively: controversial-and-
true; and defensible-but-false.
    Aside from leading to a better appreciation of one of the classic texts of
our subject, my hope is that this book will contribute to contemporary dis-

cussion in at least two ways. In the first place, there are many philosophers who still endorse something like the idea I call 'logical objectivism', but without dreaming that they may thereby be committed to *TLP*'s metaphysics. So if I can succeed in showing that there are sound arguments from the one to the other, I may give these philosophers pause for thought. At the very least they will be presented with a challenge: to show how they can remain logical objectivists without embracing Wittgenstein's metaphysics. Secondly, many contemporary philosophers are currently wrestling with Wittgenstein's later writings, particularly on rule-following. But there is little unity of interpretation, or agreement about the significance of his arguments.[2] This partly results from failure to understand *TLP* properly.[3] So if I can succeed in setting these later remarks in their proper perspective, contrasting with the very basis of his earlier way of thinking, we may ourselves get closer to the truth. For the more accurate our interpretation of one of the great philosophers of the past, the more likely it is that our own engagement with their ideas will prove fruitful.

While this book makes no attempt at completeness, even when taken together with its predecessor *TS*, there are a number of respects in which the resulting view of *TLP* may strike many as not only incomplete but positively distorted. For example, I shall pay scant attention to Wittgenstein's official doctrine that all philosophical and metaphysical statements are nonsensical. This is because that doctrine merely results, in my view, from an over-extension of the *TLP* account of the semantic content of factual statements to cover all forms of discourse, as I shall show briefly in Chapter 1. The mistake is easily corrected, consistent with *TLP*'s other doctrines. And of course the official doctrine is, in any case, violated systematically throughout *TLP* itself.

Another omission is any detailed discussion of the formal apparatus involved in Wittgenstein's treatment of logic. It is easy to justify the lack of discussion of truth-tables, in that they have long since passed into the canon of logic orthodoxy; and what is still controversial about them – namely the commitment to a two-valued logic – can be considered separately, as I do in Chapter 11. As for the N-operator, which occupies such a prominent place in Wittgenstein's text, it is in fact both technically flawed[4] and insufficiently motivated. Or rather, while the aim of using just a single operator adequate for the whole of logic may have made sense given the state of logic at the time (namely in order to avoid piecemeal definitions),[5] the problem may equally be overcome, as we now know, through the use of definitions which are *recursive*. So this aspect of *TLP* is no longer of any contemporary interest.

I shall also say nothing about Wittgenstein's remarks on value and on mysticism, which have attracted so much attention in certain quarters, although it seems likely that Wittgenstein himself believed in a connection between his work on logic and his views on value.[6] Nevertheless, since it is, in my view, clearly unnecessary to take any particular stance on the *TLP* doctrine of the Ethical in order to interpret and assess the semantic and metaphysical doctrines which make up the body of the work, and since my own assessment of the former is less than flattering, I have thought it best to follow Mother Rabbit's excellent advice: 'If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all.'[7]

(B) Interpreting *TLP*

There are a number of principles which should be mentioned, which will need to be employed in interpreting *TLP*.[8] Two general ones are Textual Fidelity (which enjoins us to choose the interpretation which most naturally fits the text) and Charity (according to which we should select the interpretation which maximises the interest of the text). These principles can sometimes pull against one another, the process of interpretation best being seen as a search for a sort of reflective equilibrium between them. For on the one hand, there is a presumption that authors will mean what they say. But on the other, if we respect their intelligence, we should hesitate to attribute to them doctrines which are either trivial or foolish. In the case of *TLP*, whose doctrines are not only obscure but given very little explicit argumentative support, the role of Charity becomes maximal. The main task of an interpreter of *TLP* is to make sense of Wittgenstein's ideas, extraordinary as some of them are.[9]

There are a number of more specific principles relating to the secondary sources which might be appealed to in support of an interpretation of *TLP*. Firstly, very considerable weight may be attached to remarks in *Proto-tractatus*, since it is so close in time to the composition of *TLP* itself, probably having been written during the same two-month leave from the army in the summer of 1918.[10] But differences between the two texts need to be handled with caution, since they admit of a variety of possible explanations, ranging from the stylistic to substantial changes of mind. Secondly, some weight should be attached to Wittgenstein's letters to Russell soon after the completion of *TLP*.[11] But since they were evidently composed with much impatience, they too will need to be handled with caution. Thirdly, the writings in *Notebooks 1914–16* should not be relied upon directly. They should rather be used as background material, giving

an indication of the issues with which Wittgenstein was wrestling in the period leading up to the composition of *TLP*. For since they date from between two and six years previously, there is evidently much scope for further development and shifts of direction.

Most importantly, Wittgenstein's later reported or written comments on *TLP* (either in the conversations with Waismann or his lectures at Cambridge,[12] or in *Philosophical Remarks*, *PI* and elsewhere), together with those remarks which are generally taken to refer to *TLP* (many of the early passages in *PI*, on names, Simples and analysis fall into this category), should be given no independent weight in the interpretation of his early thought. This is a severe, but defensible, restriction. For notice that eleven years elapsed between the completion of *TLP* in 1918 and the first of the recorded remarks in 1929, during which time Wittgenstein not only did very little philosophy, but found thinking about his own work extremely slow and painful.[13] Notice also that the writing of *TLP* seems to have been highly intuitive, with much apparently going unsaid, even in Wittgenstein's own thoughts.[14] He may therefore, in later years, have had difficulty in thinking his way back into the full complexity of his earlier text – especially given the restless and forward-looking nature of his intellect. In any case, if we wish to assess the conflict between Wittgenstein's early and later philosophies, then we had better not assume at the outset that he both understood and had the measure of his earlier way of thinking. So I shall abide by this restriction in what follows, controversial though it no doubt is.[15]

(C) Notes on style

Anyone can see that *TLP* is a work of extraordinary beauty; yet what makes it attractive is partially responsible for its obscurity. Firstly, because it is written in the style of pithy aphorism, without properly developed explanations of its own doctrines. And secondly, because it is mostly presented in the form of oracular statements, without supporting argument. (Wittgenstein is said to have replied to Russell's admonition that he should give more arguments, by remarking that they spoiled the beauty of his conclusions, like dirtying a flower with muddy hands.[16]) Such a mode of writing serves no one well. In attempting to ride two horses at once (truth and beauty), it risks falling between them. In philosophy it is clarity and explicitness that matter above all. For only what is plainly stated can be reliably assessed for truth, either by oneself or others. To adapt a remark from *TLP* itself: what is to be said at all should be said clearly.[17] In

my own writing, therefore, I try to be as open and straightforward as possible.

In order to leave the main text of this book as uncluttered as possible, my disagreements with other commentators are mostly confined to notes. But references to *TLP* are given by section-number within the text itself, so as to keep the numbers of notes from spiralling out of all control.

Throughout this work I opt to use the colloquial plural pronouns 'they' and 'their' in impersonal contexts, in place of the pernicious masculine singular required by strict grammar.

(D) Acknowledgements

My main debts are to Roger White, who was my first teacher of *TLP*, and from whom I derive many of the interpretations which follow; and to Michael Dummett, whose work on semantic realism forms the background to much of this book. I am also grateful to the following for their helpful comments on earlier drafts: David Bell, Laurence Goldstein, Jane Heal, Hidé Ishiguro, Susan Levi, Christopher McKnight and Tim Williamson. Thanks also go to Gregory Currie for his comments on versions of Chapters 2–4, and to Crispin Wright, both for his criticisms of an early version of Chapter 15, and for his advice and encouragement over many years.

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