



The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: a centenary disease

*El Tractatus Logico Philosophicus: una enfermedad
centenaria*

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Abstract

Albert Maslow points out that Wittgenstein dedicated a copy of the *Tractatus* to Morris Schlick with the following sentence: "*Jeder diese Sätze ist der Ausdruck einer Krankheit*" (Each of these propositions is the manifestation of a disease). We will try to see some of the treatments to see if the remedy is not, in many cases, worse than the disease. We will point out that it's a crisis text, one that displays not just his own pathology, but that of the whole western philosophy.

Keywords: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Ludwig Wittgenstein. Early analytic philosophy.

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Resumen

Albert Maslow señala que Wittgenstein dedicó una copia del *Tractatus* a Morris Schlick con la siguiente frase: “*Jeder diese Sätze ist der Ausdruck einer Krankheit*” (Cada una de estas proposiciones es la manifestación de una enfermedad). Intentaremos ver algunos de los tratamientos para ver si el remedio no es, en muchos casos, peor que la enfermedad. Señalaremos que es un texto de crisis, que muestra no solo su propia patología, sino la de toda la filosofía occidental.

Palabras clave: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Ludwig Wittgenstein. Filosofía analítica temprana.

Introduction

Albert Maslow points out that Wittgenstein dedicated a copy of the *Tractatus* to Morris Schlick with the following sentence: “*Jeder diese Sätze ist der Ausdruck einer Krankheit*” (Each of these propositions is the manifestation of a disease). We will try to see some of the treatments to see if the remedy is not, in many cases, worse than the disease.

Few philosophical texts have so many materials surrounding it as the *Tractatus*, but and at the same time do maintain such a vast spectrum of interpretations. To the point that one can expect every now and then, exegetical revolutions. Like the political ones, they usually bury the past in its way. An example: the appearance in the 1980s of *Wittgenstein's Vienna* was a fundamental milestone that showed that it is impossible to dissociate the author from the Viennese intellectual environment. However, attempts have been made to present this new approach as the refutation of the rest, falsely equating the *Tractatus* with continental philosophy in a book that is really weak in terms of elements of symbolic logic and without any expertise in regard to the philosophy of logic of Frege and Russell, which are essential to understand the context of the concepts in the text of the *Tractatus* itself and the records of the time. A similar case is the new interpretation that was awarded some ten years later by the North American school: they rightly called attention to the neglect of the essential paradox of the *Tractatus* of having intended to say what is shown. However, the value of this perspective is lost when the book is treated as the work of a postmodern nihilist, an antimetaphysical dialectician. The same can be said of the interpretation of Raymond Bradley, whose praiseworthy efforts to highlight the Tractarian modal

element have resulted in an inadequate Leibnizian framing in his work *The Nature of All Being* (Bradley, 1992).

To show an overview, I would broadly follow the outline of Cerezo (1998), adding and extending her taxonomy a bit. I think Cerezo's outline is accurate and simple. Cerezo does not take into account contextualist readings or, in any case, it isn't her concern in her *Lenguaje y Lógica in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Let us mention among the ways of reading the Tractatus the empiricist perspectives (in classical version, like Russell, or positivist, like those of Shlick and Carnap), non-empiricist logicians (Anscombe, Kenny), Kantian (Stenius, Coffa), metaphysical (in actualist variant, Hacker, or positivist Leibnizian, Bradley), continental (such as Janik and Toulmin), nihilistic (Diamond and Conant, Ostrow and his dialectical idea), and MacGuinn's elucidatory -ecumenical attempt.

David Stern (*Stern*, 1996) made a stratification that is not incompatible with the one I point out. 1. The logical-atomistic reading (*logical atomist reading*) of Russell; 2. The reading of logical positivism (*logical positivist reading*): with the belligerent antimetaphysical charge; 3. Metaphysical reading (*metaphysical reading*), like Hacker's, with a logically based idea of metaphysics; 4. The irrationalist reading (*irrationalist reading*) that Toulmin and Janik maintain, for example, or Isidro Reguera, where there is pre-eminence of the religious ethic elements; and 5. therapeutic reading (*therapeutic reading*), which poses it as a kind of infinity joke. We are going to add to the list a reading, which we will call a *pathological reading*.

Some notes on biographical fascination

Of course, the problem is very abstract and universal, but I think important to open this article with this fundamental theme for Wittgenstein: the relationship between the life and work of authors. How crucial is it to study the circumstances surrounding a philosophical work?

James Conant, in his article "Philosophy and Biography" (Conant, 2001) typifies two extremes that are illuminating: *the Reductivist and Compartmentalist* views regarding the relationship between biography and work. The first can become a kind of epistemic expressionism that reduces the work to its author or his biography, with

the most varied purposes. In the article one can really understand what an abuse of biographical material is. For example, Paul Johnson's book (*Intellectuals*) as an extreme display of reductionism. There he charges Sartre as a drug addict, Marx as an exploiter of his family, Rousseau as a sadist, etc. Conant shows that this doctrine is to be reflexive, like de Strong Program of Eddimburgs sociology of knowledge. So a metabiography could appear disqualifying this author as a resentful drunk. The *Tractatus* would be here the philosophical expression of the desires and discomforts of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The compartmentalists are, on the contrary, those who deny the link and, therefore, the value of the biography to understand the philosophical thought of an author. Samuel Schkolnik, a philosopher from Tucuman, used to say in his classes that we are contemporaries of all those who explored the region of which the question in question is the name and emblem. It would be the Borgesian idea that when we ask ourselves the question about supersensible reality, like Plato, at that moment we are Plato. But, of course, we are not Plato.

Let's try to contribute to get out of this crossroads a little. Perhaps it can be found, both in the compartmentalists and in the reductivists, that bias, the one that Roland Barthes calls the empire of the author. In his essay "The death of the author" he presents some notes on the turn of modern literature, marked by the hegemony of the author's first person and the magic of the signature:

The author is a modern character, undoubtedly produced by our society, to the extent that it [...] discovers the prestige of the individual or, put more nobely, of the "human person". The author still reigns in literary history manuals, bibliographies of writers, interviews in magazines, and even in the very conscience of writers, who take good care to unite their person with their work thanks to their intimate diary [...] as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was, ultimately, always, the voice of one and the same person, the author, who would be delivering his "confidence" (BARTHES, 1994).

Bourdieu will make a similar point by relating the magic of the word to *Pret a porter and high culture* (Bourdieu, 1975). The model that Barthes discusses, and to which we are equally opposed, is that of a writer who wants to say something that he has in his mind, that pre-exists writing. The image, is that with his idea in the mind or at the tip of his tongue, he sits down to write and it will be his expressive capacity what determines the effectiveness of the message. So to speak, his words and other

expressive repertoire are the instrument for the intentional meaning. The critic will be the one to judge the ideas and whether or not he has had the ability to put the message on paper. The interpretation of the text is surrounded, like a television program, by biographical data, possible explanations and clues that the author may have given during his life, as well as personal records, diaries, friendships, courtships, uncles and cousins. The author himself is a prisoner of his charm, when, as Barthes says, they take care in many cases to keep an intimate diary that everyone has access to and that allows their message to be better deciphered. No one can ignore that such a thing does not happen only in the broad literary domains, but also in the philosophical genre. And very especially in Wittgenstein, whose published private work is overwhelming with respect to the lets say “exoteric” –just the *Tractatus* and a paper–, with blame for the editors, but also responding to the illuminating clues that he left in his diaries and annotations.

In the author's empire, the message, the meaning, is platonized in the way of pre-existing ideas to writing and probably to its intellection. The interpretation revolves around the actions of the author, with which there is a methodological reductionism, we look back to the context to reconstruct what he really meant. What Barthes proposes is, on the contrary, to emphasize the figure of the reader and his necessarily active position in the hermeneutics of the text. Meaning is a construction between individuals, but also between times and social classes. As Ricoeur says, even the copyist's task leads to a hermeneutic. And the most important thing that I want to rescue from the Barthesian idea: there is no end. Only the platonic empire of author can give such an end.

To give a text an Author is to impose an insurance, to provide it with an ultimate meaning, to close the writing. This conception suits critics very well, which then intends to dedicate itself to the important task of discovering the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) under the work: once the Author has been found, the text is “explained”, the critic has achieved victory (BARTHES, 1994).

Is this the reason why there are so many interpretations of Wittgenstein? Do they demonstrate the mega-concept of no author no end? Or is it an infinite task because we have only a compartmentalist approach?

I think there is an issue that has been overlooked, which is Wittgenstein's therapeutic purpose. The idea of cure also has an undesirable halo: Wittgenstein has thought of himself as an ethical model. He didn't left notebooks, or conversations on texts because he wanted to give hints to the readers. Biography is a text, a vital one. For him his own biography was important, in a sense, as a testimony to his own philosophy. James Conant quote five propositions unequivocal about it:

1. *You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are.*
2. *Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.*
3. *If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself... he will remain superficial in his writing.*
4. *Working in philosophy...is really more a working on oneself.*
5. *That man will be revolutionary who can revolutionize himself.*

This is why Wittgenstein himself opens the door for the biographical passion that he has aroused: the conversion of himself into a saint who gives testimony of right, a Tolstoy who lives his words (or lack of words). Professor Tomasini Bassols, both Russell and Wittgenstein expert, told me an anecdote that I wasn't able to find. He told me that when Wittgenstein read Moore's autobiography, he said, "Remind him that a shoemaker also had a childhood." But he did not mean disparagingly that there is nothing extraordinary in Moore's life (or anyone else's), but that Moore presented his childhood with an extraordinary halo that carried a genius. This puts Wittgenstein in tune with the old skeptical idea of philosophy. There is no good philosophy if there is no work on oneself. The worst fallacy, for him, is that inauthenticity between life and philosophy. Hence that disease called *Tractatus*.

The disease called *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein's life has been scrutinized by great philosophers. I am referring to the fact that it has not only been the object of attention of writers who have seen in it a good story –there is one–, but also many valuable thinkers, such as their contemporaries F. P. Ramsey, F. M. Keynes, C. K. Ogden, G. E. Moore and

B. Russell; and also from other generations, such as N. Malcolm, A. Kenny, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. von Wright, are some names that have dealt with many aspects of Wittgenstein's life. People that normally would not entertain their intellectual activity by devoting themselves to the details of someone's life, even if it is a colleague of Wittgenstein's stature, have persisted in putting into words, experiences, transcendent and trivial dialogues that they have kept personal or indirectly with Ludwig Wittgenstein.

A compelling reason why practically all Wittgenstein scholars have direct contact with the biographical material is, without a doubt, that his work is almost entirely posthumous. To this are added some elements: firstly, the posthumous works have been prepared –with more or less intervention on his part– by his disciples and literary executors G. Elizabeth Anscombe, Rush Rhees and Georg H. von Wright, in such a way that every researcher has to refer to the magma from which the edition has emerged and to the editorial decisions. There is a lot of unpublished material.

Secondly, other peculiarities cannot be ignored: he is a writer of great beauty, depth and self-reflection on his own style. Both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are great literary experiments; not to mention the loose phrases and the annotations where he was carried away by passions, insults and ridicule. More than once he seems to be haranguing himself to have strength and courage, or he exclaims some conceptual banner so as not to get lost in his ideas. For example:

My style is like bad musical composition. Don't apologize for anything, don't obscure anything, look & tell how it really is--but you must see something that sheds a new light on the facts" (MS 123 112: 1.6.1941) (Wittgenstein, 1998).

Added to this is the fact that his thinking has undergone enormous changes. One of them, the change in the conception of meaning, sharply divides the waters of his philosophy. But there is also an enormous number of oscillations and transformations, which, to make matters worse, have been buried because they were not published in a timely manner. They require an elucidation work that is, we could say, by geological sediments. We find in his writings an enormous variety of layers where what seem to be small nuances, almost imperceptible differences in the way a concept is presented, are often the mark on the rock of an enormous intellectual activity, of true philosophical storms. This is the reason why Anthony Kenny, for

example, has greatly doubted Wittgenstein himself as an interpreter and corrector of his own work, especially in Wittgenstein's own reading of the *Tractatus* years later and created “the ghost” of the *Tractatus*.

I think we can go beyond the geological task and think that Wittgenstein never has a fixed point, least of all in the *Tractatus*. Soon we will refer to our dialectical, or pathological reading.

Thirdly, we find a particularly interesting fact for our case, that of the first Wittgenstein, and that is that what was published, the *Tractatus* is practically unintelligible for very singular stylistic reasons, singular even compared with other works of Wittgenstein. Let us compare his case with his other two types of writing: the notebooks and the works after the conceptual turn of 1930. In the case of the notebooks, the difficulty is that every day he changes his mind and, therefore, is very difficult to collect a thesis that covers them from end to end. Of course, they are diaries. Paradigmatically, we can mention the issue of objects and their simplicity: there are enormous changes between the entries for the month of June 1915 in this regard.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, in *On Certainty* and in his class notes the challenge is, instead, that they have been written as dialogues between opposing thoughts, and it is therefore very difficult to identify which of them is truly Wittgenstein. Let us note, as an example, the number of layers present in the following paragraph:

What does it mean to say that we cannot attribute being or non-being to the elements? –one could say: if everything we call “being” and “not being” consists in the existence and non-existence of relations between elements, then it makes no sense to speak of the being (non-being) of an element... But it would mean: Being cannot be attributed to the element (Wittgenstein, 1999, IF, 50).

Then the appeals continue in the paragraph: “let’s imagine such a thing”, “we could express this idea in this way”, “then say such a thing”, etc. They seem, if you allow me, *the draft of a platonic dialogue*. It is known that Wittgenstein failed when trying to give them a systematicity that would satisfy their publication and that the reason for this failure goes beyond a mere esthetic or stylistic issue: form and content have always been related in Wittgenstein’s writing.

Following Mijaíl Bajtín's thesis on the origin of the novel (BAJTÍN, 1989), and continuing our brief analogy, if Plato is an antecedent of the modern novel due to his polyphonic dialectic, where opposing voices refuse to close the reading, Wittgenstein is, without a doubt, one of its highest points.

The case of the *Tractatus* – and this applies to all the writings of the first decade as well – is different. The point is that its reading is impossible without appealing to a host of arguments that hide behind each aphorism. The *Tractatus* is an enormous system –not as coherent and finished as one would like, because its in movement, we will remark this later–, from which only what can be considered the apex of the iceberg of each philosophical thesis emerges. With a bit of irony we can say that what is not written *really* matters a lot. Several such arguments or motifs are found in Wittgenstein's personal letters and diaries of the time.

To summarize: there is a strong biographical pressure, of unusual vigor, exerted largely by the author's stylistic manias and reluctance to print. But there is also, as we will point out, an attempt to fix the text, because it is thought that there is no tension in its content. The message of the author is not said. The text is voluble. This is precisely what we are trying to deny. You cannot fix it. Its breaking, it is meant to brake.

Second Navigation

Wittgenstein tried in the *Tractatus* to make a steady, rigid picture of the world impulsed first by his fascination with mathematical logic. But then while writing, while fighting, made a second navigation into the mystical, as a corollary of logic. This twofold nature, this two powerful sources of philosophy melt down in the *Tractatus*. That is why, I think, the *Tractatus* collapses, breaks without a synthesis.

Let me say some words to support that Wittgenstein wasn't a Jung Wien in Cambridge, perhaps happened the contrary, but not our quest for the moment. Whoever immerses himself in the material of the first years, in the in the diaries, notes and correspondences of the time, finds a constant concern in all the writings, and by this I mean the ones before and after to the first war, for sharply distinguishing the logical plane from the empirical, the philosophical from the scientific. It can be seen that two impulses coexist, which chronologically follow one another before and the

other after the trench: the first points out that philosophy is logic, then it consists decidedly in the scrutiny of the structure of language, from which They will establish the principles of language and denounce abuses and confusion.

There is a normative effort – this is ethical on their part – to unveil the structure of the language that emerges from that time of the war. P. Shields has convincingly shown the intimate link between logical duty and ethical duty (Shields, 1997). To give a notable example: in his first published text, the review of the book *The science of logic*, by P. Coffey, writing in 1912, the confidence of Wittgenstein more auspicious manifest advances of the mathematical logic of the time than what the one the Coffey commentary. A quote will suffice for illustration:

Aristotle, whose name is brought up in vain by our logicians, would twist in his grave to learn that so many logicians know no more about logic today than he did 2,000 years ago. The author (that is to say P. Coffey) has not accused the slightest news of the great work of modern mathematical logicians, a work that has brought with it an advance in logic only comparable to that achieved by astronomy from astrology, from the chemistry from alchemy. (Wittgenstein, 1997, p. 23).

Then, especially after 1914, where the logic/philosophy separation is no longer one of levels, philosophy does not get rid of logic as a science, but it no longer believes that there is such a formal science. We found this *second navigation* from 1914-15 to 1919, the year of the preliminary versions of the *Tractatus*. The reason for this turn seems to be, as we pointed out, the experience of war.

The comparison between the silence of proposition 7 of the *Tractatus* and what Walter Benjamin points out in his brilliant essay “The Narrator” about the fact that soldiers return from modern war not richer in experiences, but impoverished, is very fruitful: “With the world war began to manifest a movement that has never stopped until now. Wasn't it noticed, during the war, that people returned mute from the battlefield? Not richer in transmittable experiences, but poorer” (Benjamin, 1980, 116).

Albert Maslow relates the tension in the work with the two tendencies that we have pointed out: one clearly scientific and the other philosophical. We close this section with an anecdote of his. We mentioned that Wittgenstein dedicated a copy of the *Tractatus* to Morris Schlick with the following sentence: “*Jeder say Sätze _ _ ist der*

Ausdruck einer Krankheit’ (Each of these propositions is the manifestation of a disease). What disease? The explanation lies in this tension between scientific optimism and existentialist humanism that fight in the book. In terms of CP Snow: the two cultures (the scientific and the humanistic) lodge without synthesis in Wittgenstein by the time of the *Tractatus*, where "one hears not only the clear voices of Frege and Russell, but also the echoes of Kant, Schopenhauer, Plato and even Saint Augustine” (Maslow, 1961, X). Let us then try to listen to Wittgenstein and, as far as possible, to the buried voices of those who speak behind him. We will hear noises, disputes, but perhaps we will also perceive that the whole forms, deep down, a secret symphony. What is the name of that symphony? The inseparability.

Sketch of a pathological reading

If there is an idea common to all readings, it is that the *Tractatus* thematizes the limit, or rather the inseparability of language-subject-world. We can refer to this with the denomination of a tractarian project. The second thing is that any proposal about the subject, language or world, that dispenses with the others, falls into the absurd. So it is with the idea of solipsism that merges with realism, of ontology that ends up being logical, and of linguistic universalism that ultimately ends up in the ineffability of semantics. On another level, the philosophy of language that wants to deal with this triad is doomed to self-checkmate of 7.

What happens in the *Tractatus* is that it is frequently forgotten that it is a symptomatic book of an illness, that it is pathological because it is a crisis book. Wittgenstein does not have the language to say what he wants, he has not managed to detach himself entirely from the dichotomies inherited by Fregean-Russellian analytical philosophy. We refer to the fact that, to a certain extent, he is still captive to traditional categories against which he seems to be fighting with enormous will, but in an unequal battle. We point out then that the *Tractatus* is a crisis text in the Gramscian sense; this display of inseparability is still embedded in a certain metaphysical vocabulary. The Sardinian points out that a crisis breaks out when “The old is dead and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, the most varied morbid phenomena take place”. What has died, what is pushing to existence?

What is dead is the old way of doing philosophy, uncritical about language, that thinks that can thematize reality and thoughts without considering language. His pathological, unstable condition becomes apparent when his ontology, his psychology and his logic are developed, which, in indeterminacy, total ineffability and subject-world identification. The *Tractatus* is not more of the same, but the latest of the same, the best of the same that has not yet managed to be the first of the new.

For this reason, to conclude, we leave raised two *metaphilosophical movements* that are related to inseparability. In the first place, we have the denial of traditional philosophy for not having understood the deep logic of language (4.003). But Wittgenstein is not simply trying to change one piece (ontology, epistemology) for another, he is looking to kick the board. Immediately we must warn, due to what is developed in this article, that there is no more Tractarian moral than the impossibility of the philosophy of language, if it intends to study language without the subject and the world intervening. Perhaps as a synthesis of this double negation, the challenge of accepting the conditioning of and to language remains, turning its elucidation into the very task of philosophy. Not to heal us, but to know we are sick.

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