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The Conflicts
of Modernity in
Ludwig Wittgenstein's
Tractatus
Logico-Philosophicus

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Introduction

One of the main questions in the following dissertation reads as follows: What reasons did Wittgenstein have to think that only propositions of natural science have meaning?

The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences) (TLP 4.11)¹.

One could expect such a statement from an admirer of natural science (of its progress, results, clarity or influence on everyday life). One could also expect this statement to be the beginning of some philosophical programme in which the progress of all other branches of culture hinges on a scientific conception of the world. Yet the *Tractatus* has nothing to do with these kinds of views. In a letter to his publisher, Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein informed him that his work consisted of two parts: the written part – the text that the reader has before his or her eyes, and the unwritten part – topics about which Wittgenstein was intentionally silent². To Bertrand Russell, who believed that one should implement scientific methods into the practice of philosophy³, he wrote: “How different our ideas are, for example, of the value of a scientific work”⁴. He was explaining to the first English translator of the *Tractatus*, Charles Kay Ogden, with respect to thesis TLP 6.5 (“The riddle does not exist”), which could be interpreted straightforwardly as proof of Tractarian positivism, that he did not wish “anything ridiculous or profane or frivolous in the word when used in the connection ‘riddle of life’ etc.”⁵. Wittgenstein was

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- 1 All English quotations from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (later: the *Tractatus*) are from the Pears and McGuinness translation (Revised edition from 1974).
 - 2 “My work consists of two parts, the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important point. For the ethical gets its limit drawn from the inside, as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous of drawing those limits; (...) I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it” (cited in: *ProtoTractatus*, p. 16). Engelmann, on the other hand, confirms that it was the ethical part which was of greater importance to Wittgenstein than the logical theory: “It could be said with greater justice that Wittgenstein drew certain logical conclusions from his fundamental mystical attitude to life and the world” (Engelmann 1967, p. 97).
 - 3 “It is not results, but methods, that can be transferred with profit from the sphere of the special sciences to the sphere of philosophy” (Russell 1914b, p. 57).
 - 4 Letters, p. 53.
 - 5 Wittgenstein 1973, p. 36.

afraid that his views would be understood as merely negating the meaningfulness of philosophy. According to Drury's testimony, he once said: "Don't think I despise metaphysics or ridicule it. On the contrary, I regard the great metaphysical writings of the past as among the noblest productions of human mind"⁶ and, according to Carnap's recollection, the result of the *Tractatus*, i.e. the thesis that metaphysical and ethical utterances are senseless, was "extremely painful for him emotionally, as if he were compelled to admit a weakness in a beloved person"⁷. Therefore, there is clearly tension in the *Tractatus* between theses that could as well have been expressed by the proponents of neo-positivism or scientism⁸ and its mystical part, where Wittgenstein writes, among others, that "there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical" (TLP 6.522)⁹.

One of the explanations for such tension comes from Wittgenstein's biography. If it was not for his war experiences, the *Tractatus* would contain only considerations on logic and language. As Ray Monk writes:

The Austrian Eleventh Army, to which Wittgenstein's regiment was attached, faced [in the June of 1916] the brunt of the attack and suffered enormous casualties. It was at precisely this time that the nature of Wittgenstein's work changed (Monk 1991, p. 140).

It was in the same month, on 11 June 1916, when Wittgenstein noted in his *Notebooks* the famous entry which begins with the question: "What do I know about God and the purpose of life?" (NB 11.6.16. p. 72). The mystical-ethical part of the *Tractatus* (TLP 6.4–7) is strictly connected with the religious conversion Wittgenstein experienced during World War I. Distressed and depressed by the evil

6 Drury 1960/1967, p. 68.

7 Carnap 1964/1967, p. 36.

8 Apart from TLP 4.11, one can mention in this context thesis TLP 6.53: "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one".

9 "Anyone who has read Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus' is struck, indeed is usually fascinated, by two apparently contradictory aspects of it. On the one hand, it seems to confine all sensible talk to the propositions of natural science, and even puts the propositions of logic into the category of senseless; on the other hand it itself embraces extremely non-scientific positions" (McGuinness 2002, p. 55).

and malicious company of his fellow soldiers and faced with the danger of losing his life, he started seriously considering problems which up to that point he had thought to be “philosophical” in the worst possible meaning of the word. The reference here to Wittgenstein’s biography, however, does not provide a suggestion as to what the correct interpretation is of the solipsistic (TLP 5.6-5.641) or the ethical theses of the *Tractatus*.

In order to address the aforementioned issues one has to put the *Tractatus* in a broader context of the history of philosophy at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Among the philosophers of that time there prevailed convictions which I will call in this dissertation ‘modernist’. The most important feature of modernist thinking is granting science the primary role in the task of describing reality¹⁰. Impressed by new physical achievements, such as Maxwell’s theory of electromagnetism (1873), philosophers and scientists began to believe in the possibility of a unitary physical description of the world – one of such projects was taken up by Heinrich Hertz in his *Principles of Mechanics* (1894). Moreover, Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) showed that we can explain events of the biological world exclusively in terms of causes and effects without mentioning the notion of an aim, which was always tinged with theological associations. Darwin’s theory explained the rise of the human species in a fully naturalistic way, therefore the explanation for the existence of the human being (with all of its magnificent mental abilities) was done without reference to the special act of God’s creation¹¹. In effect, some philosophers believed that the progress of science would make philosophical and theological doctrines, such as the philosophical doctrine of the immortal soul or the theological doctrine of the creation of the world, useless. Summing up, the first feature of the modernist way of thinking is ascribing to science (and especially natural science) the primary role in searching for the truth about the world.

On the other hand, it was exactly this “rise of science” that resulted in anxiety that the scientific worldview might flatten the complexity and sophistication of our perception of the world. Many philosophers, who came from different traditions,

10 “That we are ‘scientific’ in our attitudes and live in a scientific age is wildly held to be both a fact and a ground for rejoicing, an achievement to be celebrated and carried further” (Midgley 1992, p. 3).

11 “Darwin and other biologists, particularly Thomas Henry Huxley, seemed to have established that the existence of human beings had a naturalistic explanation and required no special creation. Among physiologists the dominant opinion, especially stemming from Germany, was equally uncompromising. The processes of life were at root ‘mechanical’ and required no special life force to explain them” (Harré 2008, p. 23–24).

began to wonder: “What is the place for religion and ethics in a worldview dominated by scientific thinking?” and “How can such notions as the notion of a free will, the notion of the self or the notion of a moral value be accommodated in the scientific worldview?”¹². I see, after Charles Taylor, posing these kinds of questions as the second feature of modernism¹³. My main interpretational hypothesis of the *Tractatus* assumes that in this book both of these characteristics of modernism are present¹⁴. In this sense the *Tractatus* shared the intellectual interests and anxieties of its epoch. If I am right then the main problem of the *Tractatus* reads as follows: “How can one safeguard the world of human values from the claims of science?”. I shall call up this question later in my work on the fundamental problem of the *Tractatus*. The aforementioned tension between some of its formulations will then find an explanation in the fact that the *Tractatus* is an example of the modernist way of thinking. On the one hand, it acknowledges the progress and success of natural science at the beginning of the 20th century and, on the other, it tries to find

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- 12 In this context one can invoke the example of such different thinkers as the idealist Josiah Royce (“Like other Anglo-American idealists, Royce attempted to find a place for religion in a world of scientific facts” (Allard 2008, p. 57)), and the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (“Peirce saw positivists as committed to a flawed conception of reality which led inevitably to scepticism; and he shared James’s hope for an empirically grounded philosophy which would find room for values and religious belief” (Hookway 2008, p. 77)).
 - 13 “All this can help explain the particular form of the modernist turn to interiority. Thinkers in the early twentieth century were exercised by a problem which is still posed today: What is the place of Good, or the True, or the Beautiful, in a world entirely determined mechanistically?” (Taylor 1989, p. 459).
 - 14 One can find in the literature associations of early writings of Wittgenstein with modernism, however, in a different meaning of this term. For instance, Janik writes: “Wittgenstein’s effort to get straight about the *limits* of thought and language in all of the stages of his development and thus to be fair to science, religion, and art account for his place of honour among *critical* modernists” (Janik 2001, p. X), but he mentions as critical modernists such thinkers as Kraus, Loos, Trakl or Weininger, who fought with the *Wiener Moderne* – the cultural movement which “attached itself to an irrationalist cult of subjective experience that sought thrill in *everything* ‘new’, especially in what was obscure and ambiguous. Thus it was in most respects closer to our post-modernism than any classical form of modernism except symbolism” (Janik 2001, p. 208). Michael Fischer (Fischer 1993) also labels Wittgenstein as a modernist philosopher, but his aim is to point out an analogy between his philosophy and modern art. Just as listeners of modern music wonder if it is music at all, the readers of Wittgenstein either revere his work or entirely reject it. According to Fischer, the uncertain reception of Wittgenstein’s writings brings to mind T. S. Eliot’s anxiety about the inheritability of culture.

a way to express the problem of the meaning of life and of moral values in a world governed by the laws of science.

The fundamental problem of the *Tractatus* in its present formulation needs clarification. First, what do I mean by the world of human values? Roughly speaking, it is the world described from the anthropocentric perspective¹⁵. Human values, in this sense, are those objects which occur only in the anthropocentric description of the world. Bertrand Russell, in *On Scientific Method in Philosophy*, indicated that, for instance, if one describes the development of species from protozoa through primates to human beings as progress, then one takes exactly the anthropocentric perspective¹⁶. This is because from a strictly objective standpoint there is no such thing as progress in the development of species, i.e. there are no better and worse species. This means that the concept of progress refers to a human value, and a description of the world which contains this notion is a description from the anthropocentric point of view. In the narrow sense, human values are those which address a group of issues which Wittgenstein named “the problems of life” in the *Tractatus*¹⁷. In this meaning one can include moral and aesthetic values to the human values, as well as values that make life worth living.

The next issue to clarify is why these values need to be defended from the claims of science? By answering this question I shall point to the fact that the natural sciences, as an effort to describe the world objectively, *sub specie aeterni*, contain no concepts which are necessarily connected with the anthropocentric perspective. This fact, combined with the acceptance of the authority of science as the only source of truth about the world, posed a problem for some thinkers. The mechanical worldview which emerges from the convictions that:

- the scientific description of the world contains ultimately only concepts of material particles, and
- the scientific description of the world is complete; there is no aspect of reality which cannot be captured by science

15 I am adopting here Bernard Williams’ point of view (Williams 2002), according to which the relation between “the human” and “the anthropocentric” perspective is such that “the human” perspective always assumes “the anthropocentric” one.

16 “Organic life, we are told, has developed gradually from the protozoon to the philosopher, and this development, we are assured, is indubitably an advance. Unfortunately it is the philosopher, not the protozoon, who gives us this assurance, and we can have no security that the impartial outsider would agree with the philosopher’s self-complacent assumption” (Russell 1914b, p. 62).

17 “We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched” (TLP 6.52).

seemed to be too depressing. For instance, in the book which contributed the most to Wittgenstein's religious conversion¹⁸, *The Gospel in Brief*, Leo Tolstoy wrote:

When fifty years old, having questioned myself, and having questioned the reputed philosophers whom I knew, as to what I am, and as to the purport of my life, and after getting the reply that I was a fortuitous concatenation of atoms, and that my life was void of purport, and that life itself is evil, I became desperate, and wished to put an end to my life (Tolstoy 1896, p. 8).

In ethics we describe human beings as persons who possess dignity and rights. Physics, on the other hand, describes human beings as a "concatenation of atoms". This view on the human being as a complex of its material elements, "unimportant agents in an aimless and senseless universe that is ruled by blind natural forces"¹⁹, amounts to a reification of persons, treating them like objects among other objects, which could lead, in the eyes of some of the commentators of Wittgenstein, to catastrophic social and political consequences²⁰. In this sense, human values need to be defended from the claims of science.

In the second meaning, one needs to safeguard human values because of positivism's mistake consisting in the conviction that both science and religion or metaphysics have the same goal, which is to describe the world, with the difference being that science does so more accurately. Therefore, in order to acquire the proper worldview, one has to overcome these temporary, i.e. religious and metaphysical, stages of the intellectual development of humankind. Those who want to adopt the scientific worldview must reject naive ethical and religious convictions which are necessarily connected with false and unjustified anthropocentrism. This was the claim of some philosophers, for instance, Russell and

18 As a biographer of Wittgenstein, Ray Monk notes: "The book captivated him (...) He became known to his comrades as 'the man with the gospels'. For a time he – who before the war had struck Russell as being 'more terrible with Christianity' than Russell himself – became not only a believer, but an evangelist, recommending Tolstoy's Gospel to anyone in distress" (Monk 1991, p. 115–116).

19 Sukopp 2007, p. 91.

20 "When we locate human subjectivity in the world there is always the danger that we end up thinking of human subjects as things in the world just like other things, as objects among objects. That way of thinking can have devastating moral consequences. It is also likely to obscure the very nature of human subjectivity" (Sluga 1983, p. 136–137).

Schlick²¹, which provoked Wittgenstein to defend the right to hold ethical and religious convictions²².

Apart from distorting the meaning of ethical and religious notions and the claim that ethics, metaphysics or religion represent bad science, or sad testimonies of periods of history when humankind was plunged into the darkness of ignorance, one can also discern the third reason for defending the world of human values from the consequences of the rise of science. One can express this reason, after Wittgenstein, as the danger that a scientific description of the world impoverishes our life and culture²³. The basic reason for this impoverishment lies in the fact that the problem of the meaning of life is not a scientific one:

Our conception on the contrary is that there is no *great* essential problem in the scientific sense (CV, p. 20).

Apparently, for Wittgenstein, if our culture and education are dominated by scientific thinking, then we will cease to ask questions about the meaning of life or about moral goodness. This means we will cease to wonder about the most important things in our lives²⁴. It was in this sense that moral values needed to be protected from the claims of science – the danger consisted, in the eyes of Wittgenstein, that enchanted by the success of scientific explanations we will forget to pose questions about the meaning of life.

The task, therefore, was to safeguard the notions of ethics and religion from scientific distortion to defend the right of a rational person to hold ethical and religious convictions and to justify the importance of posing the problems of life. In the conclusions to this dissertation I hope to show in which respect Wittgenstein's solutions either fulfil or do not fulfil this task. What I find, however,

21 "The ethical element which has been prominent in many of the most famous systems of philosophy is, in my opinion, one of the most serious obstacles to the victory of scientific method in the investigation of philosophical questions" (Russell 1914b, p. 63).

22 Carnap reports the difference between Wittgenstein's and Schlick's position in the following way: "Once when Wittgenstein talked about religion, the contrast between his and Schlick's position became strikingly apparent. Both agreed of course in the view that the doctrines of religion in their various forms had no theoretical content. But Wittgenstein rejected Schlick's view that religion belonged to the childhood phase of humanity and would slowly disappear in the course of cultural development" (Carnap 1964/1967, p. 35).

23 "Science: enrichment & impoverishment" (CV, p. 69).

24 "Our children learn in school already that water *consists* of the gases hydrogen & oxygen, or sugar of carbon, hydrogen & oxygen. Anyone who does not understand is stupid. The most important questions are concealed" (CV, p. 81).

the most intriguing in the *Tractatus*, and the reason I wrote this dissertation, is that by answering the question: “What is the place of ethics and religion in the scientific worldview?” Wittgenstein did not abandon his conviction, expressed in TLP 4.11, that natural science is the only source of truth about the world. He admitted the rightness of the most radical versions of scientism and naturalism, and it was from this point of view that he tried to see how one can talk about moral or aesthetic values. His point of interest was the question whether one, without giving up his or her rationalism, can still search for the meaning of life or whether one, without undermining scientific claims about the world, can still make sense of his or her own religious experiences? By answering this fundamental problem he did not choose the easy way out, consisting in belittling the value and possibilities of natural science. One could say that in fulfilling the task of safeguarding human values he agreed with his possible positivistic opponent regarding all of that opponent’s views on science and metaphysics. In my opinion, this is what makes his effort so fascinating and worth analysing also today. Wittgenstein reveals himself in the *Tractatus* as a doubly serious philosopher – he acknowledges the progress and explanatory powers of science and, at the same time, concedes the importance of safeguarding the values of the human world.

This conviction about what is especially interesting in the philosophy of early Wittgenstein determines the structure of this work. In its first part I concentrate on proving that Wittgenstein, although he experienced some kind of spiritual illumination during the World War I, did not withdraw from his scientism. In the first chapter I shall discuss the basic, i.e. from the point of view of my work, problem whether the Tractarian theory of meaning is an example of the realistic theories of meaning. I shall argue in favour of this thesis and against the claims of the anti-metaphysical interpretation of the *Tractatus*. I find this problem crucial because if proponents of the anti-metaphysical interpretation are right, and early Wittgenstein was indeed not interested in ontological topics, and if the notion of a simple object was a purely formal one (that is, if Wittgenstein, when writing the *Tractatus*, had no concrete candidacy for the referent of this concept in mind), then, obviously, there is no fundamental problem of the *Tractatus* as I formulate it here. Then Wittgenstein could not pose the question about the place of ethics in the scientific worldview simply because he did not raise the problem of a proper worldview at all. The second chapter analyses the two main candidacies for the referents of the Tractarian concept of a simple object: simple units of experience (as the phenomenalist interpretation of the *Tractatus* argues) and the most elementary particles of matter (as the materialistic interpretation proposes). I shall defend in that chapter the materialistic

interpretation of the *Tractatus*, i.e. I shall show that Wittgenstein's position in his early oeuvre could be classified as radical naturalism – a view according to which the world consists only in physical particles and their movements.

According to Putnam's description of scientism, this position not only assumes "that science, and only science, describes the world as it is in itself" independently of an anthropocentric perspective but it also claims "that science leaves no room for the independent philosophical enterprise"²⁵. In my opinion, one can notice in the *Tractatus* also this second aspect of scientism. Wittgenstein claims, among others, that "philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.)" (TLP 4.111). He also suspects that traditional metaphysical concepts are empty²⁶. Wittgenstein's scepticism towards philosophy is directed at metaphysics as a doctrine about the world²⁷, i.e. a doctrine which attempts to describe the world more comprehensively than science or which assumes that there is an aspect of reality which is a special subject-matter for philosophy. Wittgenstein fought with this conception of philosophy also in less obvious fragments of his book. In this context I shall present in Chapter 3 Wittgenstein's discussion of the Russellian theory of judgement (TLP 5.54-5.5422). Obviously, the main topic of this fragment of the *Tractatus* is to reconcile the existence of propositional attitudes with a strong extensionality thesis²⁸, but I shall argue that Wittgenstein's solution to this problem: "It is clear, however, that 'A believes that *p*', 'A has thought *p*', and 'A says *p*' are of the form "*p*" says *p*" (TLP 5.542) as its background has Wittgenstein's conviction that Russell did not confer any meaning in his theory of judgement on the notion of the mind. I will also analyse this topic because it strengthens the view that the author of the *Tractatus* was a naturalist. In my interpretation, Wittgenstein's theory of judgement does without the dualistic notion of the self. In contrast to Russell's theory it is able to explain the fact that propositions

25 Putnam 1992, p. X.

26 "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions" (TLP 6.53).

27 "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity" (TLP 4.112).

28 The view according to which every meaningful sentence is a truth-function on an elementary sentence, including an extreme example of an elementary sentence which is a truth-function on itself.

communicate content without referring to the realm of the mental, which is allegedly distinct from the realm of the material.

In Chapter 4 I shall discuss the transcendental interpretations of the *Tractatus*. The proponents of this kind of reading of Wittgenstein's early work agree that its fundamental problem consisted in finding a place for ethics and religion in the world of scientific facts, but, in contrast to what I believe, they believe that Wittgenstein, when addressing this issue under the influence of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, accepted an idealistic or even a solipsistic point of view at the expense of his naturalism. After a close examination of the arguments advanced in favour of this interpretation and the fragments of the *Tractatus* which supposedly speak in favour of this reading, I shall hope to prove that early Wittgenstein was consequent in his naturalism and did not adopt transcendentalism. If he wanted to "defend" the world of human values against the claims of science, he had to do so in another way.

I shall try to reconstruct what his strategy and his answer to the fundamental problem of the *Tractatus* were in the last chapter of my dissertation. The main difficulty of this effort consists in the fact that an answer to the fundamental problem belongs (invoking Wittgenstein's letter to von Ficker) to the "unwritten" part of the *Tractatus* – the book which its author ends with a call to silence. However, on the basis of what we know about the position of the *Tractatus* (for instance, that one can classify its ontological position as materialism) and Wittgenstein's later remarks (especially on the basis of *A Lecture on Ethics*, which, as I suspect, differs from the *Tractatus* with respect to views on ethics only in that in his lecture Wittgenstein was less consequential and gave in to the temptation of expressing necessarily nonsensical ethical convictions), I shall formulate the hypothesis of Wittgenstein's subjectivism with respect to ethics. This means that I shall defend the view according to which Wittgenstein held ethical expressions to be nonsensical and aiming to express a speaker's attitude to the world as a whole.

In general, I have read the *Tractatus* as a modernist oeuvre²⁹. I have read it as a sign of the times when philosophers, having acknowledged the importance

29 This is exactly the opposite view to the one represented by Ronald Hustwit, who reads the *Tractatus* as an anti-modernist book. As confirmation of his views he indicates theses TLP 6.37-6.6.372, in which Wittgenstein compares the modern conception of physical laws to the ancient myths of Fate or God. Both of these myths provide an illusion of the ultimate explanation: "The modern view uncritically suppose that it holds no starting points beyond the laws of nature, while holding the unacknowledged presupposition of realism that the laws of nature are the description of reality" (Hustwit 2011, p. 568). In contrast to Hustwit, I interpret Wittgenstein's critique of the laws of nature as a sign of his

of the results of scientific research, began to question the status of traditional philosophical doctrines. In my opinion, Wittgenstein, in his book, skilfully manoeuvred between Scylla of neo-positivism and Charybdis of transcendental idealism. It is a book worth reading, among others, for the consequence in drawing morals from naturalistic positions it holds. Up until today it shows us what the possible and most substantial position is of someone who, on the one hand, accepts the ontological authority of natural science but, on the other, does not want to see religion or metaphysics merely as past stages in the intellectual history of humankind.

strong naturalism. According to this view, in order to describe the world one needs only the notion of spatial-temporal points and their intrinsic properties, and one does without the laws that govern the causal interactions between these points (for the difference between the strong and weak version of naturalism, see: Papineau 2008, p. 132–134).