

RYLE'S READING OF THE *TRACTATUS*

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Introduction

Is there a new way of reading the *Tratatus Logicio-Philosophicus*?¹ In this essay I will examine a serious problem in any presentation of the *Tractatus* and explain a new reading found in the papers of Gilbert Ryle at Linacre College.² I am interested in the starting points of the *Tractatus*, where I am searching for a correct "reading." This may be of no interest to some scholars, who find the value of the *Tractatus* in the topics discussed and the insights discovered, and not in the propositional progressional of the work, per se. I believe that if we neglect the issue of how to read Wittgenstein, we may miss a whole level of insight, if not large segments of the content of the *Tractatus*.

So I will start with an overview of historical commentary, making some fairly obvious points. Then I will state the problem and look at Ryle's reading, which may illuminate the plan and development of the *Tractatus*. Of interest, such a reading will not displace earlier readings, but may be overlaid on these readings, enriching discussions of relevant topics.

History of Commentary

There must be thousands of essays and books on the early Wittgenstein. The history of commentary on Wittgenstein is itself now part of the philosopher's story. The "Introduction" by Russell was the first attempt to explain the content. Notoriously, Wittgenstein dismissed it.³ Ramsey's 1923 review was an important "correction", helping to advance the discussion and further casting doubt on Russell's understanding.

A new generation of commentary was associated with Wittgenstein pupils and friends. Norman Malcolm's published memories, Max Black's famous line-by-line examination, and Elizabeth Anscombe's primer were landmark efforts. There were hopes that these commentaries contained insights directly from the source. There were also worries that they might be too friendly. Yet, there was a way of saying "this must be right, she/he was a student of Wittgenstein's." In my view, the main difficulties seemed to be that key historical documents were missing, Wittgenstein's story was so persuasively overpowering, and Russell's role so diminished that measured responses were almost impossible. On a positive note, the importance of Wittgenstein's *Notebooks*⁴ was firmly and repeatedly raised, especially by Black.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicio-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961. This is the edition I will use for all references to the *Tractatus*.

² Gilbert Ryle was late Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy from 1945 to 1968 and editor of the journal *Mind* from 1948 to 1971. His career in Oxford as a student, fellow and professor spanned almost five decades. Many of Ryle's books and papers were donated to Linacre College in 1968; the remainder upon his death in 1976. Ryle was briefly an honorary fellow of the college and donated the books to enlarge the small holdings in the library. Another reason for the bequest was his friendship with Rom Harré, a fellow (now emeritus) of Linacre.

³ I have argued elsewhere that Russell's "Introduction" is more argumentative than expository. See "A Re-Interpretation of Russell's Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," Eastern Meeting, Group Meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society, American Philosophical Association, December 29, 1998.

⁴ *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Second Edition, edited by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, with an English translation by G.E.M. Anscombe, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

In the 1970s and 1980s, David Pears, Peter Hacker, Anthony Grayling, and others tried to craft "better" readings thanks to the availability of previously unavailable historical documents, such as Wittgenstein's unpublished manuscripts, Russell's missing 1913 manuscript, and other documents. There was also a longer period of saturation. Anscombe told me in 1983 that "people are just now starting to understand the *Tractatus*," indicating the length of time necessary for scholars to fully grasp Wittgenstein's early work. In addition, these scholars seemed more appreciative of Russell's influence, contributions, and possible collaborations. Since I will discuss some of their views in detail below, I will only note here that their vantage point seems better placed than previous work.

Now, in the new millenium, the "ethical" reading of the *Tractatus* is in vogue. This reading, championed by James Conant, Cora Diamond, and Eli Friedlander, and many others, views the *Tractatus* as primarily an ethical work, and therefore re-interpretations are needed accordingly. This view is based on the following letter from Wittgenstein to Ludwig von Ficker:

...the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreward which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it. Therefore the book will, unless I'm quite wrong, have much to say which you want to say yourself, but perhaps you won't notice that it is said in it. For the time being, I'd recommend you read the *foreward* and the *conclusion* since they express the point most directly.⁵

In other words, the logical discussions have an ethical point. The nature of that point remains in dispute. Friedlander, in a recent book, argues that logic is delimited in the *Tractatus*., helping to illuminate the ethical point. Language reveals experience to us. But there is a gap between the "way we represent to ourselves facts in the world and our recognition of the significance of experience." We are looking for a "phenomenon of meaning." Our knowledge of objects is related to language. Our efforts to recover language are an "imperative" that overcomes the urge to "transcend the limits of experience" through language. When we try to transcend the limits of experience, we speak nonsense. The *Tractatus* helps us return from nonsense. The ethical point is to refrain from speaking nonsense.⁶

Is it possible to generalize about these four categories/generations of commentators/commentaries? I think so. The vast majority actually by-pass the enormous difficulty of explaining the step-by-step presentation of the material in the

⁵ This translation is included in Cora Diamond's "Ethics, Imagination and the Tractatus," *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 152.

⁶ *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 16-17.

Tractatus and its relationship to the so-called "argument." The standard response is to briefly talk about the structure of the work, i.e., "there are seven propositions and then there is a substructure where we are to read the *development of the argument* as determined by the numbering of the substructural comments." Then, commentators often divide the *Tractatus* into topics, i.e., logical form, the picture theory, metaphysics, etc. One example is Anscombe's *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*,⁷ which offers chapters on elementary propositions, consequences of the picture theory, sign and symbol, the general form of the proposition, knowledge and certainty, mysticism and solipsism, etc. Peter Hacker has a different approach in *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Philosophy*.⁸ In a chapter explaining the impact of the *Tractatus*, Hacker offers the following topics: unquestioned legacy; criticisms of Frege and Russell; the metaphysical picture of the relation of thought, language and reality; the positive account of the propositions of logic; and the critique of metaphysics and the conception of future philosophy as analysis.⁹

By contrast, and in a distinct minority of scholars, Grayling actually devotes considerable effort to explaining the substructural arrangement of the *Tractatus* as the development of an argument featuring the major proposition under discussion.¹⁰

You can see why the topical approach is so attractive. The material is extremely dense and difficult. It is hard to understand the original presentation with its tip-of-the-iceberg landscape and/or suggestive aphorisms, weaving in and out of topics with some apparent method. It is surprising how many commentators immediately move into topics without adequately explaining why Wittgenstein presented his material in numbered propositions with increasingly detailed substructure. This is my point: this approach simply doesn't adequately explain the reason for the step-by-step sequence. When Grayling tries it, he makes two potentially contradictory comments: that Wittgenstein wrote out his views and then arranged them into "an appropriate overall order" and that the substructural numbering system that keeps "the argument clearly in view."¹¹ The first suggests an initial arbitrariness that may be forged into order, the second a tight argument. The degree of difficulty suggests the potential for contradiction.

In fairness, there is very little to go on. Wittgenstein himself says in the "Preface" that "Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has already had the same thoughts that are expressed in it -- or at least similar thoughts. -- So it is not a textbook."¹² Indeed! While, for Wittgenstein, "the truth of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive,"¹³ it is not clear to the rest of us. He cautions in a footnote that the decimal points indicate "the logical importance"¹⁴ of the propositions and that the substructural propositions refer to those up the hierarchy, such as 3.11 refers to 3.1, etc.

⁷ Third Edition, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.

⁸ Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996.

⁹ "The Achievement of the *Tractatus*," pp. 22-38.

¹⁰ See his *Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 28-49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

We are left with no other clues, except at the end at 6.54: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them -- as steps -- to climb up beyond them....He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."

So, use of topical explanations is convenient, because the straightforward page one to page end reading is problematic. Yet, we are coaxed to try to front to back reading because it seems that this is the way we construct the scaffolding, set up the ladder, and climb the steps, and then throw away the ladder.

So then, is this how we read the *Tractatus*, front to back? Perhaps another way is to see the book as the development of a logical treatise, atomically latticed and unfolding theorem by theorem. Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica* used an atomic means of presentation, building a logical grid linked to five axioms. Perhaps this is also suggestive of one way to read the *Tractatus*.

One effort to tackle the work "head on" is Max Black's *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*.¹⁵ Black examines the *Tractatus* in the order of propositional presentation, which forces him to confront the structure. He finds a systematic reading very helpful, but he discourages a strictly linear progression and any attempt to find atomic progression. For him, the similar system of reference to *Principia* is a "device so misleading...as to suggest a private joke at the reader's expense."¹⁶ He acknowledges the difficulties: "No philosophical classic is harder to master....The difficulties can be overcome by patient collocation of the scattered passages where Wittgenstein re-examines a topic from a new perspective. His technical terms (*Sachverhalt*, *Tatsache*, *Sinn*, and so on) illuminate each others meanings and very few passages fail to make good sense at last."¹⁷

Pears suggests a logical reading that places strong emphasis on the nature of tautology.¹⁸ Whitehead and Russell ultimately grounded their work in a connection with the real world (see the beginning of *Principia* for examples of the contents of elementary propositions, such as "this is red" or "this is to the right of that."). For Wittgenstein, the propositions of logic are strict tautologies. They need either empirical proof or other logical propositions. They are true or false by virtue of their form and content. This allows logic to "take care of itself," which was the goal mentioned at the start of the *Notebooks*.¹⁹ This dispenses with the need for an atomic structure.²⁰

¹⁵ Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ *The False Prison: Study of the Development of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, Volume One, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

¹⁹ See pp. 2e-11e, especially the comment on October 13, 1914: "Logic does take care of itself; all we have to do is to look and see how it does it."

²⁰ "Logical formulae are radically independent when their necessary truth is explained in this way. Each of them can be validated directly without any help from the others. There is, therefore, no need to string them together in a calculus, giving some of them the role of premisses and proving others as conclusions." *The False Prison*, p. 22.

The Problem

This still tells us very little about how to read the *Tractatus*. We cannot answer the following question: how are we to read the work to see the development of Wittgenstein's views? Of course, one can read it, as in starting at the beginning and reading all of the words until the end. My question is more specific. How are we supposed to read the *Tractatus* in terms of its content? This gives rise to other questions? How are we supposed to read the substructure? What are we supposed to see? How are we to "understand" all of this? What does Wittgenstein intend with his substructure?

Back in 1923, Ramsey begins his remarkable review with this sentence: "This is a most important book containing original ideas on a large range of topics, forming a coherent system, which whether or not it be, as the author claims, in essentials the final solution of the problems dealt with, is of extraordinary interest and deserves the attention of all philosophers."²¹ Black agrees. A coherent system? I suppose a "system" could be any number of things. But while the *Tractatus* is a tight, regulated, condensed presentation, it may not be a "system" in the sense of Spinoza or Russell. It has circularity in one sense, because the ending rips away the scaffolding that may have something to do with the beginning. It does claim at the end to have solved all important philosophical problems. But it remains an open question as to whether or not this equals a system. Maybe what Ramsey meant was that the presentation was systematic, i.e., that the intention was to unfold a series of propositions that built upon one another.

A system may be a set of arguments. Perhaps the propositions in the *Tractatus* are the result of arguments. There are propositions which may be linked together to form arguments. But is there a progressive argument that unfolds with the presentation of each proposition? This remains an open question, too. Pears, like Black, asks us to look to the *Notebooks* for argumentative development.²² But while offering a more argumentative style, the *Notebooks* are not textual exposition. They only look more "argumentative" in comparison to the *Tractatus*. They don't tell us how to read Wittgenstein.

So I'm back to my central question: how are we to read the *Tractatus*?

Ryle's Reading

Linacre College is the repository of Ryle's books and papers. Among the more than 1,000 volumes are three copies of the *Tractatus*. One copy is the Ogden translation. A second is the Pears and McGuinness version. This is the one I to which I will refer for the remainder of this section. The first two copies contain extensive re-translations, involving almost every line. Both contain significant marginalia and cross-referencing. Both have indexes constructed by Ryle. Both are well-worn. All references to Pears/McGuinness are to the copy which contains Ryle's notes and marginalia on

²¹ F.P. Ramsey, "Review of 'Tractatus'," *Mind*, Volume 32, Number 128, October, 1923, pp. 465-78. Reprinted in *Essays on Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, edited by Irving M. Copi and Robert Beard, Thoemmes Press, 1993, pp. 1-23, which itself is a reprint of a 1966 edition with Routledge and Kegan Paul. This quotation comes from page 1 in the Thoemmes Press version.

²² "The text of the *Tractatus* is formidably difficult. Part of the difficulty is that the intricate construction of the book makes it hard to find a clear point of entry into it. Certainly the way in is not through its opening sentences. Fortunately, we possess some of the *Notebooks* in which Wittgenstein worked out the ideas which later went into the *Tractatus*. The *Tractatus* is brief, enigmatic, and therefore apparently confident, but when the same topics are discussed in the *Notebooks*, the treatment is more extended, and brings in conflicting arguments, and is sometimes tormented by doubts. So when a comparison between the two books is possible, it throws a lot of light on the *Tractatus*." Wittgenstein, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 52.

Wittgenstein. The third copy is a version of Pears/McGuinness devoted solely to drawing parallels with Russell's 1913 *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript.²³ I will not discuss the copy devoted to Russell, leaving that for a separate examination.

In the Pears/McGuinness translation, Ryle has his heaviest notation concerning the first three propositions. This is true in the Ogden version, also. Next to Proposition 1, "The World is all that is the case," he wrote "ontological." Next to Proposition 2, "What is the case -- a fact -- is the existence of states of affairs," he wrote "picturing." With Proposition Three, "A logical picture of facts is a thought," he noted "propositional." He wrote nothing similar next to the last four major propositions, although he did have further re-translations and textual comments.

What was he getting at? An essay in his papers entitled "Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*"²⁴ gives us some idea. There Ryle argues that we can read the *Tractatus* in three ways: as offering a top-down presentation, a bottom-up presentation, or as offering a metaphorical presentation. The advantage to a top-down theory is that it allows the reader to do a front-to-back approach suggestive of Russell's atomism. Ryle rejects the top-down theory. It would require Proposition 1 to function as an axiom for a Euclidian development. In his view, that is not the function of Proposition 1, nor is it the approach of the *Tractatus* because the major propositions seem to be independent. The bottom-up theory would make sense of the rejection of philosophy at Proposition 7, but then you have a "reversed Euclidian" problem because the last proposition would now have to function as an axiom for a flip/flop argumentative development.²⁵ So Ryle rejects this because he doesn't see how one could get Proposition 1 from Proposition 7.

Rather, Ryle advocates an "Aesop interpretation" that sees each proposition as making an "allegorical statement of something to be told more strictly later on."²⁶ So Propositional 1 tells an ontological story, Proposition 2 tells a picturing story, and Proposition 3 tells a propositional story.

This parallelism in story-telling suggests parallelism in the substructure. More than that, the substructure of successive propositions could be related to the substructure of previous propositions:

I think that for nearly every seemingly factual statement Wittgenstein makes about objects, simples, complexes, etc., in the ontological story, we could find a corresponding meta-statement about propositions in the propositional story. I suggest that this correspondence is not that of premisses to conclusions or conclusions to premisses, but of nursery-statements to grown-up statements.²⁷

²³ Bertrand Russell, *The Collected Works of Bertrand Russell, Volume 7: Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames with Ken Blackwell, London: Routledge, 1984.

²⁴ This essay has been published in two places: in Ryle's *Aspects of Mind*, edited by Rene Meyer, Oxford: Basil Blackwells, 1993, and in the *Linacre Journal*, Number 3, November 1999, pp. 101-107. The latter version will be the source for all references or citations.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

He offers an example to show how this might work. At 2.02 Wittgenstein says, "Objects are simple." At 2.021 "Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be compound." At 3.202 and 3.203 we find, "The simple signs employed in propositions are called names. A name means an object. The object is its meaning." At 3.26 and 3.261 he adds, "A name cannot be dissected any further by means of a definition: it is a primitive sign...Names *cannot* be anatomized by means of definitions."

Another example is at 2.032: "The determinate way in which objects are connected in a state of affairs is the structure of the states of affairs." Then, at 4.22 "An elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a concatenation, of names."

In both examples, there is parallel development. There is no contrast, just restatement on a different level, telling a different story. The later propositions may look back to the earlier pairs, illuminating their meaning with deeper understanding.

An interesting project, certainly not attempted here, would be to look for more parallels. For example, consider the substructure of the first proposition under the first four major propositions:

- 1.1 "The world is the totality of facts, not of things."
- 2.1 "We picture facts to ourselves."
- 3.1 "In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses."
- 4.1 "Propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs."

Following Ryle, we must ask if there is a parallelism or a deeper telling of the same story with each subsequent proposition. For those inclined to agree, consider whether or not the language itself is so ambiguous that we may wishfully find anything we want. In order to demonstrate that Ryle is correct, a scholar would have to construct a careful reading of the key topics, and then re-examine the appearance and placement under the major propositions. Surely this can be done. If Ryle is correct, the topical approach would not conflict with his own reading.

Why did he not consider the stories in the other four major propositions? It is a curious question. Both of his relevant copies of the *Tractatus* are heavily front-loaded. He offers a partial explanation with his analysis at 4.126. This passage draws a line between formal concepts and concepts proper. To treat a formal concept (Ryle calls them "category words") like a concept proper (Ryle calls them "ordinary words") is to talk nonsense. What comes before may have been "a prefatory parable."²⁸

However, I suggest that the story parallelism could be continued, even though Ryle stops after Proposition 3. For example, Proposition 4, "A thought is a proposition with sense," could be the linguistic story. We could see Proposition 5, "A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions," as the tautology story. Proposition 6 about the general form of a proposition, could be viewed as the story of logical form. About Proposition 7 we would be silent.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 104.

The story-telling view of the *Tractatus* offers an interesting potential explanation of the substructure. The lower propositions might be part of the development of the story. But they could also be part of the story through a category relationship, or merely grouped underneath each major proposition because they were more similarly related to that story than to others. If the latter explanation were true, then there would not be an overt argument to the *Tractatus*, even if there were lessons learned. If the *Tractatus* had a system, it would be a mere secondary product of the enterprise. It would explain why propositions in the Notebooks could be placed in a different order later on, and why Wittgenstein could shift remarks from one proposition to another in his rewriting. He would develop the idea and then see where it could be categorized. This might give a new twist to the relationship between major and substructural propositions mentioned at the beginning of the *Tractatus*. It could also explain one reason why Wittgenstein felt misunderstood: he was telling parallel stories and we were looking for arguments. He was saying the same thing with greater depth; we wanted a system. His major propositions were independent; some of us saw Russellian atomism.

Conclusion

I have suggested that there is a difficulty in finding a proper reading of the *Tractatus*. I have suggested that Ryle offers one way to approach the text, treating each of the seven major propositions as telling the same story as the others, each with different metaphors. I have noted that this leaves the substructure under each proposition as categorically linked to the major proposition, not linked argumentatively. Such a reading does give us one way to unearth the various topics in the *Tractatus* and see their restatements or development under the major propositions. I am not sure this reading is an improvement. I do know that Ryle's reading should not be ignored.

Perhaps I've erred in labeling it a "new reading." It was probably discussed by Ryle in his lectures in the 150s and 1960s in Oxford.²⁹ But then the reading was lost or mislaid, until now. So it is new to those of us who didn't have the pleasure of hearing Ryle on the *Tractatus*.

The real danger is to assume too much. Like an explorer following the map of a previous trek, Ryle's reading takes us into strange and unfamiliar territory. With no final destination, I'm not sure where it leaves us. The search for the key to the *Tractatus* is like the quest for the holy grail: alluring, endless, a test of faith.³⁰

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²⁹ See Rom Harré, "Gilbert Ryle and the *Tractatus*," *Linacre Journal*, Number 3, November, 1999, pp. 39-53. This was the first examination of Ryle's view.

³⁰ I would like to thank the Principal and Fellows of Linacre College for permission to quote from the Gilbert Ryle Papers. I also thank Rom Harré, Antony Flew, Alex Russell, and Robert Barnard for helpful discussion.