The Problem of the Will in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, opinions on the problem of the nature of the will appeared divided between the empiricist tradition and Schopenhauer's philosophy. It is common knowledge that the young Wittgenstein was influenced primarily by Schopenhauer; however, it is reasonable to ask how much his early views on the nature of the will were influenced by the empiricists. In this paper we analyze Wittgenstein's statements on the nature of the will in the Tractatus and show that they present a fragment of a theory obviously closer to Kant's and Schopenhauer's philosophy and evincing only limited empiricist influence.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, opinions on the problem of the nature of the will appeared divided between the empiricist tradition (Hobbes, Locke, James, Russell) and Schopenhauer's philosophy. It is common knowledge that Wittgenstein was influenced primarily by Schopenhauer at the beginning of his philosophical work (Schroeder 2011). It may still be asked how much of the young Wittgenstein's views, which we find in the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus*, were influenced by empiricism, and specifically by James.

Wittgenstein had already encountered James's work during his studies at Cambridge, probably thanks to G.E. Moore, who taught Moral Sciences and who had written an article on James's *Pragmatism* (Tarbox 1989: 91). The question is whether he had already become acquainted with James's reflections about the nature of the will, which can be found only in the second half of Volume 2 of *The Principles of Psychology* (James 1890: 488).

In general, the question of the will in Wittgenstein's early writings has so far been of little interest to most researchers. For example Hacker (2000: 194) says about young Wittgenstein's encounter with the problem of the will that he "only touched upon it unsatisfactorily in the Tractatus". Other commenters focus primarily on the later works (e.g., Munz and Ritter 2017, Vacura 2018).

Tractatus 5.1362—Freedom of the Will

We shall look first at the context of the first discussion of the will in the *Tractatus*. The text in Section 5 deals with propositions, understood as "truth-functions of elementary propositions" (TLP 5), which "can be arranged in

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series" (TLP 5.1). The truth of one proposition can (logically) *follow* from other propositions; we can *see* (*ersehen*) this from the *structure* of propositions (TLP 5.13). For example, we can see that the truth of proposition *p follows* from the truth of proposition $p \vee q$ and the truth of proposition $\sim q$ (TLP 5.1311).

This deduction is possible, first, because the propositions have common parts (*p*,*q*), and second, because of their structure. Elementary propositions (propositions with no structure) cannot be deduced one from another (TLP 5.134).

Wittgenstein now moves from the discussion of propositions to the discussion of situations. While inferences from *propositions* are possible (when they meet the conditions described above), inferences from *situations* are not: "There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation" (TLP 5.135).

While we have a way to perform deduction on propositions (based on their structure), we do not have any such method for situations. This negation holds for concurrent situations as well as for diachronic situations (situations following one after another in time). While we may tend to think of causality as a kind of inference, this notion is a mistake. Causal inference (as strict inference) is not possible: "There is no causal nexus which justifies such an inference" (TLP 5.136).

Causal inference from situations is therefore not possible, and the "events of the future cannot be inferred from those of the present" (TLP 5.1361).

What immediately follows is a famous statement about freedom of the will (TLP 5.1362), which we will divide into three parts:

(1) "The freedom of the will consists in the fact that future actions cannot be known now."

(2) "We could only know them if causality were an inner necessity, like that of logical deduction."

(3) "The connection of knowledge and what is known is that of logical necessity."

In (3) Wittgenstein claims that the term "knowledge," when applied to the relation between two propositions, can be used strictly in the cases described above when one proposition *follows logically* from another—cases of "logical necessity." In (2) he says that the case of causality, i.e., the case where the truth of one proposition seems to *causally follow* from the truth of another, does not have the character of "logical necessity."

Causal reasoning is not logical inference, and once again "events of the future cannot be *inferred* from those of the present" (emphasis added); belief in the causal nexus is "superstition" (TLP 5.1361, 5.136). This formulation expresses Wittgenstein's well-known indeterminism (Scheer 1991).

The belief that causal reasoning provides *knowledge* about the future is superstition. According to Wittgenstein we cannot know anything about the future; therefore we cannot know our future actions. This "impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future" Wittgenstein calls "freedom of the will" (1).

This passage obviously provides no explanation of what the will is. By subscribing to indeterminism, supported here by the observation that causality has no connection to logical necessity, Wittgenstein merely allows for a theory of free will, i.e., will that is not subordinate to causality.

Tractatus 5.631—The Will as a Pointer to the Subject

The second discussion of the will at the end of the 5th section of the *Tractatus* focuses on a different topic: the question of the limits of language, i.e., whether there is anything beyond the totality of propositions (including all the complexities of their mutual relations and their relations to states of affairs, discussed earlier in the *Tractatus*).

Wittgenstein's short answer is no: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (TLP 5.6). There is nothing beyond the world of propositions; that world is also my world, and my world, strictly speaking, is myself (TLP 5.63).

The obvious question now arises: where, in this description of the world as a sphere of facts and their pictures (propositions), am I, the thinking self, the subject? Wittgenstein's answer is again striking: nowhere. In another famous

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statement he says: "There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas" (TLP 5.631). He elaborates on this claim in the rest of the paragraph: "If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could not be mentioned in that book" (TLP 5.631).

This statement is quite puzzling in the context of the rest of the *Tractatus*. What does it say? If Wittgenstein were to provide a list of the objects he encountered in the world, a few objects (such as arms and legs) would have a special property of being "subordinate to my will." We know that Wittgenstein's objects have internal and external properties (TLP 2.01231) (see Mácha 2015 for a detailed discussion). This special property is not internal because "a property is internal if it is unthinkable that its object should not possess it" (TLP 4.123). Is it therefore an external property, such as a table's being red and not white?

A property of being "subordinate to my will" that can be ascribed to some objects seems to be a property unlike any other. My arm's being subordinate to my will is not an external (or internal) relation between two objects, my will and my arm. The will is not an object.

One way to understand this difficult passage is that the property of being "subordinate to my will" is a kind of *pointer* that points beyond the totality of propositions, beyond the world. This property is a strange relation of being "subordinate to" that starts at my arm and goes beyond my world, pointing to the non-object, "my will."

When Wittgenstein speaks of using subordination to the will as "a method of isolating the subject" that shows that "in an important sense there is no subject" (TLP 5.631), he implies that "the will" is for him somehow connected or related to the metaphysical subject (not unlike Kant's and Schopenhauer's transcendental subject; see Leinfellner 1982). However, the relation of the will and the subject is already beyond what can be meaningfully and precisely described. The metaphysical subject itself, whose "existence" is manifested by the encounter with entities with the specific property of being subordinate to

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my will, is not in this world: "The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world" (TLP 5.632).

Section 5.6 concludes with the well-known analogy of the eye's not being seen in a visual field (TLP 5.633) and the repeated statement that "the philosophical self is…the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it" (TLP 5.641).

Tractatus 6.37—Volitional Necessity

Wittgenstein returns to the problem of the will once more in the 6th section of the *Tractatus*. This section continues the discussion of propositions and their general form. Wittgenstein also revisits the question of causality and rejects any form of the principle of induction or of Kantian apriorism with regards to causality (TLP 6.31). He then repeats his conviction that logical necessity is the only form of necessity: "There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is logical necessity." (TLP 6.37).

This conviction also has implications for the objects "subordinated to my will" described in the previous section. It may seem that there is another kind of *volitional necessity* based on these concepts of the metaphysical subject and the will. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein says that there is no such necessity, because there is no logical one: "there is no logical connexion between the will and the world" (TLP 6.374). Again, the only acceptable necessity for Wittgenstein is logical necessity ("the only necessity that exists is logical necessity" TLP 6.375) and such necessity is not present here. This conviction also reveals the meaning of the puzzling remark that "the world is independent of my will" (TLP 6.373).

How, then, can we explain the fact that my will controls my hand? For Wittgenstein this question is akin to the question of causality. Causal necessity, as we have said above, is rejected, so regularities observed in the world cannot be explained by causal necessity (in a strict sense). (A large part of section 6 is devoted to this discussion.) Similarly, my control of my arm may manifest

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some regularities; there is, however, no necessity in this circumstance. My hand may stop responding to my will at any time or even become completely autonomous.

There is a well-known phenomenon called "alien-hand syndrome" (sometimes called "Dr. Strangelove syndrome" or "anarchic hand syndrome") – in the most typical cases, affected patients experience that one of their hands cannot be voluntary controlled, acting seemingly on its own or being "disobedient" while the other hand acts normal (Scepkowski 2003). Sometimes, the hand is even personified – patients give it a name as if it were an independent agent (Doody 1992, see also Vacura 2022).

Tractatus 6.42—The Will and Ethics

The last discussion of the will in the *Tractatus* is in Section 6.4 and is related to values and ethics. In the context of Wittgenstein's pictorial theory developed in the *Tractatus*, all propositions are pictures of states of affairs and are therefore purely descriptive; in this sense, it is possible to assert that "all propositions are of equal value" (TLP 6.4). Because of the descriptive character of propositions "it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics" (TLP 6.42).

That is why "it is impossible to *speak* about *the will* insofar as it is the subject of ethical attributes" (TLP 6.423, emphasis added), i.e., it is impossible to say anything about "good/evil will" and the like. This statement can be considered a reaction to Kantian ethics, with its declaration that "it is impossible to think of anything at all in the world…that could be taken to be good without limitation, except a good will" (Kant 2011: 4:393). The point is not that the will is unrelated to ethics, but that what Kant tried to say cannot be said. Because of the descriptive character of propositions, our ability to speak is limited to depictions of states of affairs.

The will is, however, relevant to ethics. We have seen above that the will is a kind of *pointer* beyond what can be described by propositions—that is, beyond the world. This idea is reiterated here: "If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language" (TLP 6.43).

The following statement, expressing a "holistic" conception of the will, is again quite puzzling: "In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole" (TLP 6.43). This remark has been explained by Wenzel (2016), who links it to Kant's concept of an "intelligible" or "noumenal" choice (*Wahl*) by means of which one chooses the whole world (of appearances).

Conclusion

The will is not mentioned in the rest of the *Tractatus*, so we are left with the few remarks analyzed above. They present a fragment of a theory which seem to be based on Kant's and Schopenhauer's philosophy, showing only limited empiricist influence. Wittgenstein's view on the problem of the will changed somewhat in his later works. For example, Hyman (2011) and Wenzel (2016), believe that Wittgenstein's later reflections on the nature of will in *Philosophical Investigations* are in reaction to James' ideas, presented in his seminal work *The Principles of Psychology*, which he opposes. Wittgenstein's views cover merely a few pages of this book, these pages, however, attracted much attention and sparked multiple discussions. But this development is beyond the scope of the present exposition (see Vacura, 2018).

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