

Discovering Ethics in Wittgenstein's Picture Theory

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Abstract

Michael Kremer, in writing about the purpose of Tractarian nonsense, takes Wittgenstein's concluding words of his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (TLP) quite literally. Its statements "... do not begin by making sense, only to be gradually reduced to nonsense. They are nonsense all along". Readers only realise the deception too late. No theories presented are even provisionally justifiable. "This may seem too revisionary. Where is the famous 'picture theory'? Where is the isomorphism between propositions and states-of-affairs? The answer is that the *Tractatus* has shown all that talk to be nonsense."

Kremer's throwaway attitude will be rejected here. Wittgenstein's theatrical finale distracts from the intellectual labour he invested in his book. One has to *climb* the ladder before doing away with it. The purpose of the objections presented is, however, not to defend substantial theses of the TLP; their aim is more modest and provocative at the same time. Details of the picture theory are not examined in order to defend Wittgenstein's theses as correct. The theory is shown to be questionable in several respects. Yet, the effort is by no means pointless. And neither does it necessarily lead to silence. A plausible ethical perspective can be gained from close reading.

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1 A crack within 'the famous picture theory'

The key points of the theory are well known. "We use the perceptible sign of a proposition (spoken or written, etc.) as a projection of a possible situation." (TLP 3.11) 'A sign does not determine a logical form unless it is taken together with its logico-syntactical employment.' (TLP 3.327) The image alone cannot determine whether what is depicted is true or false (cf. TLP 2.224). True elementary propositions are pictures that reflect the existence of facts (cf. 4.25). In general "A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and no-existence of states of affairs." (TLP 2.11) These definitions are inspired by everyday experiences like the pictorial re-enactment of a car crash (TB 29.9.1914) or the mutual fit of "a gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes and the sound waves" (TLP 4.014). A more formal version of the idea of correspondence is discussed with regard to Newtonian mechanics (TLP 6.342 ff), concerning an image consisting of spots on a canvas and a coordinate system tracing these spots. They are registered according to their size and distribution. The resulting 1:1 mapping between an appropriately selected grid and the spots may be regarded as an isomorphism. The example seems to match the chain of correspondences observed between a record and its correlating sound waves. This juxtaposition of logic and mechanics (cf. TLP 6.342) passes over a crucial point, though, namely the disparity between isomorphism and truth. Two different notions of "mapping" are involved. Figuratively speaking: acoustic waves emanating from a record are expected to conform to a system of harmonies and not consist of deafening screeching. Such noise is still an isomorphism, though.

A subtle distinction is at work here. Wittgenstein calls "the arrangement of irregular black spots" a *picture* ("whatever kind of picture they make") and -- in the same sentence -- a *surface* "which I can always approximate as closely as I wish to the description of it ...". (TLP 6.341) There is a small but crucial difference between those two points of view. The presumed surface is a picture in the *extended sense* of being a visual form, but lacking a delimiting frame. Its description, on the other hand, *actually frames* its rendering of the patches, deploying optionally selectable grids to capture the underlying data. Here is the catch: Mechanics, given these prerequisites, "... is an attempt to construct according to a single plan all the true propositions that we need for the description of the world." (TLP 6.343) But unframed visual specks do not by

themselves suggest a system of coordinates. They are registered by data points, but this barely deserves to be called “description of the world”. ‘Truth’, in a loose sense, might be regarded as the systematically controlled replication of a structure according to a pre-established grid. But this falls short of a proper world view based on sentences attributing properties to things. Logic’s procedure includes content-related judgements over and above duplication. (A clone does not represent its original cell.) A “surface as a picture” may be reproduced by mechanical means, or else represented by conceptual specifications of a target area. Wittgenstein is aware of the difference, but gets into unexpected difficulties in the course of his treatise.

2 Isomorphy and Truth drift apart

The problem arises from an idiosyncrasy of TLP-logic which will be shown to have farreaching consequences, not least in ethics. The book sets up a striking difference between propositional logic and the realm of conventional predicate logic. The former offers a self-contained system for the truth-functional compilation of sentences referring to (possibly existing) facts. Its interaction between logical operators and assertions combines calculation and content, algebra with sentence tokens. Since this is done without regard to internal propositional structure, picture theory is useless here. One needs (at least) first order predicate logic to capture the attribution of concepts to things, i.e. properties. But Wittgenstein, in a baffling move, does away with quantors in one succinct sentence: “I dissociate the concept *all* from truth functions.” (TLP 5.521) The effects of this dictum are often overlooked. Generality, according to this move, is no operational aggregation of individual entities under the name of a property. Wittgenstein recurs to the image of a spotted surface to distinguish his notion of properties from quantifier logic. Tracing patches does not require an understanding of “black” and “white”. Representations, on the other hand, involve interpretation of signifiers. ‘I must first have determined in what circumstances I call “p” true, and in so doing I determine the sense of the proposition.’ (TLP 4.063) The meaning of sentences does not lie in verbal tokens, but in their ability to be assessed in the light of statements made. “Black” gets its meaning by its role in specifying facts.

One must keep in mind how predicate logic in Wittgenstein’s time (and in current model theory) deals with conceptual generality. A vocabulary provides terms and relational expressions the former to be assigned to elements of an

universe of discourse, the latter ones to sets of its elements. A statement is regarded as true if the bearer(s) of its names are elements of the set that its predicative expressions designates. An early remark from the "Notes on Logic" indicates Wittgenstein's reason to reject this approach. "... It comes to seem as if logic deals with things which have been deprived of all properties except thing-hood, and with propositions deprived of all properties except complexity." (Ts 201, a2,b23). To put it in terms of ideological criticism: Conventional quantification tears things and properties apart in order to then put them back together again (at one's own discretion). The truth of sentences is thus determined by freely selectable interpretation functions. Wittgenstein's move turns against this set-theoretic mechanisms. He regards names/things and sentence structure/facts as inseparable. For him, truth is not an isolated mark of assent, but ultimately the structural underpinning of the entire net of sentences correctly describing the world. His properties are formal traits shared by all sentences matching a certain feature of reality. Nothing is to be taken out of context in syntax; respect is shown towards the embedding of objects in their native environment (semantics).

The details of Wittgenstein's proposal are somewhat sketchy and rarely commented upon in the scientific literature. A brief outline must suffice. Expressions from which sentences are formed contribute to their truth values in different ways. "Caesar", for example, indicates the person to whom all true or false statements concerning his existence are attributed. Wittgenstein calls the set of all sentences equi-functional to a meaningful sentence-part a sentence variable (cf. TLP 3.313). According to this definition, predicates are sentence variables representing all sentences fulfilling a given assertive function. To be more precise: all sentences that are to be taken into account when determining content-assignments within the sentences in question. In "Caesar crossed the Rubicon," "crossed" represents all sentences between whose subject(s) and object(s) the relationship of crossing may exist. This construction is based on the vaguely Hegelian concept of holistic truth: "The force of a proposition reaches through the whole of logical space." (TLP 3.42) But there is trouble ahead. Wittgenstein's concern with meaning by verification clashes with his logical absolutism. Logic taken as a priori discipline is supposed to exert exclusive control over its variables. Applied logic, on the other hand, is concerned with actual state of affairs. It cannot freely invent its

variables. In rejecting the model-theoretical approach Wittgenstein opts for including globally contextual to-be-confirmed content. But this does not square with truth-functional completeness. Once again in the jargon of critical theory: logical formalism is pitted against logic's applicability. Power of domination against power of judgement.

3 Syntax teams up with ontology

To recapitulate the problem: "What values a propositional variable may take is something that must be stipulated." (TLP 3.316) Meanings are explicitly excluded which equals the logical fiat of model theory. But propositional variables incorporate worldly content. They contain all sentences used with a certain purpose, namely contributing to establish the truth of a given, assessable expression. Correct statements refer to existing facts external to the a priori realm of logic. As a mere sentence variable, "crossing" is a formal term. We may determine its meaning at the drawing board. This will, obviously, be arbitrary if the expression is not familiar from sentences applying it to a factually determined relationship. But, on the other hand, the "fixing" of an empirically legitimate variable will have to be a matter of experience. How does this relate to picture theory? The formal features of isomorphisms are unavailable as long as one is unaware of the complete set of instances comprised in sentence variables.

Wittgenstein, at this point, introduces a second eye-raising feature: "What is peculiar to the generality sign is first, that it indicates a logical prototype and secondly, that it gives prominence to constants." (TLP 5.522) The constants, representative of the sentences concerned, embody structural relationships that permeate the facts of this world. But what purpose do "logical prototypes" serve? In the TLP empirical generality is established by adding up judgements. The sentences thus collected have, however, to be *selected* according to a pattern. The meaning of an expression must be established prior to judgement (TLP 4.063). Wittgenstein's diaries contain a succinct description of this move: "... the proposition would consist of proto-pictures, which were projected on to the world." (TB 12.11.14, 30e) and: "Even if the sentences which we ordinarily use all contain generalizations, still there must surely occur in them the proto-pictures of the component parts of their special cases." (TB 7.5.15, 46e) Patterns are to be imposed upon visual experiences in order to be recognized as pictures; as paradigms, if you wish. Warrants of generality required by picture

theory. They are the determining force behind assertive practices (underexposed in the TLP).

Prototypes are metaphysical constructs. We have, to get a clearer picture, to look at the ontology outlined in the TLP's first two main propositions. The most prominent ontological feature of a thing is its embedding in facts: "It is essential to things that they should be possible constituents of state of affairs." (TLP 2.011) The possibility of those state of affairs themselves is determined by the entirety of logical forms available/confirmable in judgements. Since nothing in logic is accidental (cf. TLP 2.012) those forms must serve a purpose, i.e. already be inherent in a thing's internal composition. (Superfluous forms fall victim to Occam's razor, cf. TLP 3.328). The possibility of the state of affairs is the ontological counterpart to the device of sentence variables, among them those amounting to names (cf. TLP 3.314). These are containing the complete structural information of any entity's obligatory embedding in state of affairs, in other words its essential features. Think of a visual speck: logic cannot assign it any particular color, but the speck *has to have* one or the other. Knowing an object amounts to knowing "all its possible occurrences in state of affairs" (TLP 2.0123), its indispensable features which Wittgenstein refers to as "formal properties of objects and state of affairs" (TLP 4.122). Instructive examples are his (albeit cursory) remarks on space, color and tones (cf. TLP 2.0131). Logic has to be up to the *type* of phenomena, not to the specification of its *tokens*.

Sentence variables register the nodes at which propositions overlap in terms of their contribution to the truth of propositions. They are Wittgenstein's version of general terms, recording a common functionality of the sentence parts concerned. Names (as propositional variables) are consequently inseparable from the formal properties of their bearers and as such cover all of the world's possibilities, which TLP-logic, in turn, regards as its own facts (cf. TLP 2.0121). No surprises are therefore to be expected (cf. TLP 6.1251). But here we come up against a pressing conceptual challenge. TLP-Logic does not recognise development: "A new possibility cannot be discovered later" (TLP 2.0123), which means that it is to account for the syntactic pattern of precisely every required sentence variable in advance. Yet, as our analysis of the picture

theory has shown, in “making sense” logic depends on confirmation from outside its realm. Where does that leave us? Substantial changes to the world, and in particular ethical intervention, seem to be ruled out.

4 Showing by doing

Two questions remain to be addressed. How is the systematic stalemate between TLP-logic and the world to be assessed and what consequences does this have for ethical considerations. Wittgenstein does not shy away from addressing the first question. Admitting (1) that his logic does not have *in toto* access to atomic sentences he asks whether it could get into the position of needing a 27-digit relation. “If I cannot say *a priori* what elementary propositions there are, then the attempt to do so must lead to obvious nonsense.” (TLP 5.5571) Therefore (2) the following supposition is to be rejected: “It is supposed to be possible to answer *a priori* the question whether I can get into a position in which I need the sign for a 27-termed relation in order to signify something.” (TLP 5.5541)” Taken together those statements amount to a methodological impasse. Logic cannot be dependent from its application and, at the same time, be unalterable. Wittgenstein neither subscribes to model-theoretical formalism nor to logical empiricism. What remains is an epistemological equilibrium in which both sides are irrevocably opposed to each other.

The present result has been arrived at without recourse to the saying/showing distinction which generations of interpreters have tried to work out. The TLP's finale might be regarded as a consequence of the standoff described. General concepts, indicated by logical proto-types (cf. TLP 5.522) make up the formal structure of the world. By insisting on logic being strictly *a priori* and applicable to state of affairs Wittgenstein is blocking further arguments, leading over to silence. But must discussion stop here? The current reading has reconstructed a methodological *tugging-game* between conflicting intuitions, triggered by Wittgenstein's key move to abandon quantificational logic. Now, consider it as a *game*, i.e. as an ingenuous competition with the participants taking turn in advocating their position. The point of the enterprise might not to pick a winner. The TLP, contrary to prevailing opinion, is not simply a monolithic *tour de force*, but just as much a compilation of contradictory motives.

Wittgenstein, in a famous letter to Ludwig Ficker, claims that his book limits the ethical from within. This limitation is in itself an ethical endeavour. Has anyone pointed out that, therefore, the picture theory's elaborate technical apparatus is (to a certain extent) an act of resistance against attempts of order and entropy to overwhelm each other? (This is where Wittgenstein's "mysticism" seems to reside.) The *admirabile commercium* (a detour into scholastic theology may be forgiven here) between TLP-logic and its world is a solution balancing the interests between the urgency of rationality and its susceptibility to disruption. A durable ceasefire (another detour, as these lines are written). We have dealt with a monologue, but let's think of it as a dialogue, e.g. in the format of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Its "iron must" of logic vis à vis the vagaries of rule-following are already in play in the TLP, see for example the book's "famous picture theory". Note to Michael Kremer: it shows if one looks for it.

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