

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE *TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS*

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Abstract. The main objective of this text is to emphasize the ethical reading of the *Tractatus* on the basis of recommendations made by Wittgenstein in his correspondence. In order to achieve this goal, some early references to ethics in Wittgenstein's work are analyzed. Then it is specified in what way Wittgenstein understands ethics with its most important characteristics and the impossibility of its enunciation. The ethical purpose of the *Tractatus* is also specified and some ethical readings are presented in a general way. As a whole, the aim is to highlight that, although there is an epistemic and logical reading of the *Tractatus*, the ethical reading is current and relevant.

Keywords. Ethics, value, absolute, subject, limit, proposition, language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Tractatus* is a lapidary book made up of seven main sentences with their respective annotations, dealing with a wide variety of philosophical aspects, which have kept experts in reflection for almost 100 years without managing to interpret much of what the Viennese philosopher wanted to express in his work. In this sense, I do not intend to discuss the wide range of discussions and readings that the *Tractatus* has given rise to, which is in advance impossible. The intention is much more modest; it is rather an exercise in personal thought and understanding. One of the conditions that Wittgenstein enunciates for understanding the *Tractatus* is to have thought those thoughts or similar thoughts. In the prologue, Wittgenstein explains some statements that are necessary to take into account in order to achieve a good understanding of his writing. In a letter addressed to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein himself invites him to a careful reading of the prologue of the *Tractatus*. For almost a century the interpreters of the Viennese philosopher have tried to explain and give meaning to the set of propositions that make up the *Tractatus*, showing with this exercise that perhaps they have not understood anything. This was expressed by Wittgenstein himself to the tribunal composed of G. Moore and B. Russell, after hearing the argument of G. Moore and B. Russell. Russell, after listening to the presentation of the *Tractatus* in order to obtain his doctorate. What Wittgenstein is proposing with the *Tractatus* is an exercise of clarification regarding the conditions that a language must fulfill in order to correctly represent the world. If we look at it this way, in the end, there is nothing to explain, only to understand the exercise that Wittgenstein has undertaken. The book must be read, understood and overcome; this is specified by him in the prologue. What I intend to do in the following paper is to show different references of Wittgenstein in order to point out the ethical sense of the *Tractatus*. In order to do so, I will consider the following points. First, to review some of Wittgenstein's references and reflections on ethics before the publication of the *Tractatus*. The second consists of presenting and commenting on some of the references on the meaning of ethics in Wittgenstein. The third, to analyze the importance of the ethical sense present in the prologue of the *Tractatus* and in the letter to Von Ficker where Wittgenstein highlights the ethical perspective of the *Tractatus*. Fourth, to rescue some readings that highlight the ethical interpretation of the *Tractatus*. Fifth, to show what could be the ethical value of the *Tractatus* and its continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Finally, to make some concluding remarks to show that there is an ethical sense in Wittgenstein's philosophy that is enunciated in the *Tractatus* and can be followed in his later writings.

2. CLARITY AND INTEREST IN ETHICS

In the Notebooks 1914-1916, ethics is presented as a transcendental reflection that allows us to ask the question about the meaning of what is in the world. The facts of the world are not enough to give meaning to the world and to life. Ethics is independent of the world; it is a valuational condition and of the meaning of the world and is not represented in the facts that constitute the world. This shows that the ideas on ethics occupied Wittgenstein since then and that it is not a fortuitous fact that he mentions them during the process of publication of the *Tractatus*, nor that he gives them such an important place in the *Tractatus*, since it is with the ethical vision that there is an opening and a closure to the text itself. After doing this exercise of clarification, that which must be said must be said clearly, and when it is not possible to speak clearly, it is necessary to be silent. It is necessary to be silent when there is nothing to say, and indeed, it is not possible to speak with meaning. Wittgenstein is consistent with this claim stated in the prologue, and his work of clarification continued until a few days before his death, as is evident in *On Certain* with the date of his last notes. If this is true, the ethical perspective remained latent in his philosophical work, as that part which by its nature is impossible to express in language.

“Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic. Ethics and aesthetics are one. [Cf 6.421.] 29.7.16. When a general ethical law of the form "Thou shalt..." is set up, the first thought is: Suppose I do not do it? 30.7.16 And this consciousness is life itself. Can there be any ethics if there is no living being but myself? If ethics is supposed to be something fundamental, there can. If I am right, then it is not sufficient for the ethical judgment that a world is given 2-08 16 But this is really in some sense deeply mysterious! *It is clear* that ethics *cannot* be expressed! [Cf. 6.421.] Ethics is transcendental. [Cf 6.421.] 1.8.16 The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics. 9.10.16. But now at last the connexion of ethics with the world has to be made clear. 10.1.17. If suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed, then suicide is not allowed. This throws a light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin". (Wittgenstein, 1961, 77c, ss)

3. RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE USES OF EXPRESSIONS

Ethics, as Wittgenstein warns, is far removed from a general theory of the good or of what is good. In the *Lecture on Ethics*, 1929 he presents some synonymous expressions of what is traditionally understood by ethics.

“I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living”. (Wittgenstein” 1993,38ff)

Ethics arises as an attempt to establish absolute value judgments. That is to say, such an investigation, if possible, should be established in a general, necessary and absolute way: what is good, what is valuable, what is important, what is necessary to live life, what every person should do to live well. If the propositions of ethics were possible, every human being should of necessity be obliged to follow them. The point is that, in order to make such a theory, we must make absolute use of language, and this would imply using language without alluding to facts. Language makes sense when there are facts to which propositions and thoughts refer. A possible fact is "John is playing the piano in the living room." (Cf. Wittgenstein, 1993, 58ff) The propositions make sense because according to Tractarian language there is a fact that gives sense to the proposition which is John playing the piano in the living room.

The relative use of expressions in language necessarily implies facts. The absolute use of expressions in ethics reveals a use of language without speaking of facts. Ethics does not allude to facts. In this context, to speak of ethics is to

want to go beyond the fields where language is meaningful. "now, what I wish to defend is that, although it can be shown that all judgments of relative value are simply statements of fact, no statement can be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value". (Cf. Wittgenstein, 1993, 59)

Language only alludes to a legitimate use to express and enunciate facts. To the fact "Juan is playing the piano in the living room" a relative and absolute value judgment can be made: "Juan plays the piano well", "Juan plays the piano absolutely well". The first judgment alludes to the fact that Juan has studied, has trained and can play the piano skillfully. The second judgment wants to express that Juan knows how to play all pianos, that everyone should play the piano like Juan. The situations posed by ethics cannot be resolved by linguistic discourse or by the use of reason, nor by trying to make a science of ethics. It is nonsense to try to make a theory of ethics to teach how to act well, or to give meaning to life. If such a theory were true it would be meaningless. The theory would tell me nothing about my personal motivations in my life. At best, the theory would become a tautology. Ethics is an attempt to say something without alluding to facts, it is an attempt to go beyond the world and to make meaningful use of the expressions of language.

4. THE ETHICAL PURPOSE OF THE *TRACTATUS*

In the prologue to the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein makes some statements that are fundamental for understanding the book. The prologue begins with an invitation to think for oneself. Philosophy is a work on oneself.

"The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)". (Wittgenstein, 2001, 3)

As can be seen, a diagnosis is enunciated here, there is a problematic situation that Wittgenstein calls "philosophical problems" but he does not give them the status of problems and recognizes that the origin of these problems lies in the logical misunderstanding of language, which, in the sense of the interpretation of the text, is to take language beyond the world, beyond the limit where it is meaningful. The solution is an intense exercise of clarification to improve once and for all the way in which thoughts are expressed and not to fall back into the same misunderstandings. The way is none other than to clarify the way in which thoughts are expressed. To put a limit to the expression of thoughts is to be careful with the use of language, especially with those expressions that may imply nonsense, and to specify the contexts in which they are meaningful. This should lead, on the one hand, to express thoughts clearly and, on the other hand, when this is not possible and no meaningful use of language can be made, silence should be observed.

The ethical force of the *Tractatus* present from the prologue is reaffirmed by Wittgenstein in a letter to Von Ficker. The letter complements very well the prologue of the book. Here Wittgenstein says several important things; the meaning of the book is ethical, and the ethical is delimited from within the book. The book has two parts, the first is the written part and the second is the unwritten part. The second part, according to Wittgenstein, is the most important. There is a relationship between the prologue and the colophon of the *Tractatus*; at the beginning it is stated what is going to be done and at the end the conclusion is presented, after having carried out the exercise of enunciation and clarification.

"In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword 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 consist 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 that you read the foreword and the conclusion since these express the point most directly". (Luckhardt, 1996, 94ff)

One could pose the question, how is this ethical limit dealt with from within the *Tractatus*? One possibility is to follow the pedagogy of clarification that the *Tractatus* puts forward, and to the extent that the logical conditions of what can be said with meaning are established, to that same extent the expressions that do not make sense are established and separated. What is stated in the prologue implies that in the way in which the basis for expressing thoughts is laid down, to that same extent the ethical is delimited in the *Tractatus*, which constitutes what cannot be expressed. Here it is necessary to emphasize an ethical reading of the *Tractatus*, but there are parallel readings such as the ontological, epistemological, among others. this can be contrasted in (Kuusela, 2011), (Stern, 2003) and (Luckhardt, 1996) From the first proposition the *Tractatus* allows us to conceive each proposition as an attempt to say, and to establish the conditions of the thinkable. To consider the *Tractatus* in that way is to perform a very important practical exercise, very similar to taking a sieve to separate the good grains from the imperfect grains, so when one finishes separating the good grains, the bad grains at the same time will be separated. According to (Kuusela, 2017, 7) a Resolute Reading "Resolute Reading" and clarifying reading of the book allows to remember the logical principles that govern thinking and language and set the boundary that allow to distinguish sense from nonsense. Thus, each main proposition and the series of propositions that Wittgenstein uses to enunciate them have a purpose within the *Tractatus* and that is to delimit in which situations language is used in a meaningful way. Consequently, by the seventh proposition, the aspects of what can be said in science and what is unspeakable in ethics, aesthetics, philosophy and religion have been delimited.

In the *Tractatus* ethics has to do with the meaning of the world and life, with actions and will, and this meaning is not expressed in facts or language. In ethics there are no facts, ethics does not constitute states of affairs of the world. The propositions that refer to the world, in their legitimate use, do not refer to the absolute sense as the expressions are used in ethics. The propositions of language delimit the expressible from the non-expressible. By delimiting the field of what can be said, of what refers to facts, the field of ethics is delimited. In the *Tractatus* there is an attempt to express clearly everything that can be said, there is expressed in a general way the conditions that a language must fulfill in order to represent the world. The propositions that refer to ethics are enunciated at the end of the *Tractatus*.

"6.4 All propositions are of equal value. 6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. 6.42 So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. 6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental"

Now, the meaning of propositions is given by the facts that they represent in the world, the allusion to the state of things in the world. In ethics this possibility is null because in ethics there are no facts to represent. To speak of the sense of the world I must leave the world, and the propositions of language in the natural sense do not allow us to speak of that sense. We see with irony that the conditions of the uses of language in a meaningful way reach a limit where it becomes impossible to speak of ultimate ends and to use terms in an absolute sense. Ethics, by not alluding to facts, cannot say anything new about the knowledge of the world. Ethics arises as a desperate way of speaking about the ultimate meaning of life, it is an inevitable human tendency. This idea is expressed by Wittgenstein at the end of the Ethics Lecture and is in consonance with the ethical sense of the *Tractatus*.

"My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk about Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense". (Wittgenstein, 1993, 44ss)

5. ETHICAL READINGS OF THE *TRACTATUS*

Wittgenstein's comment that "the point of the book is ethical" and "the book delimits ethics from within" opens the possibility of giving an ethical interpretation to the *Tractatus*, which prioritizes the ethical sense over other themes of the book, but for some interpreters Wittgenstein's allusion to the ethical sense is not enough to sustain that the ethical is the central theme of the *Tractatus*. This situation opens the possibility of interpreting the ethical in different senses. The ethical interpretations of the *Tractatus* defend an ethical perspective that constitutes the fundamental axis of the book. The ethical readings of the *Tractatus* in any of its versions have broad defenders (Fairhurst, 2021, 153) and all of them can be sustained from Wittgenstein and the only thing that makes the difference is where the emphasis is placed.

The ethical reading takes von Ficker's letter as a basis and maintains that the ethical sense is the fundamental basis of the *Tractatus* and consequently all the ideas are subordinated to an ethical perspective, which delimits ethics, the good life and the sense of the world. This reading gives full credibility to the letter that Wittgenstein wrote prior to the publication of the *Tractatus*, which leads, by means of a philosophical exercise of clarification, to highlight the limits and importance of ethics. The limit is traced in language, in the way of expressing thoughts about facts of the world, but he clarifies that ethics cannot be expressed by means of language.

"This ethical intention of the book clearly stands in some immediate opposition to its tone of uncompromising philosophical rigor and purity. Rationality as representation, through the picture theory, exclusively emphasizes the mind's power to represent contingent reality, with language as the primary medium of such representation. But ethics deals, not with representable, contingent facts, but with necessities, with eternal meanings, with good and evil, and with the world penetrating will. Thus another aspect of the tension at the center of the *Tractatus*: it is an ethical deed; worked, however, in a philosophical medium inherently hostile to such considerations". (Edwards, 1985, 27)

The austere reading affirms that the main meaning of the book is not ethical, but in the book there is an ethical purpose that raises the meaning of life. Wittgenstein shows the ethical perspective by means of an exercise of philosophical clarification that enunciates ethics as a universal perspective of giving value to the world. The human being tends to give value to facts, to ask about the value of what is in the world. Ethics would constitute the second part of the book that is not written and that constitutes its most important component.

"The ethical point of the *Tractatus* lies in the realization that philosophy can only show the reality of ethics, not contribute to it, and by insisting on a second, unwritten part of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein marks his refusal to add to such contributions. In the *Tractatus*, he is simply pointing out that ethics shows as a universal perspective on the world that is present in the actions and specific utterances of a particular person, a point we will return to in the following. The answer is because in a certain sense it is. (...) Ethics is the very possibility of seeing a particular purpose or meaning in what we say or do; that is, it raises the contentious, but also vital, question of 'the meaning of life'". (Christensen, 2011, 587)

The intermediate reading, which agrees with some previous statements, shows that the aim of the book is not the ethical. The point of *Tractatus* is the clarification and delimitation of the ethical and from there the ethical consequences of the work are enunciated. The attempt at clarification, as Wittgenstein says in the prologue, is oriented to the clarification of philosophical problems and to delimit the expression of thoughts; this is what must be said with clarity. The exercise of clarification will show that ethics, religion, aesthetics are inexpressible, and arise as a consequence of the exercise of clarification of the *Tractatus*.

"My discussion so far makes it clear that the "ethical point" of the *Tractatus* is closely connected to its attempt to achieve clarity about the difference between what Wittgenstein describes in the ethics lecture as a way of

regarding the world as a miracle and a way of understanding natural phenomena in causal-scientific terms". (Cahill 2011, 54)

Ethical readings of the *Tractatus* are very insightful and varied and their arguments are very suggestive and convincing, but it is noteworthy that there is no consensus on the interpretations of the *Tractatus*. There is an ethical line that can be defended against some of the most celebrated interpreters of Wittgenstein's work. Some interpreters such as Peter Hacker dissent deeply from the ethical interpretation of the *Tractatus* (Cfr. Conant, 2016, 41). The reasons he adduces for this, is that Wittgenstein as every human being was concerned with moral issues, but in the long period of writing the *Tractatus* he only devoted a short period to moral reflections, the above can be evidenced in his philosophical career. Although Hacker considers that Wittgenstein's recommendation to Von Ficker is sincere, it is wrong to consider ethics as the main theme of the book. Consequently, Wittgenstein is dismissing his great achievements with the *Tractatus*, since there his reflections on the nature of logic and his criticisms of Frege and Russell predominate, and the ethical only appears as remarks in the final part of the writing. This is reaffirmed in the later philosophy where Wittgenstein deals with the philosophy of logic and language, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of psychology, and metaphilosophical concerns about the nature of philosophy itself; he wrote nothing about moral philosophy, which shows that he was not interested in the subject of morality.

6. THE ETHICAL VALUE IN THE *TRACTATUS*

The interpretations and ethical readings of the *Tractatus* are based on Wittgenstein's own statements and in its context the *Tractatus* resists multiple readings and interpretations. But the work of clarification of the *Tractatus* makes it clear that there are meaningful and meaningless propositions. Meaningful propositions are propositions that allude to facts of the world. Meaningless propositions are constituted by propositions that do not refer to facts and would be a permanent attempt to transgress the uses of language. These propositions, which in the context of the *Tractatus* are called nonsense, constitute an attempt to speak of something valuable and important. If it is considered that from the prologue there is a manifest intention to make a clarification and delimitation, the exercise of clarification of philosophical problems and the delimitation of the expression of thoughts, it can be argued that Wittgenstein was clear about the ethical sense of the book from the beginning. To the question: if the ethical intention of the *Tractatus* is strong, then why does Wittgenstein not develop it in a more extensive way? One could give two possible answers: first, that Wittgenstein states, "ethics is transcendental" "ethics is not expressible" and consequently ethics is an attempt to express what cannot be expressed. Second, from Wittgenstein's point of view, ethics is enunciated in the attempt to clarify and delimit what is expressible. In this sense, all of Wittgenstein's work would be a negative attempt to enunciate ethics. Thus, Wittgenstein clashed again and again with the limits of language in his attempt to enunciate ethics; he more than anyone else was clear about the limit of the expressible and the inexpressible. At the same time, Wittgenstein's philosophy would be an intense exercise of clarification and at the same time a fruitless attempt to enunciate ethics.

The consciousness of the limit is the consciousness of the subject who is at the limit of the expressible, and recognizes and sees in perspective something that is important but that is beyond language. This constitutes the question of the meaning of life and the world, but paradoxically this cannot be put into words. The second part of the *Tractatus*, that which constitutes ethics, which is not written, but which is glimpsed from the first part of the *Tractatus* is that which shows that the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* is traced from within. The *Tractatus* presents the way in which one should speak of the world and of what is in the world and the way in which language functions to refer to the world. The *Tractatus* in its first five propositions lays the foundations of an ontology. But it can be seen that the *Tractatus* cannot answer the question of the meaning of what there is in the world. The meaning of the world resides outside the world. The questions, What is the value of the world? What is the meaning of life? How to live? These questions are not answered from the world, they require a transcendental valuation of the world, and it makes no sense to try to create a theory to answer them, because in ethics there are no laws. Ethics is not conditioned by regularity and necessity.

TLP 6.422 “When an ethical law of the form, ‘Thou shalt . . .’, is laid down, one’s first thought is, ‘And what if I do not do it?’ It is clear, however, that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the usual sense of the terms. So our question about the *consequences* of an action must be unimportant. — At least those consequences should not be events. For there must be something right about the question we posed. There must indeed be some kind of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but they must reside in the action itself”.

The world is there, it is as it is, it is the constitution of all the facts that are the case and that are effectively given. The valuation that the subject makes of the world is not part of the world, that valuation is outside the world, it is not linked and represented by facts. The world is independent of my will, my desires and my wishes. What the world is and how it is does not depend on me. The function of the ethical subject is, consequently, to witness the world as it is, to have a vision in perspective, in perspicuous representation of the world. The attitude of the happy man is that of acceptance of the world as it presents itself, that understanding of the relationship of human will and the world. On the contrary, the attitude of the unhappy man is to confront the world, to question it, to attach it to his desires, and that is the cause of his unhappiness. The human being chooses whether to enjoy the world as it is and as it presents itself in its plurality of facts. The human being can also decide whether he questions and confronts the world, its facts and consequently suffers. The vision of the world as a “sub specie aeternis” is to give it meaning, is to see it as something valuable. This is the attitude and look of the happy man, who gives value to the world and to life through the exercise of the ethical attitude. This is what one would call ethical life and happy life, and it is delimited from within the *Tractatus*.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is noteworthy that an ethical reading can be defended without disregarding other readings such as the epistemic, the logical or the therapeutic. In this sense, there are enough elements to take seriously Wittgenstein's statement that the meaning of the *Tractatus* is ethical. It may be that at the beginning of the text this sense, except for Wittgenstein's assertion, cannot be seen. But once one advances in the reading of the text it becomes clear that, in the same measure in which what can be said is enunciated, the full sense of the ethical emerges at the same time. It seems then that the exercise of enunciating what can be said is an exercise that is underlain by the limitation of what cannot be said, which makes sense with the introduction of the ethical. Now, by taking the ethical as an exercise of saying with clarity all that can be said, this leads to relate the ethical to a sense of clarification that can be followed in other works of Wittgenstein.

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