Reading the *Tractatus*. And appreciating it

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Abstract

The reception history of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus displays an impressive and persistent diversity. This paper explores possible sources of that diversity and locates them in different takes on the text and its context of origin, and in different perspectives of the readers. This hermeneutics is illustrated by a comparison of two views on the importance of ethics for an understanding of the Tractatus: that of Cora Diamond and the one developed by the authors in previous work.

Keywords

Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; Cora Diamond; ethics; hermeneutics; therapeutic reading; pragmatic-transcendental reading; non-dogmatism.[1]

[1] English translation of Stokhof & Van der Does (2023), with some minor changes. This version dates from: 2023/04/02.

About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it's probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our ways of being wrong. *T.S. Eliot*

Some philosophy, like some art and science, is so rich that it forces us time and again to consider whether our current reading does sufficient justice to it. And time and again, it turns out that such work does indeed have aspects that previously eluded us, or that, on reflection, we would, or should, interpret differently. Eliot captures this predicament eloquently: in a sense, when it comes to such works, we never get beyond failing as gracefully as possible.

The reception history of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) is a good case in point. Shortly after its publication, the book was read by members of the Wiener Kreis as a manifesto entirely in line with their scientifically motivated views: positivist and anti-metaphysical, with logic as the instrument for separating sense from nonsense. Ethics here became meaningless and of secondary importance. In the 1960s, the first systematic commentaries and introductions appeared, by Stenius, Maslow, Anscombe, Black and Kenny, among others. Already at this stage, there is much diversity. Stenius, for instance, reads the application of logic in the *Tractatus* in a practical, contextual way.[2] Black's commentary is more in line with logical positivism, while Anscombe's introduction distances itself from it. Kenny notes continuity in Wittgenstein's early and late work. Next, Hacker reads the *Tractatus* as a work that aims to provide substantial answers to questions about the essence of meaning, language, thought, ontology, logic, highlighting what he sees as unsurmountable differences between the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein's later views. He sees ethics as a somewhat curious appendage associated with the metaphysical subject, a connection that, according to Hacker, does not stand up to a critical analysis. Gradually, what are called

[2] See Stokhof (2002, chapter 3) and Van der Does & Stokhof (2020) for a detailed analysis.

'standard interpretations' emerge, mainly associated with Hacker, Fogelin, Pears, and others. A break with these readings comes with 'the resolute interpretations', proposed by Diamond, Conant, Read, and Ricketts, among others, which emphasise the therapeutic function of the *Tractatus*: the book helps us see that there are no substantial answers to philosophical questions; what appears to be such is nonsense.

What is remarkable about this diversity is that it largely persists: apparently, clear criteria for distinguishing right from wrong are lacking. Of course, there are differences of opinion that are factual in nature.[3] But does the same apply to the controversy between 'standard' and 'resolute' readings? That is much less clear. Here we seem to be dealing with differences that originate, not in the text itself, but in the mode of interpretation, which encompasses much more than just the text itself and which often remains implicit and thus makes comparison difficult.

In this paper, we want to illustrate this by comparing two views on the importance of ethics for an understanding of the *Tractatus*: Cora Diamond's and our own.[4] Our aim is to show how a particular aspect of the *Tractatus*, in this case its remarks on ethics, can be interpreted in entirely different ways as part of an interpretation of the book as a whole.[5] To arrive at a systematic comparison, we first recapitulate some main ingredients of interpretation and then apply them to both views. We also show how this method allows for a more nuanced appreciation of interpretations in general, which could lead one to integrate some elements of another reading into one's own.

[3] An example is the analysis of quantifiers in the *Tractatus*. Fogelin (1987) claims that the *Tractatus'* analysis cannot generate mixed quantifier prefixes, but as several authors, e.g. Van der Does (2011: chapter 13) and Rogers & Wehmeyer (2012), convincingly argue, that interpretation rests on a misunderstanding.
[4] See Diamond (1991), Stokhof (2002), Van der Does (2011).
[5] There is more work on ethics and the *Tractatus*, but a good deal of it is concerned only with the content of Wittgenstein's ethical, or meta-ethical, views, and leaves the relation to interpretation of the *Tractatus* as a whole undiscussed. On the content, e.g., Stokhof (2010), Sondergaard Christensen (2011), Donatellli (2013), Balaska (2019), Friedlander (2019), Pihlström (2019); meta-ethical aspects are discussed in e.g., Conant (2005), De Mesel (2015), Stokhof (2018).

1. Reading and appreciating

What does the existence of different interpretations of the *Tractatus* show? In our view, it makes clear that the context of philosophically rich texts is almost never unambiguous enough to arrive at a single interpretation. Of course, interpretations have to be defended with strong arguments. But is it clear in advance that one interpretation will always come out on top? Argumentation, it turns out, often ends before that conclusion can be drawn. Seen in this way, adhering adamantly to one's own understanding is of value at best when developing an interpretation, but could in the end become a blind spot, or even counterproductive. Rich texts like the *Tractatus* ultimately require a willingness to appreciate the findings and insights of other interpretations and to use them wherever possible. It is the plethora of insights offered by such fundamental works that induces the appreciation they deserve.

Interpretation is a process with often more than one outcome, and those outcomes may change over time. Every interpretation arises from an interaction with a text in a particular context, and every interpretation starts from a particular perspective. All these parameters —text, context perspective, — can take on multiple values, creating a space of possible interpretations.

1.1. Text

When we talk about the *Tractatus*, which text are we talking about? Is it the bilingual text published by Kegan Paul & Trubner in 1922, in close collaboration with Wittgenstein,[6] or the 1933 second edition in which some corrections were made? It could also be the so-called *Kritische Edition*, which further corrected the second edition of the German text and carefully embedded it with relevant material from earlier manuscripts. Wittgenstein called the 1921 German edition 'a pirated edition' because of its many errors.[7]

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[6] See Wittgenstein (1973).
7 Letter to Paul Engelmann, 2.8.1922, in Wittgenstein & Engelmann (2006: 69).

Not only does the text come in different editions, there are also multiple ways of reading it. In a 1919 letter to Von Ficker, Wittgenstein characterises his book as follows: 'The work is strictly philosophical and at the same time literary, but there is no babbling in it'.[8] Is this not an indication that it is not appropriate to read the *Tractatus* as a mainstream academic discourse, with a linear developmental progression? The numbering of the remarks, indicating their relative logical weight, reinforces this suggestion. While the text is presented in the usual linear fashion, the numbering suggests that the text has a tree structure: from the trunk with seven main branches grow various, increasingly refined branches with interrelated layers of leaves.[9]

The seven main remarks suggest to readers how the text can be read: from the world as a totality of facts to that which cannot be spoken of. For more detail, readers rely on the branches, and branches of branches, that sprout from the seven main branches. In doing so, one should take heed of all sorts of cross-links, and not lose sight of the fact that central ideas are sometimes introduced at the ends of those branches.

So, even if one chooses one specific text, its structure does not enforce a unique reading. The complexity of text form and content demands re-reading anyway, and in doing so we will sometimes follow this structure, sometimes this one, until we arrive at a more or less coherent interpretation. How long and how vehemently will we defend that interpretation? That depends partly on what other readers have to tell us.

1.2. Context

With a book that leads to such diverse interpretations, one cannot ignore the context. This context is complex and plays a role at several levels. Wittgenstein's own characterisations of the *Tractatus* come from the introduction and from letters. Besides correspondence with Russell, Frege, Ramsey, Von Ficker, Engelman, among others,

8 See Luckhardt (1979: 94).
9 The tractatus.nl website supports linear reading and tree reading, among others. For a good overview of current insights, see Stern (2023).

there are the diaries (MS 101-3) in which Wittgenstein noted down experiences and philosophical thoughts.[10] Then there are the 1913 *Notes on Logic* and the notes made by Moore when he visited Wittgenstein in Norway in 1914. Finally, there is the *Prototractatus* (MS 104).

Almost every interpreter uses something from this context. The texts that Wittgenstein refers to or that helped him arrive at new insights — from Tolstoy, Frege, Russell, Schopenhauer, Kraus, Hertz, Boltzmann, and others, — expand that context even more.[11] And then there is the wider cultural context that shaped and influenced Wittgenstein's thinking in many ways.

Especially when one focuses on the ethical aspect of the *Tractatus*, correspondence and diaries play an important role. Consider, for example, the correspondence with Von Ficker or the diary MS 103. Also relevant then are Tolstoy's *Kurze Darlegung des Evangeliums*, which Wittgenstein says saved his life, and Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, which deeply affected him as a 16-year-old. But if we make use of such information, how and to what extent? Is the fact that Tolstoy was also influenced by Schopenhauer relevant? Can we use the Schopenhauer connection to compare Wittgenstein's ethics with Eastern ideas? There is the obvious danger of such readings becoming too speculative. But how does one determine where that boundary lies? Again, reflection on how interpretations are arrived at is of great importance.

Caution remains the order of the day. Wittgenstein compiled the final version of his book with great care, and his final choice from the available material should be guiding. But would he have made different choices if he had had all early material at hand when composing the book? Given Wittgenstein's strong ability to vary, this question is as justified as it is unanswerable. But that it arises in the first place partly indicates why this highly compressed text with an unambiguous structure and a complicated history has given rise to such sharply different interpretations over time.

[10] Much source material is available online, see: www.wittgensteinsource.org, wittfind.cis.uni-muenchen.de, www.nlx.com.
[11] See Klagge (2022) for a useful selection.

1.3. Perspective

And then there is the perspective of the reader, the interpreter. That, too, plays an important role, although this is not always recognised. For it is often assumed that a text has a unique, correct interpretation. That assumption fits well within the idea of philosophy as a rational activity, where consistency and validity are guiding principles. Yet, where uniqueness may be relevant when it comes to interpreting academic philosophy, it is precisely the influential works in philosophy that challenge this view. And the *Tractatus* is a prime example.

Arguments for and against an interpretation often refer, implicitly or explicitly, to the author's intention: interpretation is then a matter of ascertaining and testing the author's intention. In our view, a reconstruction of an author's intentions, although interesting in itself, is never decisive, precisely because the text is part of a written and unwritten context and derives its meaning also from that. And the perspective from which one approaches the text often does not coincide with that of the author.

Self-reflection of the interpreter is thus necessary: one can read the *Tractatus* as a logician, as a philosopher of language, as an ethicist, as a meta-philosopher, as a cultural historian, and each mode of reading involves considerations about what is or is not relevant, what does or does not count as a valid argument. None of these perspectives can claim absolute, unique correctness. Thus, different interpretations are not competitors, but rather partners.

In the remainder of this paper we use the main aspects of interpretation — text, context, perspective, — to understand how major differences in interpretation can arise. As an example, we take the role of ethics in an early resolute reading of Cora Diamond and in our own work.

2. Ethics

2.1. Ethics on a resolute reading

Currently, 'resolute reading' is a family term, covering many sophisticated distinctions and ramifications of some core ideas. There is no room to do justice to this variation here. We concentrate on the reading proposed by Cora Diamond in her article 'Ethics, imagination and the *Tractatus*' (1991) as an illustration of how ethics played a role in the early stages of resolute reading.

What characterises Diamond's reading? To begin with, Diamond bases herself mainly on the *Tractatus* text, and assumes that it should be roughly divided into two: there is a frame and there is the remaining framed text, with the frame indicating how the rest should be read.[12] A second principle is that the reader has an imagination that allows a certain kind of texts, which seem meaningful but are not, to be read *as if* they were meaningful. A third principle shows in Diamond's observation with regard to 6.54, namely that in this remark Wittgenstein establishes a direct relationship between himself and the reader:

> My remarks clarify so that he who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when with their help — by means of them — he has surmounted them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed it).
>
> He has to overcome these remarks, then he sees the world rightly.[13]

'My remarks', 'he who understands me', a writer cannot address his readers much more directly.

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[12] Diamond altered her view on to the distinction between frame and framed text in her later work, see Conant & Diamond (2004).

[13] Our translation of: "Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, daß sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie – auf ihnen – über sie hinausgestiegen ist. (Er muß sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.)

Er muß diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig."

Based on these three principles, a therapeutic reading emerges that brings one to the realisation: 'Aha, this is empty talk!' The therapy goes through the following steps. Initially, one reads the text like any other philosophical text; then one notices the frame; based on the remarks in the frame, one must conclude that the framed text can only be strict nonsense. Thus one is led to reflect on what the author intends with the framed nonsense. To see what an author intends with nonsense, one must see what he intends with meaningful language: being clear about meaning gives insight into the use of nonsense. Apparently, the author appeals to one's imagination and invites one to read the nonsense *as if* it has meaning. Based on this representation, one will realise that the framed text is not gibberish, but therapy; what we imagined turns into its opposite: seemingly deep philosophy evaporates into strict nonsense. One is enlightened and will not easily be tempted again to mistake nonsense for something else.

Within such a therapeutic view on the *Tractatus*, ethics can be little more than an extension of philosophical therapy; it is not the core of philosophy itself. Such an ethical extension is not based on a philosophical-ethical theory, with a characterisation of ethical judgements or with ethical maxims, because such would be as nonsensical as the logico-philosophical suggestions of the framed text. But neither is it an indirect, *ex negativo* characterisation of the ethical domain. Imagination is rather part of an ethical stance that can lead to self-insight and insight into our ethical judgements. Diamond suggests that reflection on stories or on art is more fruitful in this respect than reflection on philosophy, which, after all, cannot do justice to the richness of human existence.

2.2. Ethics as point of departure

Our interpretation is based on assumptions that differ substantially both from those of Diamond's resolute reading as well as from those of positivist or ultra-realist readings. First, we assume that the language of the *Tractatus* is embedded in everyday language, even if Wittgenstein sometimes stretches or refines the meaning of existing

concepts.[14] Second, we assume that ethics is at the heart of the views on world and life that Wittgenstein unfolds in his book. As Janik and Toulmin also argued: the *Tractatus* is an ethical deed.[15] Beyond the text, for which we rely on the *Kritische Edition*, we are mindful of the context in which the book originated. This is the bigger picture.[16]

For us, Wittgenstein's letter to Von Ficker, in which he argues that the crux of the *Tractatus* is ethical, is core.[17] Moreover, we argue that the ethical insights of the early Wittgenstein directly influenced his view of the nature and role of logic in our lives. In our view, the aim set by the book's introduction, viz., to clarify the limit of descriptive sense, is primarily ethically motivated.

The *Tractatus* moves from a clarification of world and applied logic, to a clarification of world and our lives here and now. The text makes clear that we must relate ethically to the world in which we find ourselves: world and life are one, and its ethical aspect is an inescapable dimension. Many Western philosophical traditions attempt to satisfy this ethical necessity in a rational way. One formulates ethical judgements, maxims, principles, which *via* rational deliberation serve as guides for action. Wittgenstein believes that this leaves the core of ethics untouched, even devalued.[18] Whether an action is ethically (in)correct cannot be captured in meaningful statements, it cannot be decided on the basis of rational considerations. To gain clarity on the ethical aspect of our daily lives, the boundary of the discursive must be determined from within. To this end, Wittgenstein indicates how we construct and use meaningful sentences as truth functions of elementary sentences in a semi-formal manner. Here it is crucial that logic is limited to ethically neutral truth-functionality.

The seven main remarks of the *Tractatus* clearly outline the steps in this process of clarification. We find ourselves in a world of describable facts. Thinking about this world consists of using meaningful sentences, themselves a kind of facts, as logical

[14] See Van der Does & Stokhof (2020) for more details.
[15] See Janik & Toulmin (1973: H.VI).
[16] For details see Stokhof (2002), Van der Does (2011), Stokhof (2018), Van der Does & Stokhof (2020).
[17] Wittgenstein's letter to Von Ficker can be found in Luckhardt (1979: 94-95).
[18] Thus attempts to find strict analogues between logic and ethics, as in De Mesel (2015, 2023), do not convince us.

models of contingent situations. According to Wittgenstein, these sentences can be reduced, while preserving meaning, to truth-functions of elementary signs, which correspond one-to-one to what appear within the logic of our language as elementary states of things.

Logic is always applied and ethically neutral: it shows the world of (possible) situations, of truth and falsehood, in which no ethical value can be found. Ethically, what matters most is that the basis of meaning is contingent. There are no necessary elements in the world that can be described and thought about. Facts are not intrinsically ethical; at most, they are tasks for arriving at an ethical stance. The contingency of what is the case shows us that ethical necessity must be sought elsewhere, in a perspective on the world that differs from the factual one. We must align our own wishes and actions with the 'will of the world', that totality of constantly changing contingencies. Ethics is an attitude that makes our life meaningful: the world of the happy one is a different one from the world of the unhappy, even if those worlds are factually the same.

3. Application

How do the major differences in the role of ethics in Diamond's early resolution interpretation and ours arise and how can they be compared? The approach outlined above should now prove its worth.

3.1. Diamond

Diamond's initial form of resolute reading seems to be a variant of close-reading: the text is central. Diamond does adopt a clear perspective: she allows herself to distinguish in the text a frame and a framed part, and to assume that people can read texts 'as if'. 6.54 is crucial here: this passage allows the reader to use text and a little context to figure out the author's intentions.

Diamond begins with a subtle observation regarding a use of personal pronouns in the text - 'he who understands me', - and ingeniously combines it with Wittgenstein's striking use of the word 'nonsense'.[19] One would expect her observation to be complemented by a systematic examination of the use of personal pronouns in the text. Is it not remarkable that there are dozens of other occurrences of, say, 'I' and 'we', especially in the remarks that Diamond later indicates should be taken as strict nonsense? In the *Tractatus*, the reader is addressed at the very beginning. According to the preface, he is supposed to have already thought the thoughts expressed in the book itself. What thoughts? There is no mention of a frame in the preface. One may wonder whether Diamond has consistently applied her interpretive principle.

Very important is Diamond's attention to Wittgenstein's paradoxical use of the word 'nonsense', which on the linear reading occurs just before the end of the text. For us, the value of her interpretation is that she forces us to take this paradoxical usage very seriously. An then the question arises: How unambiguous is this usage? In a wider context of interpretation, one might ask whether it also has a literary aspect. Modernists indeed emphasise the reflective aspect of the text that ultimately cancels itself out.[20] However, much more central to Viennese modernism is the quest for purity, with a keen eye for the unethical nature of ornament. We think the *Tractatus* stands in this tradition. Moreover, even if one understands 'nonsense' unambiguously, Diamond's position that extra-textually different kinds of nonsense can be distinguished (gibberish, therapeutic use,…), while intra-textually the heuristic is binary (nonsense = meaningless), is not evident. Why is usable nonsense impossible within the text, but not outside it? Again, we see an interpretive principle that does not seem to be consistently applied.

Imagination is a crucial part of Diamond's therapeutic process: once ‘as if’ gives way to ‘what is’ — our words, not Diamond's, — therapy is complete. Unfortunately,

[19] The observation on personal pronouns can also be found in Janik & Toulmin (1973), cf. its discussion of 6.54 near the end of Ch. VI.
[20] See, for example, Ware (2015).

Diamond does not reflect on this 'what is'. The importance of a clear view of meaning is endorsed but not offered. Also, the supposed 'as if' ability is not clarified philosophically.

Perhaps Diamond's interpretation is best read as a stand against a philosophy that does not do justice to the richness of the meaningful contact between writer and reader, from person to person.[21] In the case of the *Tractatus*, this makes sense, especially in relation to positivist or ultra-realist readings. More generally, the discursive mode in which much analytic philosophy operates appears mono-dimensional. But when one allows for other sources alongside the text, one can maintain that such a critical view of philosophy, especially that of Wittgenstein, is too restrictive. For him, there is no strict separation between fiction and philosophy, between world and life. Diamond suggests that reflection on stories, or on art, is more fruitful in this respect than reflection on philosophy, which, after all, cannot do justice to the richness of human existence, and that the value of ethics is found in such reflection. Diamond's article leaves unclear to us what that richness consists of, or why ethics is treated more benevolently than other themes in the *Tractatus*.

3.2. Our interpretation

Like Diamond, our interpretation centres on the text of the *Tractatus*, but we read it in the context of its genesis and make limited use of biographical information. We believe we can do so because we regard the content of Wittgenstein's correspondence as genuine and his biographers as sufficiently truthful.

The repercussions in his diaries of Wittgenstein's experiences at the front, his admiration for Kraus and for Tolstoy's *Kurze Darlegung*, his correspondence with Von Ficker, are for us part of the context that allows us to see the final remarks in the *Tractatus* as the culmination of the book rather than as an appendix. It is in this part of the text where world and life become one. Here we see clearly that ethics forces us to

[21] This also seems to be Diamond's take on other forms of philosophy, see Moyal-Sharrock (2012) for a critical overview.

map the limits of our descriptive and thinking capacities, and to show that language forms analogous to those of logic can neither capture ethics nor devalue it.

In our reading, the use of language plays a crucial role. Sensitised by Diamond's observations on the use of personal pronouns in the text, it is precisely the human, constructive element in the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein that strikes us. We make images of facts for ourselves (TLP 2.1). Indeed, what the *Tractatus* specifies are preconditions that concrete meaningful language must satisfy; it does not give a unique logical-metaphysical definition of it. Note that in such a 'usage reading' the distinction between intra- and extra-textual, which is so important for a resolute reading, blurs. Clarifying remarks require a different kind of language than descriptive sentences. In 6.54, a great-grandchild of 6 and itself a contribution to a clear view on meaning, explanatory remarks are Krausian-provocatively called 'nonsense': what, once mastered, has no further use can be discarded. At the same time, it also blocks a meta-logical reading and makes the limit of our discursive capacity very clear. Once the remarks in TLP have served their purpose, what remains is a different view on the world in which we find ourselves.

And thus our reading differs not only from that of the resolutes but also that of (ultra-)realists: the ontology of the *Tractatus* is not an ontology per se, but a characterisation of a discursive, factual perspective on reality, important and necessary, but not the only perspective possible.

4. In conclusion

We see interpretations as points in a space of possibilities, the results from choices made. Interpretation is a process in which we go through the available material along different routes, looking at it alternately in detail and from a distance, until we have found the starting points that we can dynamically develop into an interpretation that is sufficiently stable and gives us insight. An interpretation thus arrived at is undogmatic. There is always the possibility of adjusting or even abandoning an interpretation once

chosen on the basis of a renewed reading, or of insights provided by others. Applied to the *Tractatus*, the main question seems to be: How much philosophical substance does one allow after resolute reading, and of what nature is it? Here we could give no more than an outline of our answer, but we hope to have made clear why we still find the question meaningful.[22]

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