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Reviewed by Peter Hanks

Review: *The Early Wittgenstein on Metaphysics, Natural Science, Language and Value*, by Chon Tejedor

Peter Hanks

Chon Tejedor's aim in this thoughtful and stimulating book is to advance what she calls a "deflationary" reading of the *Tractatus*. She offers this as an alternative to the metaphysical, resolute, and elucidatory readings that have emerged in the New Wittgenstein debate. Like "anti-realist", or "empirical", "deflationary" is one of those nebulous philosophical words that can elicit equal parts excitement and frustration. Added to this is Tejedor's contention that her deflationary reading only emerges when we look beyond Wittgenstein's remarks on language and logic and consider the sections on solipsism, metaphysics, science, and ethics. These sections, especially those on solipsism (5.6–5.641) and ethics (6.4–6.45), are arguably the most impenetrable of the book. It's quite a daunting task she sets for herself—a new "deflationary" interpretation of Wittgenstein's method in the *Tractatus*, inspired by the most enigmatic sections of the book, that seeks to provide a unified vision of his early philosophy. I'm not sure she pulls it off, but she should be applauded for the attempt.

Tejedor's deflationary interpretation is perhaps best brought into focus by contrasting it with Marie McGinn's elucidatory reading (McGinn 2006; see also Hutto 2003). Like resolute readings (e.g., Diamond 1991; Conant 1991), the elucidatory reading rejects the suggestion that there is a metaphysical theory in the *Tractatus*, i.e., a theory of the structure of the world that provides a basis for representation in language and mind. But unlike the resolute reading, the elucidatory reading still maintains that there are positive philosophical views to be found in the *Trac-*

tatus. These views are not concerned with an independently constituted reality but with the internal workings of language. On McGinn's reading, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are aimed at clarifying how language functions. The metaphysical sounding pronouncements have to be seen through this language-first lens. The main task of the book is to clarify how names and sentences operate. Simple objects and states of affairs are something like metaphysical projections of these linguistic categories, which have no status independent of their roles as meanings (cf. Ishiguro 1969).

As Tejedor and others (Read and Hutchinson 2006) argue, the main difficulty for the elucidatory reading comes at 6.54, the lynchpin for the whole New Wittgenstein controversy. This is where Wittgenstein tells us that "my propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical". Like the resolute reading, McGinn wants nothing to do with ineffable thoughts that are somehow conveyed by the nonsense sentences of the *Tractatus*. The clarity brought about by studying the *Tractatus* should not be understood as coming to grasp inexpressible truths about the nature of language. Instead, "the proper expression of what we thus clearly see is our simply using signs correctly, that is, in our saying nothing except what can be said" (McGinn 2006, 253). That sounds good, but it is hard to shake the impression that the elucidatory reading is committed to ineffable truths about the nature of language. By working through the *Tractatus* we gain clarity about those truths. This clarity is made manifest, or "properly expressed", through our proper use of language, but it still looks to be, in the end, a matter of grasping inexpressible thoughts about how language functions.

I suspect that it was something like this dissatisfaction with McGinn's elucidatory reading that originally spurred Tejedor's interpretation (see the Acknowledgements, and p.6). Like McGinn, she wants to retain the idea that there are insights about language, thought, and logic to be found in the *Trac-*

tus. (I feel the same desire. The *Tractatus* is hard. Struggling with it has occasionally led me to moments of what feels like clarity about what Wittgenstein means by this or that remark. It is disheartening to hear from resolute readers that this hard-won clarity is an illusion—that in fact it’s all just gobbledygook.) The trouble is making good on this idea without a reversion to ineffable thoughts conveyed by nonsense.

Here, in outline, is Tejedor’s proposal. Our knowledge of language is a species of know-how. The sentences of the *Tractatus* are elucidations in the sense that they serve as *instructions*, with imperative force, for the meaningful use of words and sentences. Since these are instructions for doing something we already know how to do they can take the form of *reminders*. For example, on Tejedor’s reading, the remark “A picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false” (*TLP* 2.21) is a reminder “of the know-how already implicit in our everyday use of linguistic and mental signs” (p. 160). The purpose of these reminders is to fine-tune our linguistic abilities and steer us away from misguided attempts at philosophical theorizing.

Another role for the sentences of the *Tractatus* is to serve as puzzles that take the outward appearance of philosophical claims. These puzzles invite us to use our everyday practical linguistic abilities to make sense of them. The result of this exercise is to expose the claims as nonsense, or as empty tautologies, or as obvious falsehoods. One of Tejedor’s examples of this is the remark: “at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end” (*TLP* 6.431). This occurs in the middle of the ethical portion of the *Tractatus* in the 6.4s, and therefore looks as though it expresses an ethical insight. But when we “exercise our linguistic muscles” (p. 152), as Tejedor puts it, the claim turns out to be unstable and ambiguous. On one reading it is about the death of the willing subject—but the concept of the willing subject is incoherent, and so on this reading the entire remark dissolves

into nonsense (more on the willing subject below). On another reading the claim just means that at death one’s experience of the world comes to an end, which is tautologous and uninteresting. On yet another reading it means that the world ceases to exist when someone dies, which is obviously false. On no reading do we have something that makes sense and constitutes a substantive philosophical insight. The point of the exercise is, again, to help us overcome our philosophical urges and allow us to return to using language properly.

How is this “deflationary”? Well, it’s hard to say exactly, but here is my best attempt. In part it is that Tejedor’s reading declines to find any metaphysics in the *Tractatus*. But that is something her interpretation shares with the resolute and elucidatory readings. Tejedor’s deflationary interpretation attempts to go further, I think, through the idea that the remarks in the *Tractatus*, especially those on language and logic, are to be taken as instructions with imperative force. Instructions are not in the business of expressing truths. Tejedor can therefore avoid the specter of ineffable truths about language and representation that lingers around the elucidatory reading. A remark like “The picture represents a possible state of affairs in logical space,” (*TLP* 2.202) does not attempt to encode an ineffable insight into the relation between language and reality. It is rather a distillation, and reminder, of one facet of the practical ability we possess by virtue of being competent language users. On Tejedor’s reading, we *already* know everything contained in the *Tractatus*, we just need to be reminded of this know-how, and urged not to transgress it. One can see how this would deflate the surface pretensions of the *Tractatus*.

Stepping back a bit, Tejedor’s interpretive line sees the *Tractatus* as engaging readers in a dialectical exchange, somewhat like a Socratic dialogue, with the purpose of exposing and overcoming the impulse to produce nonsense. This sits well with Wittgenstein’s remark about the “right method of philosophy”:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method. (*TLP* 6.53, quoted by Tejedor on p. 159)

Tejedor finds an ethical aspect in this method. Wittgenstein once wrote that “the point of the book is an ethical one” (in a 1919 letter to the publisher Ludwig Ficker, quoted by Tejedor on p. 139). On Tejedor’s reading, the ethical purpose of the *Tractatus* is served by helping us hone our linguistic abilities, where those abilities implicitly contain an appreciation of the contingency of facts (“Any one [fact] can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remains the same,” *TLP* 1.21). Reinforcing that appreciation brings about an ethical orientation to the world:

Being clear in one’s grasp of what is essential to pictures involves being disposed to use signs in particular ways so as to reflect the fundamental contingency of facts; but this involves treating *ourselves* (*i.e.* human beings) as facts on a par, with respect to their contingency, with all other facts in the world. For Wittgenstein, using signs in such a way as to reflect that we (empirical selves) are exactly on a par with all other facts in the world *is* displaying an ethical attitude to the world. Being clear—hence, avoiding the illusion of absolute control—*is* having an ethical attitude of wonder at the fundamental contingency of the world. (p. 148)

That’s as good an attempt as any I have seen of making sense of the ethical point of the *Tractatus*. There is definitely “a flavour of mysticism” here, as Russell put it (in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Dec. 20, 1919, quoted by Tejedor on p. 140). It also helps one see why Tejedor thinks that the overall method of the book only comes into focus when one considers the remarks on ethics.

The sections on solipsism (5.6–5.641) also play an important role in Tejedor’s interpretation. In fact, the two chapters on solipsism form the centerpiece of her book. Chapter 2, “Dissolving the Subject”, is largely negative, arguing against various ways of understanding the 5.6s, including Russellian, Schopenhauerian, and Machian interpretations of Wittgenstein’s attitude to solipsism. The main lesson of the chapter, however, is to reject as incoherent two different notions of the self, the “thinking subject” and the “willing subject”. (Both of these notions are mentioned explicitly in the *Notebooks*, only the former in the *Tractatus*.) The thinking subject is something like the subject of Russell’s multiple relation theory of judgment, an active, cognitive entity capable of making judgments. The willing subject is either a transcendental condition on the possibility of representation or a personification of the perspective from which representation of the world takes place. Tejedor argues that Wittgenstein regarded all of these notions of the self as incoherent mixtures of psychological/empirical and philosophical considerations. Regarding the thinking subject, it is crucial to this notion that one thinking subject can be individuated from another (my thinking self is different from yours), and in that sense the thinking subject is object-like and empirical. On the other hand, the thinking subject is not a possible object of acquaintance—it is not in the field of vision, as it were—and in that sense is non-object-like. Regarding the willing subject, both the transcendental and perspectival versions of this notion are part of an ill-conceived attempt at describing the mechanisms through which representation is made possible. This mixes together a philosophical search for the conditions on the possibility of language and thought with a psychological/empirical search for the causal basis of representation. But as Wittgenstein tells us quite clearly, “psychology is no nearer related to philosophy, than is any other natural science” (*TLP* 4.1121).

These arguments against the thinking and willing subjects occupy a key place in Tejedor’s larger interpretation of the method

and goals of the *Tractatus*. Seeing how the notions of the thinking and willing subject incoherently combine philosophy and psychology clarifies for her how Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy. Philosophy should not be in the business of describing mechanisms. That is what psychology and the other natural sciences are for. The proper role for philosophy is clarificatory. "The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity." (TLP 4.112). On Tejedor's view, we can only get clear about this sort of remark by understanding Wittgenstein's views about the self.

What remains of solipsism, then, after the rejection of the thinking and willing subjects? We know that Wittgenstein accepts some form of solipsism in the *Tractatus*: "in fact, what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself," (TLP 5.62). On Tejedor's account, this form of solipsism concerns what Wittgenstein variously calls the "metaphysical subject", the "philosophical I", and "my world". What is the metaphysical subject? Tejedor's discussion here becomes somewhat tortuous, but she settles on the view that the metaphysical subject is the totality of possible thoughts. In other words, I (in the philosophical sense) am the totality of thoughts that are possible for me. Wittgenstein's expression of solipsism, "the world is my world" (TLP 5.641), then amounts to the claim that the world is the totality of possible thoughts. Reading "the world" in a modal sense to mean the totality of possibilities, Tejedor arrives at the view that "the world is my world" means that the totality of possibilities is the totality of possible thoughts. Furthermore, when this claim is properly understood it will be recognized as an insubstantial tautology.

As I mentioned earlier, the remarks on solipsism are impenetrable. Tejedor deserves great credit for taking them head-on. Has she solved the puzzle? I don't know. This short section of the *Tractatus* is extraordinarily complicated and telegraphic. One thing I wish Tejedor had done more of is to relate her interpretation to the connection Wittgenstein draws between solipsism

and "the fact that no part of our experience is also a priori" (TLP 5.634). This remark enters her discussion by way of bolstering her contention that Wittgenstein recognizes no a priori distinction between intrinsically and non-intrinsically representational facts (pp. 81–82). But in 5.634 Wittgenstein rejects *all* a priori knowledge, not just an a priori distinction between two kinds of representations. He is gesturing at a general connection between solipsism and the absence of a priori knowledge. It was disappointing to have this intriguing connection largely passed over.

There are other problems. Some of the difficulties she raises for alternative readings can be redirected at her own view. Tejedor complains against metaphysical readings that they cannot accommodate the overwhelmingly negative tone that Wittgenstein takes toward nonsense (p. 4). This tells against the notion of illuminating nonsense relied on by the metaphysical reading. But on Tejedor's own reading, many of the nonsense remarks in the *Tractatus* are instructions for the proper use of language. Surely such instructions have some positive value. Why, then, the negative tone about nonsense? Regarding McGinn's elucidatory reading, Tejedor asks "why the process of the *Tractatus* should result in these elucidatory propositions ultimately revealing themselves as nonsensical, rather than simply retaining their positive status as elucidations" (p. 6). The very same question can be turned on her account. Why should instructions reveal themselves as nonsense, instead of retaining their positive status as instructions? Here's Tejedor:

The propositions of the *Tractatus* have a purpose to serve for as long as we continue to be drawn towards metaphysics and towards a confused approach to logic, representation and ethics. Once we overcome this pull, however, the propositions of the *Tractatus* no longer have a function: they become redundant, that is, *purposeless*. I suggest that it is at *this* point that they become nonsensical. (p. 162)

But instructions don't lose their purpose once they've been followed. Furthermore, this line of reasoning could be used to argue that any sense-bearing proposition that has ever been used is nonsense. The purpose of senseful propositions is to represent states of affairs. Suppose I construct a proposition and thereby represent a state of affairs. Hasn't the proposition then served its purpose? After I've used it, doesn't the proposition become redundant? If that makes it nonsense, then everything anyone has ever said is nonsense.

But I raise these problems only half-heartedly. I don't think they ought to detract from the value and interest of Tejedor's book. The remark at 6.54, where Wittgenstein throws away the ladder, has taken on an outsized importance in current *Tractatus* scholarship. Interpretations of the *Tractatus* are now judged on the single point of how well they accommodate this remark. I think Tejedor's account falls short in this regard, but it would be unfortunate if the whole book were to be judged on this basis. She has many illuminating things to say about some of the most difficult parts of the *Tractatus*—and not just solipsism and ethics. A significant portion of the book is devoted to Wittgenstein's early views about causation and the natural sciences. I haven't been able to give this part of the book its due, but it is excellent, and in fact crucial for Tejedor's deflationary reading. Overall, the book contains many valuable and thought-provoking discussions of parts of the *Tractatus* that are often neglected. Reading her book has made these parts seem less hopelessly formidable to me. That is reason enough for me to recommend it highly.

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