



Wittgenstein's 1913 Objections To Russell's Theory of Belief: A Dialectical Reading

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ABSTRACT: In what follows, I give (following Burton Dreben) a dialectical reading of his dismissal of metaphysics and of Wittgenstein's objections to Russell in 1913. I argue that Wittgenstein must be read as advocating no particular theory or doctrine — that is, philosophy is an activity and not a body of truths. Furthermore, this insistence is thoroughgoing. Put differently, a dialectical reading must be applied to one's own thought and talk. Characteristically, this sort of dialectical philosophy begins with the question, *Is there any definiteness to what I am doing in my own thinking and speaking?* Such a question undercuts the easy assumption that what we are doing may be expressed in a body of meaningful statements. In particular, I argue that Wittgenstein does not advocate any particular theory of language. A common reading of Wittgenstein is that he aims to prevent us from misusing language. This view assumes that, for Wittgenstein, the notion of a correct, acceptable or meaningful use of language may be taken for granted. In my view, Wittgenstein does not take the notions of use of language and grammar and its misuse for granted. For Wittgenstein grammar underdetermines what it is to use or misuse language. I argue that an ethical critique is implicit in Wittgenstein's objections to any attempt to speak a priori about language and thought.

Distrust of grammar is the first requisite of philosophizing. *Notebooks*, p. 106.

The purpose of my talk this afternoon is to make clear what I shall call, following Burton Dreben, a dialectical reading of Wittgenstein's dismissal of metaphysics in the context of his pre-*Tractatus* objections to Russell's 1913 theory of belief.

The earliest letters to Russell by Wittgenstein read naturally as presentations or proposals, to be read straightforwardly, as they stand. In this spirit, many authors interpret Wittgenstein as rejecting Russell. s attempts to talk about the structure of language and facts, and, further, as insisting that any attempt to state the limits of language is itself nonsense. On such a reading, Wittgenstein is reacting to Russell. s realist attempts to analyze the structure of facts into constituents and the structure of propositions into names by eliminating certain apparent symbols. Wittgenstein relegates their pseudo-uses to what is shown in the use of propositions. Ricketts writes:

....Russell takes relations to be a type of thing — they are constituents of facts, objects of acquaintance, and the designata of names....So conceived, Wittgenstein rejects the reality of relations, Russell's most cherished ontological thesis. Relations are not things, are not entities; relations cannot be labeled or designated. Unlike "a" and "b", "R" is not a symbol in "aRb". Instead, roughly put, the holding of a relation over objects is symbolized by the holding of a relation over names of those objects. (1) (Number 1 on your handout)

To be sure, Wittgenstein (2) specifically says that:

Symbols are not what they seem to be. In "aRb" "R" looks like a substantive but is not one. What symbolises in "aRb" is that R occurs between *a* and *b*. Hence 'R' is *not* the indefinable in "aRb"....This is the first thing that indicates that there *may* not be logical constants. *Notebooks*, p. 98. (Number 2 on your handout)

This same distinction between what can be *shewn* by the language but not *said*, explains the difficulty that is felt about types — e.g., as to the difference between things, facts, properties, relations. That M is a *thing* can. t be *said*; it is nonsense: but *something* is *shewn* by the symbol "M".

...Therefore a THEORY of *types* is impossible. It tries to say something about the types when you can only talk about the symbols. But *what* you say about the symbols is not that this symbol has that type, which would be nonsense for [the] same reason: but you say simply: *this* is the symbol, to prevent a misunderstanding. E.g., in "aRb", "R" is *not* a symbol, but *that* "R" is between one name and another symbolises. Here we have *not* said: this symbol is not of this type but of that, but only: *this* symbolises and not that. ... *Notebooks*, p. 109. (Number 3 on your handout)

These views can be traced back to Wittgenstein's letters to Russell in 1912 and 1913:

Logic is still in the melting pot but one thing gets more and more obvious to me: the prop[ositions] of Logic contain ONLY APPARENT variables and whatever may turn out to be the proper explanation of apparent variables its consequence *must* be that there are NO *logical* constants. *Notebooks*, p. 120. (Number 4 on your handout)

...I have changed my views on "atomic" complexes: ...I think there cannot be different Types of things! In other words whatever can be symbolized by a simple proper name must belong to one type. And further: every theory of types must be rendered superfluous by a proper theory of symbolism.... *Notebooks*, p. 121. (Number 5 on your handout)

On the basis of these and other remarks, Wittgenstein is commonly read as a philosopher who aims to prevent us from misusing language by using nonsense to point to a correct understanding of our symbolism. On such a reading, to correctly understand the logic of our language is to see one's own metaphysical talk as nonsensical. To view Wittgenstein as resisting Russell's realism by insisting on a correct understanding of the logic of our language, of what can be said and what is shown is to assume that Wittgenstein took for granted a notion of the uses and misuses of language. That is, Wittgenstein can subscribe to an unsayable doctrine of misuses and uses of language, only if he assumes that what it is to use or misuse language is settled. Thus Ricketts, as we saw, attributes to Wittgenstein the view that: "Relations are not things, are not entities; relations cannot be labeled or designated". (3)

I suggest a different interpretation. I argue that Wittgenstein is not to be read as advocating a theory of language, or of philosophical misuses of language. To begin with, I ask, *Can* the view attributed to Wittgenstein by Ricketts and others prevent philosophical nonsense? The nonsense with which Wittgenstein is concerned, philosophical nonsense, is *prima facie* grammatical and thus not *obviously* nonsensical. On the view I am attributing to Wittgenstein, his point is that grammar, the appearance of sense, underdetermines what it is to misuse language. There is no fixed category of nonsense, of philosophical misuses of language. Nevertheless, we do sometimes engage in philosophical nonsense. That is, it seems to me that it is Wittgenstein's fundamental insight is that nonsense is not a characteristic of some language use, as though there were certain words and phrases which themselves were to be rejected, but rather Wittgenstein holds that nonsense is relative to particular desires to use words in a certain ways in a particular contexts.

On my dialectical reading, Wittgenstein does not take for granted a notion of what it is to misspeak in the sense that might enable him to *mean*, though he cannot say, that "Relations are not things, are not entities; relations cannot be labeled or designated." We must instead read his remarks dialectically. By that I mean, we must read Wittgenstein's response to Russell's theory of types and belief to be advocating no particular theory or doctrine (e.g., insisting that philosophy is an activity and not a body of truths) in such a way that this insistence is seen as thoroughgoing — that is, as applying to his own thought and talk. What is characteristic of this sort of dialectical philosophy is its beginning with the question, Is there any definiteness to what I am doing in my own thinking and speaking? in such a way as to undercut one's sense that what we are doing may be expressed in a body of meaningful statements.

Wittgenstein will say in the *Notebooks*, "For the very reason that a bit of language is nonsensical, it is still possible to go on using it — see the last remark." (4) As I see it, the force and aims of Wittgenstein's remarks are constantly being held in question by him. That is, Wittgenstein's remarks are to be read as questioning the attempt to give a philosophical theory as though we could take our starting point for granted and proceed straightforwardly with assertions. I read Wittgenstein as reacting to Russell and his doctrines for aiming to prevent nonsense, because he, Wittgenstein, presupposes no such definiteness concerning Russell's or his own philosophical misuses of language. His own remarks engage in addressing what is false in a philosophical approach to nonsense — when for example, in the *Notes on Logic*, Wittgenstein insists that were we to try and use false propositions to say something true, they would then be true, not false (5) — while undercutting that what he, Wittgenstein, is doing is asserting a(n unsayable) doctrine.

I am suggesting that many of the ordinary assumptions we bring to bear in reading a philosophical text of the early Wittgenstein no longer hold, especially those expectations that bear on how we are to understand the connection between philosophy and the value of life. Wittgenstein's remarks must be read as embodying a sense of the value of life and its connection to philosophy that is entirely alien in spirit to a Russellian or Fregean context of interests and aims.

For Russell, the happy man is not the man of instinct but rather the philosopher whose life is deepened by grappling with great subjects and uncertain answers. (6) In contrast, Wittgenstein writes, "I am either happy or unhappy; that is all." (7) "In order to live happily I must be in 'agreement with the world.' And that is what "being happy" means." (8) I take these comments as vehicles intended to question and reconstrue the status and force we, as philosophers, attribute to remarks about happiness, value, and philosophy — e.g., that there is something that makes us happy or unhappy and that connects philosophy to the value of life — while taking the apparent form of philosophical assertions.

On this reading, Wittgenstein's addresses not so much Russell's doctrine as Russell the man, that is, the conception Russell has of how his activity of doing philosophy is related to understanding. Their confrontation has the sense of going deeply into what is highly personal because Wittgenstein's objections *are* personal: they expose deep differences between Russell and Wittgenstein on how value enters in life, and is connected to philosophy.

Wittgenstein's disdain for Russell's willingness to argue for the value of philosophy, as something extrinsic to it that adds worth, is not incidental here. I read, for the sake of its irony, what Russell writes to Ottoline on March 12, 1912:

He [Wittgenstein] abominates ethics and morals generally; he is deliberately a creature of impulse, and thinks one should be. What he disliked about my last chapter [in the *Problems of Philosophy*] was saying philosophy has *value*; he says people who like philosophy will pursue it, and others won't, and there's an end to it. His strongest impulse is philosophy. I won't answer for his technical morals.

When he left me I was strangely excited by him. I love him and feel he will solve the problems I am too old to solve — all kinds of vital problems that are raised by my work, but want a fresh mind and the vigour of youth. He is *the* young man one hopes for.... (9)

Notes

(1) Thomas Ricketts, "Pictures, Logic and the Limits of Sense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", in Sluga and Stern, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, p. 72.

(2) References are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, second edition. Ed. G.H. vonWright and G. E. M. Anscombe and with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961).

(3) Ricketts, "Pictures, Logic and the Limits of Sense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", p. 72. Note that Ricketts continues: "But this way of talking is itself misleading for its use of "object" and "relation" as a contrasting pair of common nouns." In contrast, I claim that what Wittgenstein sees as misleading is the tone of assertion we attribute to philosophical remarks.

(4) *Notebooks*, p. 50.

(5) *Notebooks*, p.

(6) *Problems of Philosophy*, p. 153-161.

(7) *Notebooks*, p. 74.

(8) *Notebooks*, p. 75.

(9) [Selected Letters, ed. by N. Griffin, p. 419.] I am grateful to Matt Ostrow for reminding me of this passage.

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