


5-2020

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Elucidation and the Solipsism of the Tractatus

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Honors Program Thesis

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May 2020

Abstract

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*TLP*) of 1921, Ludwig Wittgenstein presents his metaphysical account of the logical structure of the world and language. He aims to establish the possibility of the connection between “pictures” of the world—including linguistic constructions as sentences—and the constituent elements of the world. The account Wittgenstein promotes yields, by his own admission, a form of solipsism. Underlying the difficulties in interpreting the details of Wittgenstein’s solipsism (which he does little to explicate), there is a fundamental tension between solipsism of any sort and a metaphysical account that relies on language, something which seems essentially shared and public, and which, according to Wittgenstein, is conditioned by convention. My language is something that I receive from and refine in discourse *with others*. In what way is this compatible with solipsism? The resolution or principled dismissal of Solipsism is quite important for a thorough understanding of the *Tractatus*, yet this has not been discovered. In light of what little has been said about Wittgenstein’s solipsism, I present a new framing of the relevant issues, without venturing a conclusive answer to the confounding dilemma. Rather, I consider the ways in which different interpretations of Wittgenstein’s solipsism can be fruitfully set into relief. Furthermore, I bring Wittgenstein’s conception of elucidation (*Erläuterung*) to bear on the interpretations of his solipsism, for it clarifies the problems at hand.

Elucidation and the Solipsism of the Tractatus

“What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world! ... What others in the world have told me about the world is a very small and incidental part of my experience of the world...” (*Notebooks* 82).

These words, written in 1916, articulate with great exuberance a central feature of the metaphysical worldview promoted by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the first phase of his philosophical endeavors. In his emphatic “Mine is the first and only world!” one finds a succinct expression of the solipsism built into his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (henceforth “the Tractatus” in text and *TLP* in citations, in keeping with tradition) of 1921.¹

On the one hand, discussion of solipsism makes up but a small part of the work. Most of the Tractatus is devoted to explicating and elaborating the specific structure of his metaphysical atomism, philosophy of language, and the connection between the world and representations of it, especially those that are found in language. The lack of literature on the solipsism of the Tractatus mirrors this disparity in emphasis. On the other hand, the solipsistic attitude is understood by some to be integral to Tractarian metaphysics (Hacker 81; Pears 79-80). On this view, the passages on solipsism in the Tractatus (and, to a lesser extent, his notebooks from 1914-1916) are fundamental to the situating of will and meaning in Wittgenstein’s account; an understanding and incorporation of these passages is, therefore, rather necessary.

Just how significant is solipsism to the Tractatus? Perhaps it is, as some have suggested, a consequence of his metaphysical account that is in some ways inconvenient and cumbersome, but necessary nonetheless. In the words of Pears: “It is true that he uses the language of

¹ When citing the Tractatus in this paper, I will also obey tradition by citing the proposition number and nothing more, e.g. “(4.002).”

Schopenhauer. But he is putting new wine into old bottles, and he is characteristically reticent about its effect on them. His theory of representation is essentially realist” (77). Whatever understanding is correct, these issues in interpretation are interesting and important. Primarily, these issues in interpreting the solipsistic worldview expressed in the *Tractatus* make obvious the need for abundant clarity on 1) how Wittgenstein understood the term *solipsism* and 2) how that which is entailed in his understanding of solipsism connects with the basic mechanics of his metaphysics and theory of language as expressed in the first part of the work. Really, (1) is a historical matter, and perhaps a psychological matter, regarding what a certain person thought at a certain time. In dealing with this matter, an understanding of the *Tractatus* itself is essential; nonetheless, it probably would (and undoubtedly should) be informed by consideration of his influences and proclivities in and beyond writing the *Tractatus*, and even beyond his philosophical work. In the present paper, I will set aside these issues for the most part. My focus will be clarifying in some detail how, exactly, the features of the solipsism expressed in the *Tractatus* fit into its metaphysics and philosophy of language. Specifically, I intend to address and clarify—without venturing a definitive conclusion—the difficult tension between an understanding of language as something which arises from convention practiced in discourse with other subjects and, conversely, a solipsism that takes issue with the very concept *other subjects*. An examination of the role of elucidation (*Erläuterung*) in the *Tractatus* facilitates my considerations on this front.

Solipsism as a philosophical position has a rich and strange history, often received with a good deal of confusion and contempt. To many, it seems too absurd to be entertained in the first place. Of course, it is imperative to determine what, exactly, is asserted in solipsism, and this

must be determined case-by-case; not all solipsism is the same. Since the term broadly delineates a philosophical position or positions that include some or all of the following:

1. *Denial of the accessibility of other subjects' representations.* I cannot access or characterize the representations of the world brought about in other subjects.
2. *Denial of the existence of other subjects' representations or understandings.* Any conception of a representation or understanding of the world that is not my own is solely derived from my conception of my own representations.²
3. *Denial of the existence of other willing subjects.* Any conception of a will that is not my own is solely derived from my conception of my own will.
4. *Denial of the metaphysical relevance of other subjects' wills, if such things exist.* The limits of the world and the limits of my representations of the world are necessarily and exclusively linked.
5. *Denial of the semantic-metaphysical relevance of other subjects' wills.* The possibility of meaning or sense being imparted to representations of the world depends entirely on the exercising of *my* will and none others.

Some of these claims entail one or more of the others. If (2) is the case, then (1) must follow: if other subjects' representations do not exist, then they are inaccessible. If (3) is the case, then (4) and (5) must follow: if there are no willing subjects besides myself, then they must be irrelevant.

The Tractatus explicitly asserts (4) and (5). (1), (2), and (3) follow obviously from it says. “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (5.6). “The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) means

² I such a case it would probably make sense to deny that the ostensible “subjects” are subjects in the first place; if they do not represent, then they are not subjects *of* anything.

the limits of *my* world” (5.62). “The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (5.632). “What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that ‘the world is my world’” (5.641). “If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language” (6.43).

These quotes are clear in their intent. There is one metaphysical subject; *I* am that subject. The limits of the language which the metaphysical subject (*I*) can understand determine the limits of that subject’s world, which is *the* world. Furthermore, the world and language are limited by the will of the subject. The only meaningful language is the language which the metaphysical subject can understand, a language that is coterminous with the limits of the world, a world whose limits are restricted by the exercise of the subject’s will.

This is radical, and it might be surprising that its connection with the rest of the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* is not made very clear in the work. In the coming pages, it should become clear that this lack of specification is likely important consequence of the nature of the *Tractatus* as a work of elucidation (*Erläuterung*). However, we should still like to know the general context in which the solipsism is developed, and why. This ends up being an issue of interpretation.

On the one hand, it seems that there is no room for any representing subjects in the world depicted by the *Tractatus*, and this is what motivates solipsism. According to Pears, “The simple point on which Wittgenstein’s assessment of solipsism rests is that the word “ego” is not the name of an identifiable object...” (74). This is an extension of an important passage in the *Tractatus* that motivates the denial of the possibility of apperception and the denial of the unity of consciousness: “It is clear, however, that ‘A believes that *p*,’ ‘A has the thought *p*,’ and ‘A says *p*’ are of the form “*p*” says *p*’: and this does not involve a correlation of a fact with an

object, but rather the correlation of facts by means of the correlations of their objects” (5.542). Here, Wittgenstein does not argue directly against the possibility of the ego as an identifiable object. Rather, he shows that there is no reason to endorse the existence of psychologically unified egos. “Only a fact can represent a state of affairs,” and the facts that do serve this function in ‘A believes that *p*,’ ‘A has the thought *p*,’ and ‘A says *p*’ are thoughts and sentences; the ego does not represent (Hacker 84-85). “The mind or self *A* is not an object, but a complex array of psychical elements” (Hacker 85). There is no room for empirical egos, unless all that is meant by *ego* is the conceptually impoverished *bundle of beliefs, bundle of thoughts, bundle of sentences, etc.*

Wittgenstein reserves *ego* for application elsewhere. The ego plays an essential role, not as an entity in the world but something that gives sense to potential representations.³ “In the *Tractatus*, meaning is conferred by the pure will, the pure will of the extra-mundane solipsistic metaphysical self” (Kenny 147). Sense, then, also appears to be extra-mundane, but not entirely. Sense is only expressed by way of facts (in the world). “A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol” (3.32). What cannot be perceived is its sense, the result of the intentional willing of the metaphysical ego.

I have depicted in a general and preliminary fashion how the solipsism of the *Tractatus* fits into the rest of the work’s metaphysics. Now I wish to bring to bear a significant concern. If (1), (2), or (3) from the list above do follow from what is expressed in the work, Tractarian solipsism runs the risk of nullifying the very position it asserts in asserting it. A looming condemnation of any account that denies the knowability or existence of other subjects and their representations or

³ Really, it cannot be called “something” at all; to be a thing is to be in the world on the Tractarian view.

will is that, if the denial is true, the denial itself might end up meaningless. More specifically, sentences that deny the existence of the referents of the names in the sentence might be devoid of meaning. This is the problem of empty proper names, a problem that famously concerned Russell before and after the *Tractatus*. Of course, it is a major issue in the *Tractatus* as well. Fundamental to the work's central project is determining under what conditions parts of sentences can succeed in referring to objects, and determining under what conditions a sentence as a whole can succeed in representing a fact or state of affairs. Whether or not Tractarian solipsism is compatible with the Tractarian theory of names, representation, and sense is what I will now consider.

Briefly put, the *Tractatus* accounts for names in the following way: "A name means [bedeutet] an object. The object is its meaning [Bedeutung]" (3.203). The meaning of a name comes from its success in referring; its success in referring has to do with the sense of the name, which is established by its use: "If a sign is useless [nicht gebraucht], it is meaningless [bedeutungslos]" (3.328).

The Tractarian account of fully-formed sentences takes sentences to be built from signs but to be essentially different in what and how they represent. The meaning of sentences is dependent on the ability of the parts of the sentence to refer. "The possibility of [sentences] [Satzes] is based on the principle that objects have signs as their representatives" (4.0312). "To understand a [Satz] is to understand what is the case if it is true" (4.024). A *Satz* represents a state of affairs, and does so because "the logical form of the represented state-of-affairs parallels, but is not identical with, the form of the sentence-fact" (Black 120). Just as the state of affairs has objects as its basic constituents, the representing sentence has the signs of objects—names—as its basic symbolic components. Since the sentence and the state of affairs have analogous

logical form, the parts of the sentence fall together in such a way that they can represent the way in which the parts of the state of affairs falls together.

With this in mind, sentences involving names that do not correspond to objects in the world might suffer meaninglessness. But this is not guaranteed. Certain sentences have the unique standing as *elucidations* [Erläuterung]. Elucidations feature in the Tractatus, in part because the rendering of certain sentences as elucidations is the only way the Tractatus can save itself from being nonsensical. Wittgenstein makes it clear that the overarching project of the Tractatus is, strictly speaking, impossible. “What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language” (4.121). “What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said” (4.1212). “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (7). Yet, much of the Tractatus is a series of propositions about language. The Tractatus is, it seems, an account *in* metalanguage. If the work is to be of any use at all, this deep tension has to be explained and pardoned. Sure enough: just when he condemns the work, he resurrects it:

“My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” (6.54).

We are to understand elucidation (Erläuterung) as occurring in sentences that have sense in virtue of their use as tools for understanding, a use very distinct from *use as reference*. Yet it seems that we should of these two “uses” as having something in common. Both elucidations and names have sense in virtue of how people use them. “What signs fail to express, their application shows. What signs slur over, their application says clearly” (3.262). This goes for primitive or simple signs—names—and sentential signs, of which elucidations are special cases.

As tools, however, elucidations are to be set aside once one comes to understand what they show, despite the purported impossibility of saying what they attempt to say. This understanding of elucidation seems to be rather similar to what Wittgenstein's predecessor Gottlob Frege expresses in *Logic in Mathematics* of 1914. The similarity is illuminating. On Frege's view:

“Science needs technical terms that have precise and fixed *Bedeutungen* (references/meanings), and in order to come to an understanding about these *Bedeutungen* and exclude possible misunderstandings, we provide elucidations. Of course in so doing we have again to use ordinary words, and these may display defects similar to those which the elucidations are intended to remove. So it seems that we shall then have to provide further elucidations. Theoretically one will never really achieve one's goal in this way. In practice, however, we do manage to come to an understanding about the *Bedeutungen* of words. Of course, we have to count on a meeting of minds, on others' guessing what we have in mind. But all this precedes the construction of a system and does not belong within a system” (Frege 313).

According to both Frege and Wittgenstein, elucidation is essentially practical. For Frege, it is a way to refine one's understanding of names by gradually pinning down a word's precise and fixed *Bedeutung*.⁴ They differ, however, in that the *Tractatus* extends the utility of elucidation to also facilitate understanding concepts without referents in the world. In line with Frege, Wittgenstein states: “The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known” (3.263). Primitive signs are impossible to define, but

⁴ Frege's conception of elucidation here differs from his “leading by hints” in *Concept and Object of*

they are still signs that sit squarely in the object language. However, on Wittgenstein's view, *all* names are primitive signs; definition does not “dissect [a name] any further” (3.26). Furthermore, what he asserts at 6.54 suggests that elucidation can also help us understanding sentences that strain the object language. “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them.” So, according to the *Tractatus*, all names (for objects), name-like signs in metalanguage, and sentential signs in metalanguage require elucidation. We could summarize the comparison as follows: for both Wittgenstein and Frege, the mechanism—elucidation—is the same, but the targets differ. The target can be primitive and/or indefinable signs with referents in the world (for both Frege and Wittgenstein) or primitive and/or indefinable signs without referents in the world (for Wittgenstein).⁵

Both accounts converge once again when it comes to how elucidation happens. It is only through “the meeting of minds,” through attempting to use and observing usage in discourse, that one comes to understand indefinable signs. It is clear in the quote from Frege that I offer above. In the *Tractatus*, the basis of elucidation in use and convention is explicit throughout. “In order to recognize a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense” (3.326). “If a sign is *useless*, it is meaningless” (3.328). “What signs fail to express, their application shows” (3.262). “Our arbitrary conventions” give meaning to the “parts” of propositions (3.315). The understanding of everyday language depends on “tacit conventions” (4.002). “The meaning of simple signs (words) must be explained to us if we are to understand them” (4.026). The sense of signs is based in usage, and meaning is discovered through elucidation.

⁵ All primitive signs are indefinable, but not all indefinable signs are necessarily primitive.

On this view, people are necessary for discovering the meaning of the language we use. More precisely, we use language with other people, and in so doing learn the arbitrary assignment of meaning to the signs in language. Here I set aside Frege and turn to the *Tractatus* and its solipsism. The concept *elucidation* is a way out of the original predicament that seemed to face solipsism. One can deny the existence of other subjects and/or their representations and/or their wills; one can deny the accessibility of other subjects and/or their representations and/or wills. In any of these cases the denial can still be informative as an elucidation, despite the lack of the signs' successful reference. This should offer substantial clarity to the otherwise mysterious assertion "...what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest" (5.62). What solipsism means makes itself manifest in elucidation.

Unfortunately, this solution brings about a larger problem. Wittgenstein has made it clear that elucidation works when people talk. Meaning is rooted in convention, and convention in language is nothing other than how people tend to use words and sentences. I do not learn how a sign is used if I do not "observe how it used with a sense" (3.326); what I am observing is, of course, how *other people* use it with a sense. The problem: how can sentences expressing solipsism meaningfully endorse skepticism about other subjects while also being entirely dependent on other subjects for their meaning, as elucidations?

It must be admitted that the *Tractatus* does not offer a clear resolution to this problem. As in the issue of empty names that I note above, the problem only comes about if the solipsistic attitudes (1), (2), or (3) are contained in Tractarian solipsism, and none of the three are stated explicitly. Therefore, this becomes a matter of interpretation. In order to see how much of an issue is present in a solipsism that depends on intersubjectivity, it must be determined if the irrelevance of other metaphysical subjects, their representations, and their wills expressed in (4)

and (5) does, in fact, suggest their *inaccessibility*. And it must be determined if the irrelevance of other metaphysical subjects, their representations, and their wills expressed in (4) and (5) does, in fact, suggest their *nonexistence*.

My tentative answer is that the Tractatus renders other subjects, their representations, and their wills as conclusively inaccessible and inconclusively nonexistent.⁶

My argument for the inaccessibility interpretation follows: if I am to have knowledge or acquaintance with something, I must be able to observe it, which means that it must be in the world. I can observe the signs and sentential signs constructed by mouths and hands. But, according to the Tractatus, I cannot observe their senses. I can observe the occurrence of signs and sentential signs in conjunction with objects and states of affairs, but I cannot observe the sense of these signs and sentential signs. The only sense I have access to is the one I imbue in exercising my will, “I” referring to the myself as the metaphysical subject.

I construct this argument with the conviction that its premises are embedded in the Tractatus. However, I must address some passages that seem to go against it. Consider the following passage: “In order to recognize a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense” (3.326). This contradicts the inaccessibility interpretation I defend above on two counts. One, “use” here entails intentionality. If I observe others “using” signs, I am observing intentional acts executed by willing egos. If this is possible, then I can observe other willing subjects at least indirectly, by way of their use of signs. Therefore, they and their representations would *not* be inaccessible, a view that is thoroughly non-solipsistic. Two, 3.326 is about observing “use with a sense,” which involves observing sense. The very suggestion of such a

⁶ Needless to say, if they are nonexistent then they are inaccessible. I argue for these two interpretations separately in order to show that there is independent evidence for both interpretations.

possibility goes directly against my inaccessibility interpretation, for observing signs and sentential signs as they are used with a sense is to directly observe others' representations.

However, such a suggestion also goes directly against other claims made in the *Tractatus*. Outside of a few stray and confounding passages like 3.326, Wittgenstein makes this abundantly clear: "A sign is what we can perceive of a symbol" (3.32). What is left—the sense of the symbol—is not observable. Just so, wherever he speaks of observing people using signs, he seems to contradict other key features of his account.

Although Wittgenstein occasionally speaks as though *use* can be observed, I think we must interpret the entire account differently. If *sense* cannot be observed, *use* cannot be observed. One *can* observe the occurrence of signs and sentential signs in conjunction with objects, facts (including other signs), and states of affairs, and in so doing come to abide the conventions of co-occurrence of sign-facts and facts to be represented. If we are interpreting 3.326 and similarly confusing passages in the *Tractatus* generously, I urge that the phrases that involve "use" and "observing use with a sense" cannot be taken literally. They have to be understood as informal turns of phrase that refer rather to the conventions of conjunctions of facts that certainly can be observed. If we *do* take these passages literally, then we have to alter our understanding of the rest of the *Tractatus* in a severe way. If interpreted charitably as I suggest, these passages do not do damage to the inaccessibility interpretation.

If this is the case, then intersubjective elucidation is possible. Although I cannot observe the sense and use of signs as employed by others, there is no reason to deny that others use signs with sense. Even if observable convention must be reduced to the co-occurrence of facts and nothing more, that I begin to take certain signs as signifying certain things might well be the result of other subjects' willful use of signs. When I observe the co-occurrence of a sign-fact

(including sentential signs) and a certain object, fact, or state of affairs, I can learn to use the sign-fact to refer to that object, fact, or state of affairs. If the co-occurrence is the result of another's willful use of a fact as a sign, and I then begin to use the sign with what it signifies, then I have learned from them, even if I have no access to subject qua subject or their representations. In the case of sentences that have empty names, convention as co-occurrence could still occur, the difference being that the co-occurrence is not a sign with something in the world, but a sign as tending to play a certain role in certain sentential signs.

Again, this interpretation says that a solipsism based on the inaccessibility of other subjects and their representations and wills is compatible with elucidation based on the usage of signs by other subjects, even I cannot observe the sense of these signs as they are used. What this should suggest is that Tractarian solipsism can be interpreted such that it is not as extreme as it might seem. If the inaccessibility interpretation holds, this would suggest a kind of internalist solipsism that in some ways resembles the more widely-discussed views on the privacy of mental phenomena in contemporary philosophy of mind. Nonetheless, this interpretation does not exhaust the options, for one must also consider the evidence for understanding Tractarian solipsism as asserting the *nonexistence* of other subjects and their representations and wills. Unfortunately, any interest in reinforcing the compatibility of Tractarian solipsism and elucidation that relies on other subjects appears fully usurped by the conclusive remarks made in the latter half of the work that make the singularity of the metaphysical self seems abundantly clear. As stated above in my explication of the central points of Tractarian solipsism, "ego" as it is typically construed has no place in the world. Rather, there is a metaphysical self that limits the world and proffers sense.

However, I am not convinced that the ostensibly *singular* metaphysical self is *singular* at all. More specifically, it does seem that the notion of *a* metaphysical self is coherent to begin with. “Metaphysical self” is not a Tractarian object; it is not in the world. We speak as though it is *something* since we have no other choice (a necessary consequence of employing metalanguage). But it seems important to not treat it as a thing, beyond what language requires of us on this front. To assert or inquire about its singularity or multiplicity is to regard it as a mundane object. Even to regard it as a “variable”—Pears’ alternative to considering it as thing—still permits its quantification, and this is dubious.

This means that, if one is to assess the nonexistence interpretation of Tractarian solipsism on its own turf (so to speak), one cannot argue from the singularity of the metaphysical self. By the same token, one cannot assert the possibility that there are many metaphysical selves (perhaps one for every bundle of thoughts). Indeed, we must pass over this issue in silence. This is significant for the fate of Tractarian solipsism. Bringing together the two interpretations I have considered, there is no ground on which one can conclude that the *Tractatus* denies the existence of other subjects and their representations and wills. There is equally no ground on which one can conclude that the *Tractatus* affirms the existence of other subjects and their representations and wills. Where Wittgenstein speaks as though there are other subjects that represent and will like I do, elsewhere he makes it clear the one cannot presume the existence of these things. Perhaps it is more likely than not that the language I understand, I understand because I have learned it from others who understand it. But the *Tractatus* implores the reader to side with skepticism on this count.

If elucidation requires other willing, representing subjects, then whether or not it is possible depends on the possibility of the existence of these things. Yet, to speak meaningfully

about the existence of other metaphysical subjects seems entirely impossible, whether or not our sentences about them are elucidations. Elucidation proceeds by the gradual approximation of meaning. It seems that making sense of the possibility of other subjects is quite impossible.

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