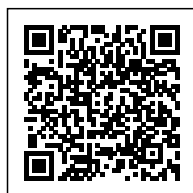


# WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HUMILITY. PART I: THE TRACTATUS

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*Wittgenstein has clearly formulated the proud thesis of the omnipotence of rational science (Rudolf Carnap, [The Logical Structure of the World](#), § 183).*

Ludwig Wittgenstein is often ranked as one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century for his contributions to the philosophies of logic, language, mind, and mathematics. This contribution is made in two different periods. First, in his early [Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus](#) and [Notebooks, 1914-1916](#), and many years later in his [Philosophical Investigations](#) and subsequent related works, like [Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics](#), [Zettel](#), and [On Certainty](#). Call these, respectively, "Wittgenstein's Early Period" and "Wittgenstein's Later Period." Call the view that Wittgenstein's main contribution to philosophy is constituted by his work in these areas in the aforementioned works "the Official View."

I do not deny the importance of Wittgenstein's contributions to these fields, in these works. Quite the contrary. Wittgenstein's contributions to these areas of philosophy in these works are incomparable. However, I argue that "the Official View" misses the fundamental aim of Wittgenstein's philosophical endeavors in both his early and his later periods and argues instead that his aim in both of these periods is, broadly speaking, religious or ethical in nature. Although this may seem paradoxical, the paper argues this despite the fact that there are very few remarks about religion or ethics in any of his philosophical works, and the fact that Wittgenstein explicitly denied that he is "a religious man."

Thus, I argue that there is nothing whatsoever "proud" about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the related and *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. Rather, the *Tractatus* is, as a first approximation, most fundamentally a philosophy of humility inspired by Wittgenstein's unique species of religiosity. The argument that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and the other works in his later period also express that a similar religious humility is argued later in a separate paper. It is commonly said that Kant denied knowledge to make room for faith. One might say that Wittgenstein denies the excessive "pride" associated with rationalistic science to make room for religious humility about the limits of human reason.

## **I. The Official View Of The *Tractatus***

*The whole sense of the book might be summed up as follows: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about, we must pass over in silence (Tractatus, Preface).*

The official reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus-logico-philosophicus* is familiar. The *Tractatus* is one of the seminal works in "analytical" philosophy. It is very similar in this respect to several of Bertrand Russell's early works on "logical atomism." The *Tractatus* holds that the resolution of philosophical problems can only be achieved by "logical analysis." The only things that can be "said" or "put into words," that is, the only "genuine propositions," are contingent factual propositions about the structures of objects in the world.

The *Tractatus'* (4.11) "scientific" view that the totality of true genuine propositions coincides with the propositions of natural science is a corollary of this. All other alleged "propositions," except for the "senseless" logical propositions, are viewed as "mystical" "nonsensical" pseudo-propositions that cannot be "said" (Preface, 3.24, 6.54).

What such pseudo-propositions attempt to "say" can actually only be "shown" (4.1212). That is, what these "mystical" pseudo-propositions try to "say" is beyond the limits of language (Preface, 7). Since the *Tractatus* understands the "mystical" very broadly to include almost everything traditionally of philosophical interest, including ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, cosmology, religion, and the self (the "metaphysical Subject"), the better part of the history of philosophy is seen as "unsayable" "nonsense," leaving only science and logic standing. Indeed, the *Tractatus* even views its own sentences as nonsensical pseudo-propositions that must be discarded after one has used them to obtain the correct view of the world,

*My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: Anyone who understands me eventually regards 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).*

This passage from the *Tractatus* is reminiscent of Hume's statement in the *Enquiry on Human Understanding* that the works of metaphysics must be consigned to the flames. After one has used the *Tractatus'* own pseudo-propositions to obtain the correct view of the world one must "throw" them away like a "ladder" one no longer needs. This is the "proud" scientific interpretation that inspired Carnap and other logical positivists. Everything that can legitimately be said can be said by the natural scientists with some ancillary support from the logicians.

## II. The "Mystical" Dimension Of The *Tractatus*

*There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest . They are what is mystical . (Tractatus, 6.54).*

Astonishingly, although the *Tractatus* describes its own "propositions," as well as all the "propositions" of ethics," understood broadly to include all value sentences, as "metaphysical" "nonsense," the book, in its final passages, appears to take all this back, when it informs the puzzled reader that "there are" mystical things that cannot be put into words. In a letter to the publisher Ficker, at the time he was trying to get the *Tractatus* published (see Ray Monk's [Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius](#)), Wittgenstein explains his own perspective on the significance of the *Tractatus*:

*consists 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 am convinced that, strictly speaking, it can only be delimited in this way. ... All of that which **many are babbling** today, I have defined by remaining silent about it " and cannot be said ." Call this "the Charitable Interpretation." The sentences in the *Tractatus* do not attempt to "say" anything but only to "show" something. On this "Charitable Interpretation" there is no inconsistency because the *Tractatus* does not try to "say" what cannot be "said." It only tries to "show" what cannot be said.*

One obvious problem with the "Charitable Interpretation" is that it must explain the obscure notion of "showing." Another is that it must explain how the sentences in the *Tractatus* "show" what they try to "say." For even if one clarifies the notion of showing and explains how *Tractatus* sentences "show" something, there is still a clear sense in which those sentences "say" something. For does not "Objects are simple" (2.02), in some sense, "say" something, namely that objects are simple? It is a remarkable fact that the claim that *Tractatus* sentences "show" but do not "say" is generally not recognized as the pure dodge that it is for the straightforward reason that claiming that *Tractatus* sentences "show" something does not automatically rule out the possibility that there is also another sense in which they do "say" something.

The moral, for present purposes, is that no matter which way one turns, the *Tractatus* appears to be a baffling work. On Carnap's kind of logic and science-friendly view, one must literally discard the better part of the book like a diseased spleen. The "Charitable Interpretation" appears to be more promising at first glance, but, first, it is fraught with obscurity (the notion of "showing"), and, second, it does not even seem to solve the one problem it purports to solve. For even if one gives an account of the sense in

which *Tractatus* sentences “show” something, that does not by itself eliminate the fact that they also seem to “say” something.

I do not deny the importance of these questions, but suggest that the exclusive focus on these kinds of disputes reflects an overly academic way of thinking about the *Tractatus*, a way of thinking about it that leaves out what Wittgenstein himself saw as its point. Wittgenstein did want to solve these academic problems about the logic of language, but solving these kinds of problems were not his reasons for writing the book. A surgeon may obsess endlessly about the strength of a certain kind of suture she uses to stitch up wounds, but she does not obsess about them because she is fascinated by engineering questions. She does so because it is her purpose to save lives. What was Wittgenstein's real purpose in writing the *Tractatus*?

### III. The “Ethical” Interpretation Of The *Tractatus*

*Those Austrians who were closest to Wittgenstein insisted that whenever he concerned himself with anything, it was from the ethical point of view; in this sense he reminded one of them directly of Kierkegaard. The Tractatus was more than a book on ethics in the eyes of his family and friends; it was an ethical deed, which showed the nature of ethics. (Toulmin and Janik, [Wittgenstein's Vienna](#), p. 24)*

Wittgenstein obsessed endlessly to make sure that he got the technical “logical” issues in the *Tractatus* right. But he did not write the *Tractatus* in order to solve technical problems in logic. His aim in writing the *Tractatus* was, as he stated to Ficker, fundamentally “ethical.”

It is, however, important to recognize that in these kinds of contexts, Wittgenstein uses the word “ethical” in a very broad sense to include all fundamental questions of value. In the *Tractatus* itself (5.641) he identifies ethics with aesthetics and in his 1929 “Lecture on Ethics” he explains that he understands ethics quite broadly to include “what is valuable,” “what is really important,” “the meaning of life,” “what makes life worth living,” “the right way of living,” as well as religious matters and questions concerning the existence of God.

Further, in that same “Lecture” he explains that he is not interested in mundane problems of value, e.g., whether it is better to wear a plain or a checkered tie with a striped shirt, but with issues involving

"absolute" value. Questions about dress codes may, in a sense, be value-questions but by "ethics" Wittgenstein means *fundamental* questions about the *absolute* values. In this same "Lecture" Wittgenstein makes clear that these attempts to discuss absolute values represents the same attempt to go beyond the limits of language he had discussed years earlier in his *Tractatus*,

*For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.*

Indeed, Monk, in [\*Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius\*](#) (p. 541), reports that Wittgenstein had a "fundamentally ethical conception of religion." Since Wittgenstein includes this broad range of issues concerning absolute values, including religious questions, under his notion of ethics, his concept of ethics is the concept of an interrelated set of ethico-religious issues broadly understood.

If Wittgenstein understood writing the *Tractatus* as an "ethical" "deed," what deed was it? What, that is, was Wittgenstein trying to accomplish by laying out the general form of all meaningful propositions, that is, the general form of the sorts of genuine propositions that might be included in a true scientific description of the world. Wittgenstein does address this question. After stating, in the Preface to the *Tractatus* that he believes that the "truth" of what he says in the *Tractatus* is "unassailable and definitive," he goes on to say:

*And if I am not mistaken in this belief that the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.*

In what respect does Wittgenstein mean that "little" is achieved by the *Tractatus*? For many logicians and philosophers of science believe it accomplishes a great deal. Carnap certainly thinks the *Tractatus* accomplished a great deal, specifically, that it "proudly" shows the "omnipotence" of rational science. Carnap appears not to have noticed that Wittgenstein explicitly rejects this claim of the "omnipotence" of rational science at *Tractatus* (6.52),

*We feel that when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.*

That is, if it is one's aim is to solve "the problems of life," roughly, the fundamental ethico-religious problems that from the time of Socrates until relatively recently were understood as the signature mission of philosophy, then solving the logical problems that the *Tractatus* goes no way whatsoever towards solving these "problems of life" or these traditional problems of philosophy.

In brief, rather than, as Carnap thinks, stating the "proud" thesis of the "omnipotence of rational science," the *Tractatus* actually exposes the *impotence* of human reason and the physical sciences for solving "the problems of life." That is, the ethical meaning of the deed accomplished by writing of the *Tractatus* is not pride but the precise opposite – humility, which happens to be one of the most basic of all Christian teachings.

Wittgenstein's actual relation to Christianity is controversial, but it is clear from his many remarks in [Culture and Value](#) that he was deeply sympathetic to many Christian teachings. The following remark from *Culture and Value* (13) makes Wittgenstein's attitude to Jesus quite clear:

*What would it feel like not to have heard of Christ?  
Should we feel left alone in the dark?*

Further, part of what appeals to Wittgenstein about Christ is his humility. In a 1937 remark in *Culture and Value*, after criticizing St. Paul's Epistles because he sees in them "something like pride or anger which is not in tune with the humility of the Gospels," Wittgenstein writes,

*In the Gospels – as it seems to me – everything is **less pretentions**, humbler, simpler. There you find huts; in Paul a Church. There all men are equal and God himself is a man; in Paul there is something like a hierarchy; honors and official positions.*

Thus, the meaning of the "ethical deed" of writing the *Tractatus* is reflected in precisely this kind of Christian humility. The *Tractatus* does not take pride in outlining the sorts of grand scientific edifice that human beings can possibly build. Rather, by clearly "showing" that this logico-scientific edifice can have no bearing whatsoever on the great ethico-religious problems of life, he aims to illustrate the sort of *humility* appropriate to limited beings such as ourselves.

Carnap, presupposing his own very different scientific goals, gets the real purpose of the *Tractatus*



precisely backwards. The *Tractatus* is actually attempting, so to speak, to expose the sin of pride in scientific philosophers who ascribe to human reason properties like "omnipotence" that can only properly be attributed to God. Whereas the ethical meaning of the *Tractatus* mirrors Christ's teaching of humility, the meaning of Carnap's scientific belief in the "omnipotence" of human reason traces to the opposite kind of source:

*And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:4 – 3: 5).*

#### IV. Wittgenstein "Not A Religious Man?"

*When Wittgenstein was working on the latter part of the Philosophical Investigations, he said to his... close friend... Drury... "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view" (Norman Malcolm, [Wittgenstein: From a Religious Point of View?](#)).*

Since the present interpretation holds that Wittgenstein understood the *Tractatus* as an ethico-religious deed that reflects the Christian teaching of humility found in the Gospels, a doctrine of humility explicitly endorsed by Wittgenstein in *Culture and Value*, and since Wittgenstein himself admitted to his friend Drury that he is not a religious man, one might infer that the present interpretation must be wrong. For if writing the *Tractatus* is an ethico-religious deed, then the man who wrote it is by definition, to that degree, a "religious man." How does one resolve the conflict between the present interpretation that writing the *Tractatus* is an ethic-religious deed and Wittgenstein's own self-evaluation that he is "not a religious man."

In fact, Wittgenstein is simply wrong in that he is not a "religious man." First, Wittgenstein satisfies many of the ordinary requirements for being a religious person. Indeed, Monk, in *The Duty of Genius* (p. 540), remarks that "Wittgenstein's Hebraic conception of religion was, Drury suggested, based on the sense of awe one feels throughout the Bible."

Malcolm reports in his [Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir](#) that Wittgenstein "reveres" St. Augustine. Wittgenstein also reveres many religious figures like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Bertrand Russell complains that Wittgenstein, when he first met him, reads [Silesius](#) (who, significantly, is a 17th



Century Catholic monk who also believed in the ineffability of mystical truth). One could go on. In fact, Wittgenstein's mistaken claim that he is "not a religious man" is based on the enormously high standard he sets for being genuinely religious. In *Culture and Value* (53), Wittgenstein writes,

*religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a belief, it's really a way of living, a way of assessing life. Instruction in religious faith, therefore, would have to an appeal to conscience.*

Call this "Wittgenstein's Passionate Commitment" criterion or WPC. By this strong criterion, Søren Kierkegaard and Thomas Merton would clearly classify as religious men because they each had a passionate commitment to their religious beliefs and tried to live in accord with them, but many people who regularly attend church or temple and sincerely hold religious beliefs but do not "passionately" devote their lives to their religious views would not be religious people.

Since WPC is Wittgenstein's criterion for being a genuine religious person, it is clear why he stated to Drury that he is "not a religious man." Wittgenstein leads the life of a philosopher, not the life of a monk or saint. He does not make WPC's "passionate commitment" to a religious "system" in that sense.

Thus, Malcolm is correct in his remark in his *Memoir* of Wittgenstein that "If 'to be a religious person' is to 'lead a religious life' then... was not a religious person" – but the "If" in Malcolm's statement is the operative word. For, it is important to recognize why Wittgenstein does not satisfy WPC. Malcolm remarks in the same work that Wittgenstein understood "religious belief based on qualities of character and will that he himself did not possess." That is, Wittgenstein felt that he is himself too flawed as a person to be a genuinely religious person.

From this perspective, Wittgenstein's denial that he is "a religious man" is actually evidence that he is a religious man, at least in the ordinary sense. For it is an unfortunately fact about the world in which we live that the people who trumpet that they are religious people are often not and the people who deny, out of harsh self-criticism, that they are genuinely religious people are in fact the genuinely religious ones.

Although Malcolm, when he first wrote his *Memoir* of Wittgenstein in the 1950's, agreed with Wittgenstein's self-evaluation that he is not a religious man, he later, after he read Wittgenstein's

remarks about religion in [Culture and Value](#), reversed his opinion and came to see Wittgenstein as a religious person. For, in the ordinary sense, Wittgenstein is a religious person, indeed, a very religious person. Wittgenstein denies that he is a religious person because he feels too unworthy, given his almost impossibly high standards for being a genuinely religious person, and that, ironically, is a sign of a genuinely religious person.

Wittgenstein's denial that he is a religious person is, therefore, not to be taken straightforwardly as a statement of fact. For that denial is actually an expression of Wittgenstein's Kierkegaardian religious despair. Wittgenstein denies that he is a religious man for exactly the same reason the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 5:6), whose religiosity is not in question, was overcome with a sense of unworthiness when he received his vocation and confessed: *"Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips"* (Isaiah 6: 5).

The objection that the *Tractatus* cannot be a religious deed because Wittgenstein admitted that he is not a religious man fails. Wittgenstein is, both in the ordinary sense and in Wittgenstein's own almost impossibly high sense, an extremely religious person and the *Tractatus* is his courageous ethico-religious deed.

## Conclusion

*I find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not the other sort (Culture and Value, 79).*

On Carnap's view, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is a "proud" statement of the "omnipotence" of rational science (specifically, the physical sciences). The truth is quite the opposite. Wittgenstein was not particularly gripped by the accomplishments of the natural sciences. He did, of course, have a normal healthy human interest in these accomplishments and he did have an interest in the conceptual questions concerning the nature of the natural sciences.

However, what primarily gripped him, as both he and the Austrians who knew him well, stated, was ethics (broadly construed to include aesthetics and religion). One must therefore infer that Wittgenstein's primary interest in the logical foundations of the natural sciences in the *Tractatus* was

"ethical" (in his broad sense of that word).

Indeed, that is precisely what he told Ficker. Specifically, his aim in the *Tractatus* was to *show* the ethical role fulfilled by the natural sciences in human life. The message of the *Tractatus* is that it has no role. It is one of the mistaken beliefs of our shallow time that science will provide the answers to the problems of human life. That is, the *Tractatus* attempts to "show" the *impotence* of rational science to say anything whatsoever of importance toward solving "the problems of life" (the precise opposite of the message Carnap somehow saw in the *Tractatus*).

Wittgenstein gives the *Tractatus* to the world as a humble ethical deed intended to counter the proud belief in the omnipotence of the natural sciences. The reason Carnap and so many others get the fundamental message of the *Tractatus* precisely backwards is that they simply assume that Wittgenstein shares with them the modern reverence for the physical natural sciences and the associated scientific view that these sciences will provide solutions to the ethico-religious problems of life.

When, therefore, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* lays out in minute detail the logical foundations of everything that can be meaningfully and scientifically "said," they automatically assume that he is endorsing their own proud rationalistic and scientific project. The "mystical" remarks at the end of the *Tractatus* are dismissed either as an inconsistency, a logical mistake, or as an idiosyncratic belief of an eccentric Austrian that actually reads the likes of Silesius.

In fact, however, Wittgenstein humbly admits in the Preface to the *Tractatus* "how little is achieved" when one has solved "all" the philosophical problems concerning the limits of language and the logical foundations of the natural sciences.

Admittedly, Wittgenstein does, in the *Tractatus*, obsessively attempt to solve the logical issues of philosophy, but, like the surgeon who obsesses over the strength of a certain kind of suture even though she is not interested in engineering facts about materials but only in saving lives, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* obsessively attempts to engineer solutions to numerous "logical" problems even though what really interests him is, in a sense, to save lives (or, perhaps better, souls).

As such, the *Tractatus* is an "ethical" deed intended to invite the reader to turn inward, towards one's

silent self, and away from the distractions of the empty "idle talk" in the noisy marketplace of the proud but sterile pretenders to wisdom.

Travel within thyself! The Stone  
Philosophers with wisest arts  
Have vainly sought, cannot be found  
By travelling in foreign parts.  
Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, § V.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "The Raising of Lazarus," by Jan Lievens; painted in 1631.

