Analysis and the Elucidatory Interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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1. The Elucidatory Interpretation

In a recent article, Marie McGinn has proposed an "elucidatory" interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as an alternative to postmodernist (or "resolute") interpretations of the concept of elucidation in *TLP* 4.112 and 6.54. According to McGinn, the concept of elucidation is one that Wittgenstein "intends to oppose to the concepts of explanation and theory construction". (McGinn 1999, 498) She regards "the remarks in which Wittgenstein articulates his idea of philosophy, makes use of the comparison between pictures and propositions, develops the distinction between saying and showing, or explores the role of logic, are ones which exemplify the idea of philosophy as 'essentially … elucidation.'" (McGinn 1999, 498) In fact, such an interpretation is made highly plausible by various statements from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914-1916* such as the following: "Logic takes care of itself; all we have to do is to look and see how it does it" (*NB*, 11); "My difficulty is only an – enormous – difficulty of expression." (*NB*, 40); "We must recognize *how* language takes care of itself" (*NB*, 43); "That a sentence is a logical portrayal of its meaning is obvious to the uncaptive eye" (*NB*, 5); or again: "It is *evident* that we feel the elementary proposition as the picture of a situation. (*NB*, 25) Similarly, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein seems to regard the picture theory of propositions as something that simply can be seen: "It is obvious that a proposition of the form "*aRb*" strikes us as a picture. In this case the sign is obviously a likeness of what is signified." (*TLP* 4.012) Passages such as these convincingly support McGinn's view according to which elucidation has the function of making a difference in the perception of the phenomena of language without conveying any new information. At the same time, McGinn tries to eliminate some aspects of Wittgenstein's early thought from the elucidatory core of the *Tractatus*. In this sense, she understands Wittgenstein's views as to the existence of elementary propositions, of a general propositional form, and of simple objects, his theory of variables, and his view of analysis as elements of the Tractatus which do not belong to the elucidatory part of the work. (McGinn 1999, 500-501; 505-507) The present paper argues that this second part of McGinn's interpretation is problematic. In particular, this part of her interpretation reflects Wittgenstein's own retrospective critique of his earlier conception of analysis, which partially distorts the role of analysis in his earlier philosophy. Contrary to McGinn, in the early Wittgenstein there is a sense of analysis that is connected with the idea of the descriptive nature of philosophy and thus, indirectly, with the idea of philosophical elucidation.

2. Analysis and the Problem of Particular Logical Forms

On first sight, the suggestion to separate the idea of analysis from the elucidatory core of the *Tractatus* seems to correspond well with some of Wittgenstein's retrospective remarks. For example, in the *Philosophical Grammar* Wittgenstein writes:

> The idea of constructing elementary propositions (as e.g. Carnap has tried to do) rests on a false notion of logical analysis. It is not the task of that analysis to discover a *theory* of elementary propositions, like discovering principles of mechanics.
>
> My notion in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was wrong: 1) because I wasn't clear about the sense of the words "a logical product is *hidden* in a sentence" (and suchlike), 2) because I too thought that logical analysis had to bring to light what was hidden (as chemical and physical analysis does). (*PG* I, Appendix 4, A, p. 210)

However, what exactly is the point of Wittgenstein's objection to his earlier conception of analysis? In conversations with the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein is reported to have made the objection that "we cannot assume from the very beginning, as Carnap does, that the elementary propositions consist of two-place relations, etc." (WVC, 182) The *Philosophical Grammar* sees Wittgenstein's own earlier conception of analysis in the same perspective: "This is all connected with the false concept of logical analysis that Russell, Ramsey and I used to have, according to which we are writing for an ultimate logical analysis of facts, like a chemical analysis of compounds – an analysis which will enable us really to discover a 7-place relation, like an element that really has the specific weight 7." (*PG* II, III, sec. 15, pp. 311-312) Thus, Wittgenstein's critique seems not only to be directed at the idea of the existence of elementary propositions and simple objects; it also is directed at a determinate view as to the particular logical form of elementary sentences and, thus, of simple objects.

However, this second aspect of Wittgenstein's retrospective critique involves a partial misrepresentation of his earlier views. Seen from within Wittgenstein's early philosophy, the a priori character of logic excludes that logic answer questions concerning the particular logical forms of elementary sentences or the particular logical forms of simple objects. (cf. Blank 2000; 2002) This is the point of the distinction between "logic" and the "application of logic" in *TLP* 5.557. As Wittgenstein there emphasizes, both areas must "touch" each other without "overlapping" each other. Although this topological metaphor is difficult to decipher, it involves the idea that logic is what makes it possible to "invent" particular logical forms. (*TLP* 5.555) Moreover, the analysis of particular logical forms is the task of the application of logic, not of logic itself. For example, it cannot be decided a priori whether there are relational predicates, and thus relations, with 27 places. (*TLP* 5.5541-5542) Therefore, Wittgenstein thinks that we have "some concept of elementary propositions quite apart from their particular logical form." (*TLP* 5.555) Rather, "[i]f we know on purely logical grounds that there must be elementary propositions, then everyone who understands propositions in their unanalysed form must know it." (*TLP* 5.5562) Already in the *Notes on Logic*, Wittgenstein emphasizes this independence of the realm of logic from a theory of particular logical forms: "Not only must logic not deal with things, but just as little with relations and predicates." (*NB*, 98) Accordingly, there is a type of analysis that is irrelevant for logic: "Every statement about apparent complexes can be resolved into the logical sum of a statement about the constituents and a statement about the proposition which describes the complex completely. How, in each case the resolution is to be made, is an important question, but its answer is not

unconditionally necessary for the construction of logic." (*NB*, 101) Or, as the *Notebooks 1914-1916* put it: "Could it be said: Logic is *not* concerned with the analysability of the functions with which it works." (*NB*, 4) Thus, Wittgenstein's early conception of analysis cannot be adequately under-stood from the perspective of his retrospective critique.

3. Analysis and the Descriptive Nature of Philosophy

The early Wittgenstein distinguishes a conception of analysis that has to do with disentangling the composi-tional structure of given examples of propositions from a different conception of analysis that is connected with the idea of the descriptive nature of philosophy. From the beginning, Wittgenstein was aware of the fact that according to his own view of the nature of propositions the sentences of philosophy cannot be counted as descrip-tions in the proper sense. (cf. *NB*, 101) Nevertheless, in a programmatic passage in the *Notes on Logic*, Wittgenstein connects his a priori approach to logic with a characteriza-tion of philosophy as "purely descriptive". (*NB*, 106) There, Wittgenstein adds: "Philosophy consists of logic and metaphysics: logic is its basis." As Rush Rhees has emphasized, Wittgenstein in this passage does not say that logic is the basis of *metaphysics*. What Wittgenstein says is that logic is the basis of *philosophy*. (Rhees 1970, 24-25) More specifically, this passage does not suggest that metaphysics is something that is deduced from logic. Quite to the contrary: if in philosophy there are no deductions, there are no deductions *from* logic. The most plausible reading of this passage seems to be that metaphysics here is characterized as a *part* of logic.

This explains why the question around which much of the thought of the *Notebooks 1914-1916* turns is: "Can we manage without simple objects *in* LOGIC?" (*NB*, 9.5.1915) From this perspective, Wittgenstein connects the existence of simple objects with a type of analysis that leads to a kind of descriptive knowledge:

> But it also seems certain that we do not infer the exis-tence of simple objects from the existence of particular simple objects, but rather know them – by description, as it were – as the end-product of analysis, by means of a process that leads to them.
>
> For the very reason, that a bit of language is non-sensical, it is still possible to go on using it – see the last remark. (*NB*, 50)

Interestingly, at this place Wittgenstein holds a view of the nature of philosophical sentences that – in contrast to the "austere" view of nonsense at the end of both the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus* – could be called the "liberal" view of nonsense. According to this liberal view, nonsensi-cal philosophical sentences do not have to be "thrown away" in a literal sense, but can have a communicative function because they convey information that, in some sense, can be characterised as purely descriptive. This descriptive aspect of philosophical analysis clearly distinguishes Wittgenstein early view of analysis from theory construction. More precisely, the type of analysis involved in this kind on knowledge is characterized as a kind of presuppositional analysis:

> The question might however also be presented like this: It seems that the idea of the SIMPLE is already to be found contained in that of the complex and in the idea of analysis, and in such a way that we come to this idea quite apart from any examples of simple objects, or of propositions which mention them, and we realize the

existence of the simple objects – *a priori* – as a logical necessity.

So it looks as if the existence of the simple objects were related to that of the complex ones as the sense of ~p is to the sense of p: the *simple* object is *prejudged* in the complex. (*NB*, 60)

Obviously, the kind of analysis involved here does not have to do with disentangling the simple semantic components of complex signs. Thus, analysis in the sense Wittgenstein has in mind here does not give an answer as to the particular logical form of elementary propositions or of simple objects. Rather, the existence of simple objects is seen as something presupposed in the existence of the complex constituents of the world.

Moreover, the kind of descriptive knowledge reached through presuppositional analysis is seen as something that, in some sense, is already known. This becomes clear in a series of entries from the *Notebooks* in which Wittgenstein makes use of an everyday conception of tautology that diverges from his technical (truth-functional) conception of tautologies. In these passages, he charac-terises philosophical sentences as tautological in the sense that they do not convey any new information. For example, he writes, "A definition is a tautology and shews internal relations between its two terms!" (NB, 18) In a later entry, he applies this insight to his view about the nature of propositions. There, he states that "complex sign" and "proposition" are equivalent and adds, "Is it a tautology to say: *Language* consists of *sentences*? It seems it is." (NB, 52) Moreover, analytic knowledge concerning the existence of simple objects is characterized as something that is in this sense tautologous:

> Is it, A PRIORI, clear that in analysing we must arrive at simple components – is this, e.g., involved in the con-cept of analysis –, or is analysis ad infinitum possible? – Or is there in the end even a third possibility?
>
> This question is a logical one and the complexity of spatial objects is a logical complexity, for to say that one thing is part of another is always a tautology. (NB, 62)

Finally, the same conception of the tautological nature of philosophy is expressed when Wittgenstein states, "Simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. And if I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological question; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it *is* the only right life." (*NB*, 78)

Thus, for the early Wittgenstein philosophical sentences are descriptive and tautological at the same time, in the sense that they direct attention to what already is implicitly known. They can be at the same time nonsensical and communicatively effective because they create no new insights but rather influence the perception of what we already know. The type of analysis that is involved in this philosophical strategy, therefore, can make a difference in our perception of the phenomena of language without conveying new information. This closely corresponds to the role McGinn ascribes to philosophical elucidation. Thus, although in Wittgenstein's early view there is a type of analysis that does not belong to logic and therefore is irrelevant for philosophy, there is another conception of analysis at work in the *Tractatus*, which is not adequately represented in Wittgenstein's retrospective remarks. This type of analysis aims at making implicit knowledge about the nature of propositions explicit. Therefore, the idea of logical analysis should be seen as a part of the elucidatory core of the *Tractatus*.

References and Abbreviations

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