Throwing Away the Ladder *Before* Climbing it

Dimitris Gakis, Amsterdam, Netherlands

D.Gakis@uva.nl

1. Introduction: Historical Ladders

As the New Wittgenstein debate testifies, the penultimate remark of the Tractatus (6.54) remains one of the work's most discussed propositions. Although the Tractatus lacks a reference concerning its origin, the ladder metaphor employed in 6.54 has been widely used in the philosophical tradition. Chronologically close to Wittgenstein are Fritz Mauthner – one of the few philosophers mentioned by name in the Tractatus and one who actually uses the metaphor in a similar way in his writings (see Weiler 1958, p. 80) – and Arthur Schopenhauer (see Schopenhauer 1909, p. 256), by all accounts a major influence on Wittgenstein's early thought and a possible influence not only for Wittgenstein's, but for Mauthner's use of the metaphor as well. Much earlier, Sextus Empiricus uses it in an analogous way (see Sextus Empiricus 2005, p. 183 (2:480-81)) while utilizations of a similar image can be also found at various places in Nietzsche (see Nietzsche 2006, p. 167-168 (§20); 1976, p. 472 (§42)), as well as in Hegel (see Hegel 1977, p. 14-15 (§26)).[1]

There are two characteristics of the metaphor that we should notice. First, from a philosophical perspective, the ladder metaphor is a heavily loaded one. It is widely used in the philosophical tradition by prominent philosophical figures and has raised a lot of discussion. Second, we can discern two main uses of the metaphor. The first (Sextus Empiricus, Mauthner, the non-metaphysical readings of Hegel) emphasizes the "negational", "skeptical", "de(con)structive" or "therapeutical" aspects of climbing and subsequently abandoning the ladder. The second (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, the metaphysical readings of Hegel) stresses the "elevational", "surmounting", "transcendental" character of this overcoming and the allegedly privileged view that is the result. Bearing these two points in mind, we shall move now to a discussion of some of the characteristics of the New Wittgenstein debate, a central aspect of which is the issue of continuity in Wittgenstein's thought. As we shall see, the distinction between the two interpretations of the ladder metaphor might shed a new light on some of these issues.

2. Wittgenstein's Later Rejection of the Ladder Metaphor and the Issue of Continuity Regarding his Metaphilosophy

I might say: if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already.

Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me. (MS 109, 6-7/11/1930; Wittgenstein 1998, p. 10)

This remark suggests that by 1930 Wittgenstein had come to repudiate the place that the climbing of the ladder leads to. Neither the linguistically transcendental, panoptic standpoint to which we are lead – via showing – by the "deep nonsense" of the Tractatus, as traditional readers of the work have it, nor the liberated position that the purportedly cured reader occupies after the demystifying dialectic therapeutics of the work has been put into play, as the resolute readers hold, is what Wittgenstein thinks we should strive after. Varying on 6.54, we could say that now Wittgenstein wants us to throw away the ladder *before* we have climbed up on it. It is of crucial importance that Wittgenstein decides to attack the ladder metaphor and, consequently, the image(s) that it suggests. For the resolute readers, remark 6.54 of the Tractatus constitutes not only the frame proposition par excellence, that is a proposition that Wittgenstein intends to be recognized as having sense and as providing instruction on how the whole work is to be read, but also the very climax of the work (see Conant 2007, p. 42).[2] So, what the above remarks actually challenge is the resolute readers' conception of a strong continuity in Wittgenstein's thought. This continuity is tracked down by resolute readers – and especially by those who acknowledge the significance of the differences between the early and later phase of Wittgenstein's thought – paradigmatically, but not exclusively, in Wittgenstein's conception of the aim of philosophy and, in general, in his metaphilosophy, i.e. in his remarks *on* philosophy (e.g. Conant 2007, p. 66-71, 105-107).

It is in this respect that resolute readers think that Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy has priority over his philosophical positions themselves and accordingly the continuity of his thought is highlighted. However, this emphasis on Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy and the claim that, no matter the (profound) differences between his early and his later philosophy, his metaphilosophy remains, by and large, the same, are not unproblematic. For, despite the apparent similarities between the metaphilosophical positions of the young and the mature Wittgenstein, there are also deep discontinuities to be found. On the one hand, Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy (both early and later) is linguistically oriented – and this is a sign of continuity of course. On the other hand, his conception of language changes profoundly; and with this change in his views about language, his (linguistically oriented) metaphilosophy becomes different as well. Key terms in Wittgenstein's (meta)philosophy, such as 'language', 'activity', 'practice', 'nonsense', 'clarity', 'elucidation', etc., have a certain meaning in the philosophical context of the Tractatus, and gain another meaning in that of the Philosophical Investigations. So, it is not "Wittgenstein's view of philosophy, rather than his view of meaning, that plays the pivotal role in his thought" (Horwich 2004, p. 107), but actually the interaction of the two. Wittgenstein's shift from the metaphysical (standard readings) or unwittingly metaphysically committed ("weak" resolute readings) point of view of the Tractatus to the anthropological perspective of his later works is not without consequences for his metaphilosophy.[3]

3. Metaphysics, Ethics and Therapy in the Tractatus

One thing the resolute readers must do is combine their resolute readings with the undeniable discontinuities in Wittgenstein's work. Being resolute, they hold that the text of the Tractatus does not contain philosophical positions that Wittgenstein willingly endorses. Yet, in order to account for the discontinuities, they do allow that Wittgenstein unwittingly was committed to certain implicit philosophical preconceptions (see Conant 2007, p. 85-86). So, as far as the views of early Wittgenstein on language and

logic are concerned, this resolute schema of reading the Tractatus holds: i) that Wittgenstein was in fact metaphysically committed in the Tractatus; ii) that, nevertheless, he was only implicitly metaphysically committed; iii) that despite the fact that these metaphysical commitments emerge from or reveal themselves in the text, we should still maintain that these philosophical positions are to be understood as empty resolute nonsense that Wittgenstein intends to reject in an absolute way.

Regarding ethics, things are not much different, since Conant maintains that the ethical point of the book lies outside of what its "ethical" propositions say (Conant 2005, p. 72). But what he provides as candidate expressions for describing this ethical point are actually views that are already contained, directly or indirectly, in those parts of early Wittgenstein's writings (i.e. his wartime notebooks and the Tractatus up to the 'Lecture on Ethics') that are concerned with ethical issues. It is, thus, very hard to see how this resolute construal of the ethical point of the Tractatus differs not only from the ineffable ones, at least as far as their starting points are concerned,[4] but also from the relevant "ethically oriented" remarks, such as Tractatus 5.632, 5.633, 5.641, 6.44 and 6.45 among others, that the resolute readers treat as austerely nonsensical.

This exclusively negative conception of ethics, and of Wittgenstein's philosophy in general, not only gives rise to an image of Wittgenstein as merely a member of the "language police" who patrol the limits of the meaningful, it also fails to illuminate the wide scope of Wittgenstein's distinction between sense and nonsense (Wittgenstein 2001, §499 p. 117-118). In particular, it fails to acknowledge the conception of ethics and philosophy as a struggle against "the boundaries of language" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 44; 1979a, p. 68-69). The same seems to hold for the resolute conception of (philosophical) therapy, for although it embraces some of the epistemological aspects of Pyrrhonism, as has been often observed by resolute and non-resolute readers alike (e.g. Plant 2004 and Sluga 2004), the resolute view is not equally sensitive to the ethical aspects of it that revolve around the notion of *ataraxia* (tranquility). Interestingly enough, a conception of the ethical akin to that of tranquility seems to run through early Wittgenstein's "ethical" oeuvre, as is evident from remarks such as "the world is independent of my will" in the wartime notebooks (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 73, 6/7/16), or the experience of "feeling absolutely safe" discussed in the 1930 'Lecture on Ethics' (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 41-43).[5]

4. Wittgenstein's Early Thought in Context and Resolute Readings

The observations sketched above highlight some of the problems which resolute readings face. We could add remarks regarding the way resolute readers conceive of the Tractatus as a piecemeal work and as a formal (and not substantive) whole; on their uneasiness with the essentially paradoxical character of the work; concerning the differences between Wittgenstein's early and later conception of therapy and the relation of the Tractatus to the tradition of modernity. Regarding this last point, the following can be noticed. The signs of scientism that the resolute readings detect in the Tractatus – through their own underlying scientism (see Stokhof 2010) – are indeed clearly discernable, along with other characteristics of modernity such as essentialism and dogmatism. However, we should keep in mind that these signs are at the same time indicative, as Wittgenstein's later, self-critical remarks on these

issues show, of his radical opposition to the Tractatus. It is a radical opposition for it breaks the (vicious) circle of trying to fight modernity from within, by its own means.[6] And this radical opposition to some of the main tenets of the tradition of modernity that Wittgenstein's later writings give voice to need not be reduced to the rather trivial motto of the "end of (substantial) philosophy" that the negatively constituted scientistic conceptions of (Wittgenstein's) philosophy, either resolute or standard, adopt; an attitude that if anything, is not original, as it can be found throughout the history of philosophy in its various skeptical manifestations.

Endnotes

[1] An extensive discussion of the ways in which Hegel conceives of the nature and function of the ladder in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be found in Harris (1997). One point of debate is whether "the ladder" is dispensable for Hegel or not. The two positions square with "orthodox" traditional (metaphysical) readings and the "heretic" non-metaphysical ones that can be distinguished in contemporary Hegelian scholarship. The resemblance with the contemporary state of Wittgensteinian scholarship, especially in relation to the New Wittgenstein debate, is striking, but discussion of it must be left for another occasion.

[2] Even resolute readers who do not ascribe to the idea of "frame propositions" still recognize in 6.54 the culmination of the whole text (see Hutchinson and Read 2006, p. 23, n. 37).

[3] At least so far as metaphilosophy is not conceived as a foundational enterprise (a second-order philosophy), but as flesh of philosophy's flesh (see Wittgenstein 2001, §121 p. 42).

[4] See for example Stokhof (2002, p. 186-249) where Tractarian ethics is treated as both a certain way of viewing or living in the world and as being intrinsically related to action.

[5] For an exemplary construal of the ethical in the Tractatus, which also draws interesting parallels with the Eastern philosophical tradition where tranquility (as detachment from the world) is again a central ethical goal, see Stokhof (2002).

[6] What the Tractatus and the resolute readings of Wittgenstein's philosophy actually share is the false consciousness of scientism/modernity. Wittgenstein, in direct reference to remark 4.5 of the Tractatus, puts it like this: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Wittgenstein 2001, §115 p. 41). The author of the Tractatus and the readers that understand him, as the resolute readers tend to emphasize this specific point, come to believe – in a typical modernist matter - that their conception of philosophy goes against the tradition, when in fact it is its outcome and manifestation. But in early Wittgenstein's case, and this is the crucial point, these aspects do not exhaust his philosophical stance, since the tradition is also incorporated in a direct way, as we can see this for example in its metaphysics, its conception of language and logic, and the remarks on ethics.

Acknowledgment

Literature

Conant, J. 2007 "Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism", in Crary, A. (ed.) *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 31-142

—— 2005 "What Ethics in the Tractatus is Not", in Philips, D. Z. and von der Ruhr, M. (eds.) *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 39-95

Harris, H. S. 1997 *Hegel's Ladder - I: The Pilgrimage of Reason*, Indianapolis: Hackett

Hegel, G. W. F. 1977 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: OUP

Horwich, P. 2004 "Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophical Development", in Kölbel, M. and Weiss, B. (eds.) *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance*, London: Routledge, p. 100-109

Hutchinson, P. and Read, R. 2006 "An Elucidatory Interpretation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Critique of Daniel D. Hutto's and Marie McGinn's Reading of Tractatus 6.54", in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 1-29

Nietzsche, F. 2006 *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits, Volume I*, in Large, D. and Pearson, K. (eds.) *The Nietzsche Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

—— 1976 *Twilight of the Idols*, in Kaufman, W. (ed.) *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Penguin

Plant, B. 2004 "The End(s) of Philosophy: Rhetoric, Therapy and Wittgenstein's Pyrrhonism", in *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 222-257

Schopenhauer, A. 1909 *The World as Will and Idea Vol. II*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co.

Sextus Empiricus 2005 *Against the Logicians*, Cambridge: CUP

Sluga, H. 2004 "Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism", in Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (ed.) *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 99–117

Stokhof, M. 2010 *The Quest for Purity: Another Look at the New Wittgenstein*, (Under Submission)

—— 2002 *World and Life as One: Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein's Early Thought*, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Weiler, G. 1958 "On Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Language", in *Mind*, Vol. 67, No. 265, p. 80-87

Wittgenstein, L. 2001 *Philosophical Investigations (rev. 3rd ed.)*, Oxford: Blackwell

—— 1998 *Culture and Value (rev. 2nd ed.)*, Oxford: Blackwell

—— 1993 "A Lecture on Ethics", in Klagge, J. and Nordmann, A. (ed.) *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Indianapolis: Hackett, p. 36-44

—— 1979 *Notebooks 1914-1916 (2nd ed.)*, Oxford: Blackwell

—— 1979a *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Oxford: Blackwell

—— 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge