Representation and Reality in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by J.L. Zalabardo

Silver Bronzo

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Zalabardo's book is an ambitious and tightly argued study of the account of linguistic and mental representation apparently expressed in the main body of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. It deals with the so-called "picture theory of the proposition" and with some of its presuppositions and implications. The author does not merely try to advance an interprettation of Wittgenstein's views. He seeks to show how, if we are concerned with a certain set of philosophical problems, we can naturally arrive at those views and find them attractive. He tries to think anew, from the ground up, each of the views he attributes to the *Tractatus*. For this reason, the presentation is insightful and stimulating even when it does not advance original exegetical claims. The book is written in the prose of standard contemporary analytic philosophy – with its virtues and occasional mannerisms. The book focuses mainly on the reconstruction and evaluation of arguments, but is also a scholarly work. It engages extensively with the primary sources and addresses, mainly in footnotes, an eclectic corpus of secondary literature.

Zalabardo sets out to examine the views expressed in the main body of the *Tractatus* in abstraction from Wittgenstein's own instructions for reading the book. In the famous penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus* (TLP 6.54), Wittgenstein tells us that in order to understand him we must recognize his own propositions as nonsensical: we must use them as a ladder to be eventually thrown away. For the last two decades, the question of how to understand this puzzling remark has been at the center of *Tractatus* scholarship, dividing proponents and opponents of a "resolute" approach to the book. Zalabardo does not simply ignore 6.54. In the

Introduction, he argues that, given the limited aims of his book, he is *justified* to bracket the *Tractatus'* final self-revocation. He contends that, on any plausible reading of the book, one must first climb up the Tractarian ladder before throwing it away. That is, one must come to grasp the apparent content and motivations of the doctrines seemingly expressed in the body of the *Tractatus* before recognizing them as nonsensical. Zalabardo's book is concerned only with the first part of this endeavor. This renders it exegetically incomplete, according to the author, but not exegetically misguided. Zalabardo submits, in addition, that the limited scope of his study does not prevent it from bringing out many aspects of the *Tractatus* that deserve the consideration of contemporary philosophers. In fact, it is hard not to have the impression that what is of *greatest* philosophical interest in the *Tractatus*, for Zalabardo, can be gathered without having to grasp its overall strategy.

Even though Zalabardo does not aim to defend a particular account of how the *Tractatus* as a whole is meant to work, he wants to show that his interpretation of the doctrines apparently expressed in the main body of the *Tractatus* does not demand an *ineffabilist* construal of Wittgenstein's project. According to such a construal (which used to be dominant before the advent of resolute readings), the author of the *Tractatus* aims to communicate to the reader a number of philosophical doctrines that he regards as correct – doctrines that, by their own standards, are "unsayable" and indeed even "unthinkable", but only in a technical sense, because they remain perfectly capable of being grasped and communicated in an ordinary sense of these terms. Zalabardo rejects this approach as a "measure of last resort" (p. 2). He outlines and recommends an alternative account of "Wittgenstein's communicative intentions" (p. 4). According to his proposal, the ultimate goal of the *Tractatus* is not to put forth any sort of philosophical doctrine (whether effable or ineffable), but to "undermine the philosophical enterprise" (p. 4). How? By showing that the "rules that define the enterprise of philosophy… compel us to regard nonsense as correct" (p. 4). The idea is that philosophy – construed as the enterprise of "seeking answers to philosophical questions and solutions to philosophical problems" (p. 4) – is governed by rules that force us to regard the views apparently expressed by the propositions of the *Tractatus* as the *correct* solutions to the philosophical problems they apparently address, *even though those propositions are in fact nonsensical and do not express any view.* When we realize this fact about philosophy, we should be persuaded to abandon it. What is crucial, for Zalabardo, is that according to this account the *Tractatus* can achieve its ultimate goal only if it first convinces its reader that it expresses correct philosophical doctrines.

Determining whether Zalabardo's account of the *Tractatus*' overall project represents a stable alternative to ineffabilist readings is not a straightforward matter. The problem is that, with one exception, Zalabardo always assumes that the reader of the *Tractatus* is supposed to recognize the nonsensicality of its propositions *by applying the theory of significance that those propositions apparently express*. The reader is supposed to realize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* "entail their own nonsensicality" (p. 5). But this involves a commitment to the central idea of ineffabilist readings: The reader is supposed to grasp a theory that counts as "inexpressible" and "unthinkable" only according to the technical standards it defines. At one point, however, Zalabardo states that his account of the strategy of the *Tractatus* can be "easily modified" to accommodate a point defended by resolute readers: namely, that the recognition of the nonsensicality of the propositions of the *Tractatus* is not supposed to rely on the grasp and application of any sort of philosophical theory (p. 5, n. 3). How exactly this accommodation is supposed to go is left to the reader to figure out.

Whether or not Zalabardo's construal of the strategy of the *Tractatus* avoids ineffabilist commitments, it involves the questionable assumption that we must choose between (a) the enterprise of seeking answers to genuine philosophical questions and solutions to genuine philosophical problems, and (b) the wholesale rejection of this enterprise. What is missing from this picture is the sort of philosophical activity that, according to Cora Diamond and other resolute readers, the *Tractatus* actually seeks to practice – namely, an activity of clarification which aims to dissolve piecemeal philosophical questions and philosophical problems without relying on any philosophical theory.

Zalabardo approaches the doctrines apparently expressed in the main body of the *Tractatus* as a response to Russell's Multiple Relation Theory of Judgment (henceforth "MRTJ"), and in particular, to the most sophisticated version of that theory: the one set out in the *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript (1913), which Russell abandoned under the pressure of Wittgenstein's criticisms. Zalabardo explains that Russell's aim was to develop a theory of representation which makes room for the possibility of false representation without postulating the existence of "false propositions" (namely, objective items having the same ontological status of facts, but different from facts or "true propositions" because they possess the indefinable property of "falsity".) Russell's theory faces various problems, the most fundamental of which, according to Zalabardo, is the "combination problem": the problem of explaining how the items the representation is about would have to be combined with one another in order to make the representation true. The picture

theory of representation developed in the *Tractatus*, according to Zalabardo, seeks to fulfill the same agenda of MRTJ without falling into its pitfalls. In particular, it seeks to supply a better solution to the combination problem. It does so, in the first instance, my holding that represent-ations are composed of items that *stand for* the items they are about, rather than *including* those items as their parts, as maintained by MRTJ. (Why Russell resisted until the late 1910s this rather natural move is not an issue that Zalabardo discusses in depth.) The crucial idea of the picture theory, then, is that a representation is a *fact*. A representation is composed of parts which stand for the items the representation is about; these items are related to one another in a certain way; and the way in which the things represented *would* have to be related to one another in order to make the representation true is identical to the way in which the parts of the representation are *actually* related to one another. Zalabardo goes on to argue that most of the doctrines of the *Tractatus* can be derived from these basic contentions and a number of auxiliary assumptions plausibly attributable to early Wittgenstein.

One of the greatest merits of Zalabardo's book is that it helps us to think hard about the idea that representations are *facts* – an idea that is clearly central for the *Tractatus*, but that is difficult to grasp in its full significance. Particularly interesting, in this regard, is Zalabardo's interpretation of the distinction between logical pictures and pictures that employ more specific forms of representation (e.g. spatial or chromatic pictures). I expect, however, that some readers will be surprised to find out that Zalabardo goes beyond the plausible claim that the *Tractatus* responds to a Russellian problematic: he attributes to the *Tractatus* solutions that, as he himself often emphasizes, remain deeply Russellian. So, for example, Zalabardo argues that the sections of the *Tractatus* that deal with the inexpressibility of logical form construe the logical form of a fact as itself a fact (a "fully existentially generalized…fact", p. 77, n. 25), just as Russell maintained in the *Theory of Knowledge* – with the only difference that, for reasons that Zalabardo finds inconclusive, the *Tractatus* regards such a fact as not representable, and thus as something that does not strictly speaking count as a "fact" in the sense defined by the *Tractatus* (pp. 76-84). Similarly, Zalabardo presents the Tractarian distinction between "saying" and "showing" as a version of a distinction drawn in Russell's *Theory of Knowledge*. For Russell, our access to facts is a multiple-relation, subject to truth or falsity, whereas our access to the logical form of a fact is an immediate, dual relation, not subject to truth or falsity. For the *Tractatus*, we access facts (which can be "said") by picturing them, but we access the logical form of a fact (which can only be "shown") by means of a "pseudo-perceptual, immediate relation" (p. 85). This special relation does not count, by

Tractarian standards, as a form of "picturing," because it does not give us access to items that count, by Tractarian standards, as "facts"; but it retains nonetheless a picturing-like nature, because the items it makes available to us are similar to facts. For Zalabardo, the *Tractatus* invokes the same special relation to explain our access to other denizens of what can only be shown, such as the "the pairings of the constituents of the picturing fact with the objects they stand for" (p. 84), and the "information" that we need to grasp in order to know whether a proposition follows logically from another proposition (pp. 191-194). With respect to each of these issues, however, one can argue that the distance between Russell and the *Tractatus* is much greater than Zalabardo contends. Michael Kremer (2001, 2007), for instance, has argued that one of the central goals of the *Tractatus* is to attack the tendency to construe "what can be shown" on the model of "what can be said," which is precisely what the *Tractatus* does according to Zalabardo.

Zalabardo engages with an extraordinary number of intensely debated exegetical issues. To give just a few examples, he argues that the picture theory entails that Tractarian objects include not only particulars, as some commentators have maintained, but also universals; he defends a "combinatorial" inter-pretation of the Tractarian account of possible but non-actual states of affairs; he presents a non-standard interpretation of the Tractarian argument for simple objects, which does not hinge on the necessity to rule out empty names; he gives an non-atomistic account of the Tractarian conception of propo-sitional constituents, arguing that it extends to all the parts of elementary propositions the status that Frege attributed to "unsaturated expressions"; he discusses in detail the Tractarian critique of Russell's Theory of Types; and he argues that the Tractarian analysis of ordinary-language propositions is guided "by our inclinations concerning the logical relations that they bear to each other" (p. 208). Given its length (250 pages), the book cannot deal extensively with all the issues it tackles. In some cases, the discussion is very quick and leaves the reader with a lot of questions. This applies, in particular, to the treatment of non-elementary propositions – the part of the book that I found less satisfactory. The topic is broached in the last 10 pages of the final chapter (pp. 217-227). The stakes here are high. In her *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Anscombe argued at length against readings that construe the whole Tractarian theory of propositions as a "merely external combination of two theories: a 'picture theory' of elementary propositions… and a theory of truth-functions as an account of non-elementary propositions" (1965: 25). This is precisely the view that Zalabardo does not hesitate to attribute to the *Tractatus* – even though it clashes, as he himself notices (p. 217), with the statement

that "[a] proposition is a picture of reality" (TLP 4.01), which contains no intimation that the picture theory is meant to apply only to *elementary* propositions – and even though it clashes, as he might as well have noticed, with the statement that "[a]n elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself" (TLP 5), which makes clear that truth-operations are meant to be involved already at the level of elementary propositions, as confirmed by the fact that the general form of the proposition (which gives the form of *all* propositions, elementary and non-elementary) contains the sign of a truth-operation (TLP 6). But the clashes here are so conspicuous as to cast serious doubts on the accuracy of Zalabardo's interpretation. This is not to deny that his book as a whole is a lucid and earnest work deserving the attention of anybody interested in understanding the *Tractatus*.

Auburn University, AL, USA

silver.bronzo @ gmail.com

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