

## The Tractatus for Future Poets: *Dialectic of the Ladder* by B. Ware

Kevin Cahill

Ben Ware, *Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the Tractatus and Modernism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, xix+212 pp.

On a flight to Oslo in the summer of 2016, one of two young men sitting to my left asked me in unmistakable American English if I were an electrical engineer. I answered “No, but why do you ask?” to which one of them responded “Because of the book you are reading”. The book I was reading, or more particularly, the chapter of the book I was reading, was on electricity and electrical circuits. The book itself was a standard introductory physics textbook used in Norway. I was on my way to Oslo for the weekend to help my middle stepdaughter cram for her physics exam. As it turned out, both young men were recent graduates from U.C. Berkeley, my alma mater. One had studied computer science, the other chemical engineering. They were taking some time off of work to see a bit of Europe. We got to talking about the two different undergraduate physics series traditionally offered at Berkeley. I assumed, rightly, that they took the same series as I had taken (although in my day it was the Physics 5 series, now it’s Physics 7). This was the series described as “Physics for Scientists and Engineers”. Basically, this was the physics series one ought to take if one studied physics, chemistry, or engineering. It made relatively extensive use of mathematics. The other physics series, Physics 8, was intended for premed students and those in the life sciences (whom I suppose were not being counted as scientists, oddly enough.) Anyway, Physics 8 made rather less use of mathematics. As a biochemistry major, I could take whichever of the two I pleased. Out of stupid pride, I took Physics 5, which resulted in a string of mediocre grades. And then there was Physics 10. This was a course offered to non-science majors to satisfy a so-called “breadth requirement”. It was an entirely

conceptual presentation of the main ideas of physics without any math (or hardly any math). I now think such courses have an important role to play at universities and would never denigrate them at all. Still, in my day we used to refer to Physics 10 as “Physics for Poets”. Before leaving the plane, I asked my two fellow alumnae if Physics for Poets was offered when they were still students. One of them responded “Oh sure. But now they call it ‘Physics for Future Presidents’”.

In *The Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the ‘Tractatus’, and Modernism* Ben Ware attempts to shed light on some of the more puzzling aspects of Wittgenstein’s first book by examining it through the prism of literary modernism. Though it goes against the mainstream of traditional *Tractatus* interpretation, according to which the book is usually treated as an idiosyncratic work of philosophical logic, such an approach is not unmotivated, especially as Wittgenstein himself wrote to a potential publisher that the book is “strictly philosophical and literary at the same time”. This suggests that any just treatment of the book must address its literary character as internal to its philosophical ambitions, whatever they may be. Suffice it to say, for most of its interpretative history the literary character of the *Tractatus* has been given rather short shrift. This began to change substantially about 30 years ago, in particular with the work of Cora Diamond, the founder of what has come to be known as “resolute”

approaches to reading the book. While Diamond’s writings on the *Tractatus* kept such logical topics as the nature of the proposition, inference, the nature of a *Begriffsschrift*, and definite descriptions at the forefront of her treatment, she also paid much more serious attention than other scholars previously had to perplexing features of the work such as Wittgenstein’s calling his *Sätze* “nonsense” at the book’s second-to-last remark, 6.54, and, to Wittgenstein’s comment in the same letter to the potential editor already mentioned, where he describes the aim of the book as an “ethical” one. One of Diamond’s most controversial claims, perhaps the first pillar in resolute readings, is that when Wittgenstein tells the reader at 6.54 that the person who understands him must recognize his *Sätze* as nonsense and so throw these *Sätze* away, he really means it.

Ware wishes to draw our attention away from what I above called “logical topics” and to the book’s strictly literary character while doing justice to what he takes to be the overall correctness of a resolute approach to reading the book. It is with this goal in mind that he thinks treating the *Tractatus* as a work of literary high modernism is fruitful. Such an approach has promise, but given that Wittgenstein chose to pursue his ethical aim largely by employing the tropes of Frege’s and Russell’s work on logic, any attempt at clarifying the *Tractatus* that so substantially eschews these themes as does Ware’s had better get almost

everything else just right. Given the fact that the blurbs for the book suggest that *finally* someone has given us a way *really* to read the *Tractatus* the way in which it was supposed to be read I think Ware's book comes up short in some significant ways.

Chapter One provides some of the cultural and intellectual backdrop to the *Tractatus*. I didn't find anything exactly wrong with this chapter, but neither did I find anything particularly new. Much of it can be found in Janik and Toulmin's 1973 *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, granted without the particular modernist take Ware's narrative provides. One thing I wished this chapter had had more of was an in depth philosophical and historical treatment of the problems that modernism was meant to respond to. I think, for example, that it would have been worthwhile to explore Stanley Cavell's idea that connects the advent of modernism (and "the modern" more generally) to difficulties that arise when, for various reasons, philosophical, aesthetic, and moral traditions become increasingly difficult to inherit.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2 is a reasonably clear and accurate retelling of the state of *Tractatus* scholarship that is relevant for Ware's overall project. But again, it doesn't contain much that is new for those who have followed the

---

<sup>1</sup> Several of the essays in Cavell's (Harvard, 1969) *Must We Mean What We Say* touch on this issue. See especially "A Matter of Meaning It".

relevant debates. It does, unfortunately, repeat a now tired falsehood however, viz. that Frank Ramsey's quip "But what we can't say we can't say can't say, and we can't whistle it either" was directed at what Ramsey took to be Wittgenstein's attempt to show ineffable truths by the use of what P.M.S. Hacker calls "illuminating nonsense." This should have been laid to rest some time ago.<sup>2</sup> I was also struck by Ware's claim (p. 65) that

In the *Tractatus*, the poetic quality of the writing is evident not only in the epigrammatic style of the sentences themselves, but also, and more importantly, in the way in which every word makes a vital contribution to the whole. The writing, as it stands, is perfectly complete – in it nothing is superfluous nor is there anything missing.

This seems a bit much, given Wittgenstein's own concession in the preface regarding the slightness of his powers.

Chapter 3 deals with (mostly middle and later) Wittgenstein's

---

<sup>2</sup> See Cora Diamond (2011), "We Can't Whistle it Either", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 19: 335-356. The original remark by Ramsey can be found at F.P. Ramsey, "General Propositions and Causality" (1931), in *The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays*, edited by R.B. Braithwaite, 238. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

views about culture, modernity, politics, and scientific progress. Ware claims, correctly I think, that Wittgenstein's overall views on these matters were largely continuous throughout his life, although most of his discussion here concerns not how these views infuse the early work but concern influences such as Spengler whom Wittgenstein picked up somewhat later. Most of what is said is fine as far as it goes; but it doesn't go beyond by what has been said elsewhere. There is one point that must be mentioned where Ware's book goes completely off of the rails. This is in his discussion of some of the political implications of Wittgenstein's philosophical quietism. In particular, *PI* §124 (a remark that never ceases to send certain members of the political left into paroxysms) in which Wittgenstein writes that "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is" is connected to what Ware (94) calls Wittgenstein's "hollowed out political perspective". This, we hear, is a product of among other things Wittgenstein's "failure to grasp the working class as *the* collective agent of social (and intellectual) change..." We are then treated to a serious misreading of a discussion about philosophy with Rush Rhees, followed by the implication that Wittgenstein's calling Ramsey a bourgeois thinker is perhaps a bit hypocritical as the discussion with Rhees shows his own "bourgeois

attachment to the ideal of the autonomous, free-thinking intellectual..." If by "philosophy" Wittgenstein meant something like "intelligent, well-reasoned discussion of important topics like politics, religion, morals, and art", then perhaps Ware's accusation could get some traction. But Wittgenstein doesn't mean this; he means almost always two things (in sometimes seamless alteration): metaphysics and the critique of metaphysics. Any critique Wittgenstein might have voiced against Marxism (or any other political philosophy) would have been directed at its metaphysically foundationalist ambitions, the seeking of which he would have regarded as a diversion from the quest for a better society.<sup>3</sup>

I thought Chapter 4 on the question of the limits of language was the best chapter in the book. It situates the *Tractatus* as a kind of modernist Trojan horse among other modernist works, undermining from within as it were strains of ineffabilism about the limits of language within modernist literature itself.

Chapter 5 is a reading of Kafka's story *Der Bau* in terms of the *Tractatus*' relation to modernism. Since literature is not my field, I can only say that even if I thought the

---

<sup>3</sup> As for his calling Ramsey a "bourgeois thinker", I suspect that he meant to say something to the effect that Ramsey was a practitioner of the philosophical equivalent of what Kuhn calls "normal science".

motivation behind this chapter appealing, there were some problems with the execution. The interpretive function and placement of the biographical references to Wittgenstein's work as a designer seemed unclear to me, even if on the surface one could understand the temptation to connect just these facts to an interpretation of precisely this Kafka story. Finally, the use of Heidegger's concept of anxiety seemed a bit simplistic to me.

Overall, Ware's book is well-written and very accessible. It is a worthwhile effort at delineating the contours of an important and too often neglected topic. But as I have stated above, a bit too much of the book rehashes already available literature and there are a few serious problems with some important details.

University of Bergen, Norway  
kevin.cahill @ uib.no