Starting from Sentential Unity. Zalabardo's Reading of the *Tractatus*

José L. Zalabardo. *Representation and Reality in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Oxford (OUP), 2015, pp. 263.

In this book Zalabardo aims both as a historical as well as a systematic account of some of the key doctrines of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (TLP). The historical account (mostly in the beginning chapters) argues that the TLP answers to the shortcomings of Russell's theory of judgement and propositions. The systematic account (mostly in the last three chapters) focuses on Wittgenstein's theory of sentential unity and explores the merits of Wittgenstein's position in its own right and independently of the historical context of the TLP. Zalabardo deals thus with what he calls the 'Tractarian Account of Representation and Reality' and not with all philosophical issues present in or raised by the *Tractatus* (like subjectivity or Wittgenstein's affinity to Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein's ethic agenda etc.).

Treating the TLP as offering systematic theses goes against the common perception that the very point of the TLP is not to offer theses, but to show that no philosophical theories can be put forth beyond nonsense. Even though Wittgenstein did not intend to support a philosophical theory nevertheless it might be feasible to extract theories from his writings which merit attention however their formulation was intended.
Zalabardo takes up this possibility and in the introduction explains his approach in the light of 'Wittgenstein's Programme' of not expressing doctrines but to ultimately undermine the proliferation of philosophical doctrines. Wittgenstein's Programme proceeds in two steps: first the doctrines of the TLP have to be established as the only solutions to the supposed philosophical problems and then the argument that they turn out to reveal themselves as nonsense reveals the whole philosophical enterprise as on the wrong track. Assessing the success of Wittgenstein's Programme thus requires evaluating both steps of Wittgenstein's reduction of philosophy. The historical account in Zalabardo's book deals with the first step, whether the TLP-doctrines really answer the challenges met in Russell's account and are the only way to meet them. The systematic account in Zalabardo's book at least in part covers the second step. Even if Wittgenstein fails in both steps we can learn from such a reconstruction of the TLP. Zalabardo argues that the TLP doctrines do answer the challenges faced by Russell's theories, but fail to establish their exclusiveness. Thus (even) step 1 of the programme fails. Concerning step 2 Zalabardo argues that there is some inner coherence within the TLP doctrines towards them being inexpressible or 'nonsense' is this specific sense of being not a theory. Especially if step 2 does not succeed completely the doctrines of the TLP deserve attention as they are not nonsensical theses on language and representation that supersede other theories.

The principal start off of the TLP is Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell's theory of judgement and propositions.
["Proposition" is nowadays mostly used to stand for abstract entities of some sort (either sets of possible worlds or tuple-like set theoretic entities). Russell's early use of "proposition" (e.g. in *The Principles of Mathematics*) means something of this sort, something like a tuple of the entities which are components of the proposition. Only when moving towards Logical Atomism the notion of 'proposition' in Russell moves towards the linguistic, as Zalabardo correctly mentions. In modern parlance 'propositions' are the contents of sentences, not sentences themselves. Therefore the translations of TLP passages used in Zalabardo's book are most unfortunate: "Proposition" could be used in German, Wittgenstein could also speak of (Fregean) "Gedanken" ('thoughts'), but in fact Wittgenstein always talks of "Sätze/Satz" (i.e. sentences). These parts of the TLP are always misleadingly translated as if Wittgenstein

used "proposition". The difference to Russell and Wittgenstein's Fregean inheritance of starting with linguistic representation instead of ontology would be obvious from the proper translation.]

The two main challenges faced by Russell's theory of judgement and the proposition are (a) the problem of false judgements and (b) the issue of propositional unity. Wittgenstein criticised Russell on both accounts, and Russell accepted the criticism resulting in him dropping his project of a general theory of knowledge based on his theory of judgement and propositions. The TLP provides Wittgenstein's answer to his own criticism and thus – in the sense of 'Wittgenstein's Programme – the (only) proper account of representation.

Problem (a) consists in the difficulty of making false (or incorrect) judgements. A false judgement puts forth as true a false proposition, puts forth that something obtains in reality which in fact does not obtain. Russellian propositions, however, are complexes that really – 'REALLY' one might stump one's foot – contain those entities they are concerned with. Thus these entities are brought together, thus the proposition obtains, thus it does not not obtain, thus it cannot be false! How can there be false judgements then?

Problem (b) consists in the difficulty of explaining the difference between "Man bites dog" and "Dog bites man", and explaining that "Red swims bites" is nonsense (not even well-formed). Russell went through some pains of adding further constituents or markers which cover order, but ultimately had no solution. A tuple-like proposition cannot simply enforce the absence of further properties (corresponding two further predicates in an ungrammatical combination).

Wittgenstein's solution starts with sentences as basic representational units. Sentences have unity and it is with sentences (assertoric sentences uttered with assertoric force, to be precise) that we say something which can be true or false. Sentences are pictures of state of affairs. An incorrect judgement employs a sentence which is false (i.e. the state of affairs depicted in the sentence does not obtain). We can have the sentence "There is a unicorn in the garden" without there being a unicorn in the garden. This solves problem (a).

Given sentences we reconstruct their constituents as reoccurring components defined by their combinatorial features/possibilities. One of the components (the predicate or the entity the predicate refers to) is responsible for binding its arguments in some order, limited to its arity and type. "Red swims bites" violated the combinatorial features and thus is not sentence at all, cannot be said. This solves problem (b).

Zalabardo sets out these doctrines and the idea of pictures in detail. He even claims that the substance passage in the TLP ('2.0211 If the world had no substance, then whether a sentence had sense would depend on whether another sentence was true.') should be read as claiming that the substance of the world consists in the combinatorial features of sentential constituents. That is an interesting interpretation. [The book contains two Appendices in which Zalabardo defends his interpretation of two crucial passages against common interpretations in the literature.] One might *prima facie* read the thesis as rejecting any inferential role type of account of sense, expressing a realist picture of representation and reference. Zalabardo's reading can be made compatible with a realist picture if one understands the combinatorial features as *grounded* in a representation relationship. Zalabardo later on explains that the thesis (with related theses) also implies that the elementary sentences have to be independent of each other, and thus far from the sentences of ordinary life.

Frege thought that a model starting with (assertoric) sentences as basic semantic units and then proceeding to an account of their constituents employs a realist account of the sentential constituents referring to entities which have corresponding combinatorial features. Concepts as the referents of predicates are unsaturated and the theory of concepts underpins Frege's theory of sentential unity. Frege's theory does not face the problems Russell's theory faces. In fact one has to say that the TLP doctrine of sentential primacy, unity and combinatorial features is just Wittgenstein's adaptation of Frege's account. Zalabardo first in a footnote and

later in the main text refers to this heritage, but Frege's importance for the TLP cannot be overstated. Wittgenstein not just follows Frege, he thus inherits also some (supposed) problems resulting from Frege's theory of concepts, the most famous being 'Kerry's Paradox' (that a concept, as an unsaturated entity, cannot be named, even not by the expression "the concept 'horse', since a name refers to a saturated entity). Frege's answer to that problem, communicated to Russell in some letters and presumably verbally to Wittgenstein when he visited Frege, was the introduction of the 'showing'/'saying'-difference which is so important in the TLP. Frege claims that the logical features of concepts cannot themselves be expressed, but are shown by the formalism (e.g. Second Order Logic).

Zalabardo claims that Wittgenstein radicalizes Frege's conception to the claim that *all* constituents are unsaturated. A doctrine, however, which is endangered by the nonsense objection as types and arity of constituents have to fit each time. The result would have to be, as Zalabardo observes, that "Peter" in "Peter loves Sue" and "Peter" in "Peter swims" have to be different constituents, which makes the doctrine quite implausible, the direct textual evidence for Wittgenstein really proposing it being scarce.

This connection to Frege should have been more expanded in the book, because it invites an interesting question at a crucial point Zalabardo sets out. Wittgenstein, following Russell on this occasion, sees a problem with indirect contexts (e.g. context of belief, judgement etc.). The problem resides for him in the presence of two predicates (i.e. the embedding predicate like "believes that" and the embedded predicate), which supposedly poses the problem of nonsense again by abundance of unsaturated constituents. Wittgenstein rejects representation of representation, and this takes him a step towards the general thesis of inexpressibility. We have the 'missing (representing) subject' in the TLP, Zalabardo explains, because that would entail indirect contexts and representation of representation.

Frege on the other hand has a theory of indirect contexts. Why does Wittgenstein not follow Frege? Frege claims that sentences (being build out of unsaturated and saturated constituents) are saturated themselves: they denote truth values. They can be regarded as terms themselves. It is no accident, therefore, that the logic of Frege's *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* can be reconstructed formally as a term logic, the *Grundgesetze* being one of those writings being admiringly referred to in Wittgenstein's preface to the TLP. A term can be argument of another unsaturated term, thus indirect contexts pose no challenge for Frege. Why does Wittgenstein not follow suit? Wittgenstein could have also understood belief literally representational (like in a representational theory of mind): as sentences are real *objects* believing some state of affairs obtains could be a relation to a sentence which represents that state of affairs. Why does Wittgenstein, who otherwise stresses that sentences are part of the world, not explore this option?

The systematic part of the book then expands the start of point of the primacy of sentential unity into several directions. To be explained is on the one hand the distinction and the relation between elementary sentences and complex or everyday life sentences. On the other hand the theory of logical analysis has to be built on the dual foundation of the picture theory of representation, applying to elementary sentences, and our *immediate* grasp of logical form, as logical form and representation cannot be represented themselves. As Wittgenstein does not regard sentences as denoting truth values, the TLP presents a picture of reality as existing in (concrete, not abstract) facts. The semantic primacy of the (elementary) sentence (i.e. its precedence over names) corresponds to the ontic primacy of the (elementary) fact (i.e. its precedence over objects), which claim may be an ingredient of an advanced modern formal ontology.

From an exegetical point of view Zalabardo's book works painstakingly through the details of the TLP. Some readers might esteem his pedagogical thoroughness and repetitions, others

might think the book could be cut of considerable redundancy. One might cast doubt on some passages (e.g. pp.218-23 where he advances an unresolved problem on logical form in the TLP), because they exclusively rely on Wittgenstein's notes or diary entries, not the TLP itself. One may surmise that those thoughts and ideas present *only* in these notes or the *Proto-Tractatus* are missing in the TLP for a good reason.

From a systematic point of view one may argue with some of the details of Zalabardo's exposition. Zalabardo, for instance, sets out the TLP doctrine of non-elementary sentences being truth functions of elementary sentences. The set of true elementary sentences defines a state of the world (the basis of a 'possible world' in modern parlance, a Carnapian 'state description'). Given n elementary sentences there are 2 to the power n ways of distributing truth values among them, these are the possible states of the world. Possibilities are derived from the elementary sentences containing constituents picturing reality. The TLP endorses a re-combinatorial theory of possibility. Considering the possible states of the world we can contemplate sets of them, arriving at propositions as understood by many today (sets of possible worlds). We can picture this foundational role of elementary sentences as a huge truth table combining all elementary sentences, each row of the table then representing a possible state of the world. Zalabardo in that context talks of 'assigning truth values' to the rows, which sounds like a category mistake. One should rather take Wittgenstein's thesis ('5. A sentence is a truth function of elementary sentences.') more literally: A Non-elementary sentence can be considered as being (in the ultimate logical analysis) equivalent to a disjunction of conjunctions of elementary sentences (each disjunct being a state of world, in which the non-elementary sentence is true, the disjunct itself is a conjunction of the elementary sentences true in that state of the world). This will be a (long) sentence. It will not be a sentence if there are more than finitely many elementary sentences. If there are more than finitely many elementary sentences there can be no conjunction of them, as sentences are finite. (A non-finite number of elementary sentences presupposing a non-finite number of predicates or names would make the language involved unlearnable as well, but that, of course, does not concern Wittgenstein in the TLP)
Wittgenstein, however, as many interpreters of his philosophy of mathematics and quantification have argued, was some form of finitist. His theory of quantification treats quantifiers as abbreviations of conjunctions or disjunctions. Non-elementary sentences also contain quantifiers. So they can only be *truth functions* of elementary sentences if (i) they reduce to conjunctions or disjunctions, and (ii) every object has a name. Non-elementary sentences being truth-functions of elementary sentences also means that their truth grounds in elementary facts. (How we know about their truth may be challenging as elementary sentences are independent of each other, containing simple constituents supposedly far off from the objects and compound properties of everyday life. Questions Russell tries to tackle with his version of Logical Atomism and acquaintance, but the TLP does not concern itself with in detail.)
Zalabardo is mostly silent on quantification. He mentions *Church's Theorem* as an obstacle for Wittgenstein's claim of decidability of truth. Given finitism there is no obstacle. *Church's Theorem* states that First Order Logic *with arbitrary domains* is undecidable: First Order Logic with a finite domain is decidable, and such a domain fits the TLP doctrines.
Zalabardo excuses Wittgenstein as he could not have known *Church Theorem* when writing the TLP, but that nevertheless he made a mistake if a later theorem contradicts his doctrines. Rightly so, this applies in fact, as Zalabardo on that occasion does not note, to Wittgenstein's thesis that a sentence cannot contain itself, or that a function cannot contain itself – thus rejecting self-reference as a *syntactic* impossibility. Given arithmetization of syntax and the existence of diagonal functions a sentence (e.g. containing the predicate "has an unprovable

diagonalization") can in effect talk of itself (e.g. saying that itself is unprovable), as shown in *Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems*.

Whether a reader benefits more from the historical part or the systematic part of Zalabardo's book will, of course, depend on the view the reader brings to the study of the TLP and her interest in the systematic issue of sentential unity, but especially readers interested in a fine-grained analysis of the historical (hidden) allusions and systematic context of the TLP will benefit from the book.

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