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An Overlooked Insight of the Tractatus

Mariana Saavedra

Richard Rorty begins the introduction to his magnum opus *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (hereafter PMN) as follows:

Philosophers usually think of their discipline as one which discusses the perennial, eternal problems – problems which arise as soon as one reflects. Some of these concern the difference between human beings and other beings, and are crystallized in questions concerning the relation between the minds and the body. Other questions concern the legitimation of claims to know, and are crystallized in questions concerning the “foundations” of knowledge. To discover these foundations is to discover something about the mind, and conversely.¹

This account of philosophy is largely uncontroversial. Few would deny that the history of philosophy has dealt at some point or another with these problems. For Rorty, philosophy’s problems stem precisely from the fact that this definition of philosophy is uncontroversial. He does not deny that these problems have been of tremendous significance to the tradition; he in fact sees them as having single-handedly shaped the entire tradition. He sees traditional philosophy as captive in a picture of the human mind as a great mirror² and all of its problems as implications of this.

The history of philosophy can hence be summarized in the history of our conception of the mind. If its purpose is to adjudicate claims of

¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 3

² *ibid.*, p. 12

knowledge by revealing their foundations, then the nature of the “knowers” is central. Rorty’s project is to deconstruct the notion of “knowers” as beings with minds as great mirrors, and thereby show the confusion of the epistemological project that has dominated philosophy for so long. He constructs a two-pronged attack on the traditional notions of mind and meaning, which he sees as closely related; the dissolution of one is crucial to the dissolution of the other. His deconstruction includes several positions, which he adopts from different philosophers. From Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, and Quine and Davidson, he adopts holism of meaning: language is a whole whose meanings are determined by the relation in which they stand with other parts of language, and all meanings and relationships among them are determined by use. From there, he advocates a parsimony of ontology by advocating Davidson’s thoroughgoing holism which sees linguistic and non linguistic behavior as continuous, and non-reductive physicalism which “amounts to the claim that a given event can be described equally well in physiological, non-intentional and intentional terms”³. This view dissolves the traditional problems of epistemology as it implies that “[t]he difference between mind and body –between reasons and causes- is thus no more mysterious than, e.g., the relation between a macro-structural and a micro-structural description of a table”⁴. It also implies that language does not have a “making true” but a causal relationship to the world by which we are “to think of human beings [as] trading marks and noises to

³ Ibid., “Non-reductive Physicalism” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.114.

⁴ Ibid.

accomplish purposes”⁵. This leads Rorty to the following conclusion:

In this model the distinction between Self and World has been replaced with the distinction between an individual human being (describable in both mental and physical terms) and the rest of the universe. The former is limited by the contours of the body, and the task of explaining the relations between events occurring within that boundary and all other events is a matter of postulating, or observing, entities within these contours: inner causes of human being’s behavior. These causes include both micro-structural and macro-structural, and both mental and physical, items: among them are hormones, positrons, neural synapses, beliefs, desires, moods, diseases and multiple personalities.⁶

When the self is the human being, it is in the world: there is no ontological gap to separate it from the world. Like anything else in the world it can be described in terms of a “self” for the sake of convenience, or in terms of what it feels, believes, says, does, etc. which are all part of what it is.

It is very surprising that given his infinite admiration for Wittgenstein, Rorty does not acknowledge that Wittgenstein had in the *Tractatus*⁷ advanced a view of the self that is coherent with the view he advocates. Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself does not explicitly delve into issues of the self in the *Investigations*. Though Rorty considers the

⁵ Ibid., “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 58.

⁶ Op cit., p.121.

⁷ All references to the *Tractatus* refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York, Routledge, 2002).

Investigations to be Wittgenstein's most important work and a most decisive advance towards the 'naturalization' he advocates, he does recognize some of the advances that had been made in the *Tractatus*. For example, he considers Wittgenstein's recognition of the third-man problem in Russell's relationship between logic and the world, and his postulation of logic as in the world, a first step towards naturalization⁸. It is therefore all the more surprising that he does not acknowledge the *Tractatus*' forward-thinking remarks on the self. In this essay I wish to elucidate the similarities between the Tractarian and Rorty's versions of the self and thereby show another way in which the *Tractatus* contributed to naturalization.

Within the context of the *Tractatus* the rationale behind dissolving the self is that thoughts, in the sense that they are representations, must be part of reality so that it can be necessary that they share logical form. The discussion of the self begins in 5.6. where it becomes relevant to the discussion because belief-sentences appear to present a problem if Wittgenstein's grand theory of meaning is to be truth-conditional: belief-sentences do not yield propositions whose truth-functions are determined by their parts. Fogelin expounds on the reasons why the subject is problematic when he writes: "Suppose that the subject were another object in the world which, through thinking, puts a set of objects (the thought) into representational relationship with the world. If this were the case, the meaning of every proposition would depend upon the truth of another for it would be a contingency that the required relationship obtains between the subject (one object in the world) and the thought (another set of

⁸ See "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 54.

objects in the world)⁹. Meaningfulness comes from the identity of structure of the form of representation with that which it represents. As the *Tractatus* has argued, only structure, logical form, is necessary. As the actual states of affairs in which objects stand are contingent, “if the thinking self *were* part of the world it would stand in a contingent relationship to its thoughts”¹⁰, making the ‘showing’ relationship a contingent one. Wittgenstein says this explicitly when he says in proposition 5.634 that “... no part of our experience is at the same time a priori. Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things.”

One of main problems of the *Tractatus* is that given the fact that the world is just the totality of facts, there seems to be the need for a thinking subject to discriminate between just facts and facts that stand in representation of other facts. Not all facts are meaningful, so there needs to be a subject to see that meaning. This is a problem of the picture theory of meaning and the notion that the world can be analyzed down to simple objects. The picture theory requires that the self be another object for the reasons outlined above, yet at the same seems to presuppose that subject. It is the picture theory of meaning that is incoherent and not the notion of the self. When the picture theory, which requires determinate objects, is abandoned for a notion of meaning as established by use, Wittgenstein’s insights on the absolute necessity of the subject to be part of the world, and of the contents of the mind to be in direct relationship with it, still stands.

⁹ Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston, 1976), p. 85.

¹⁰ Ibid. For a similar explanation see also Jaakko Hintikka “On Wittgenstein’s ‘Solipsism’”, in *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 67, No. 265 (Jan., 1958), 88-91. p. 89.

Wittgenstein fully develops his view of the self with his remarks on solipsism. He begins by saying in 5.6 “the limits of my language are the limits of my world”, and continues to explain how this must be so because logic does not determine what there is in the world, so the world must limit language. Furthermore there are no limitations on the subject because, as explained earlier, there cannot be anything that necessarily belongs to the subject as the only necessary relations are those determined by logic. From this he can say in the next proposition:

This remark provides the key to the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism.

For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest.

The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world.

He continues then, in the subsequent propositions to fill out his conception of the self, based on this¹¹.

In his analysis of Wittgenstein’s solipsism Jaakko Hintikka says that we must recognize the linguistic nature of the metaphysical subject in the *Tractatus*; that we must grant him a further consequence of the view he discusses¹². Given the system that the *Tractatus* constructs there is no other way to understand the subject than as the sum total of the propositions in the mind. Wittgenstein has already in proposition 5.421 after first introducing the issue of beliefs, claimed that “there is no such things as the soul –the subject, etc- as it is conceived in the superficial

¹¹ This group of propositions much like the entire *Tractatus* must be taken as a whole rather than a succession in order to be fully understood.

¹² Hintikka “On Wittgenstein’s Solipsism”

psychology of the present day. Indeed a composite soul would no longer be a soul.” Like many issues in the *Tractatus* one cannot understand this until one has understood the *Tractatus* in its totality and one needs this particular issue in order to understand the totality in the first place. Given this, it makes sense that Wittgenstein can say in proposition 5.64: “Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension and there remains the reality coordinated with it”. The implied argument is the following: if the subject is the totality of its propositions and there is no such thing as *its* propositions (because there are no necessary relations between objects), then its propositions are all the propositions.

Within Rorty’s view, there is no such thing as the limit between language and the world. It is not that their limits coincide but that there simply is no limit. This is the implication of Davidson’s thoroughgoing holism, developed in his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”. Language turns out to have no limits of its own and be a part of the world just like anything else and therefore have its limits. There is nothing in the Tractarian view of the self that is contradictory with this. By getting rid of the picturing/pictured division of facts, Rorty dissolves the need to have a subject to discriminate between the two, which as mentioned before was one of the main problems of the *Tractatus*.

The early Wittgenstein’s view of the self is furthermore compatible with Rorty’s in that it rejects behaviorism in the same manner. In propositions 5.63 and the following, Wittgenstein indicates that he does not deny that there is such a thing as a point of view, even if the subject is not a closed entity. Hintikka explains that there “ is nothing private and nothing

psychological about Wittgenstein's notion of a thought. Like Frege's *Gedanke*, it can be shared by different people. In the *Tractatus* the propositional signs are completely public, and so is that which "does not get expressed in the signs"; for if it were private, it could not be "shown by their application" (3.262). And the limits of the metaphysical subject cannot be the limits of one's actual thoughts, for there is nothing necessary about *that* limitation."¹³ Thus Wittgenstein's reasons for endorsing solipsism have "nothing to do with the classification of elementary propositions into 'mine' and 'yours'"¹⁴ and therefore have nothing to do with the troubles related to other minds which lead to behaviorism.

Rorty responds to accusations of having left out the "the view from inside" from his model (basically of being a behaviorist), by saying that this internal view discloses some but not all of the internal causes of a human being, and discloses them under "mental descriptions". "That is, what the individual human being identifies as 'himself' or 'herself' is, for the most part, his or her beliefs and desires, rather than the organs, cells, and particles which compose his or her body"¹⁵. He or she considers those particular descriptions as part of his or herself because that is what makes sense within the web of his or her beliefs. "The fact that human beings can be aware of certain of their psychological states is not, on this view, any more mysterious than that they can be trained to report on the presence of adrenalin in their bloodstreams, or on their body temperature, or on a lack of flow of blood on their extremities. Ability to report is not a matter of 'presence of consciousness' but simply of teaching the

¹³ Hintikka, p.90-91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.91.

¹⁵ Rorty, "Non-reductive Physicalism", p. 121.

use of words.”¹⁶ The notion of self is then to be understood as within a language game in which the particular psychological states are included and not a separate ontological entity and in which the collection of those descriptions is seen as “*being* the self rather than as something which the self *has*”¹⁷. Rorty concludes then that

Kant’s argument that the “I think” must accompany all my representations can (...) be construed not as an argument for a quasi-substantial background for beliefs and desires (...) but simply as a way of pointing out that to have on belief or desire is automatically to have many – that to have a belief or desire is to have one strand of a large web. The “I” which is presupposed by any given representations is just the rest of the representations which are associated with the first – associated not by being “synthesized” but by being parts of the same network, the network of beliefs and desires which must be postulated as inner causes of the linguistic behavior of a single organism.¹⁸

By this, as with Wittgenstein, any accusations of behaviorism are simply trapped in Cartesianism, because what they are claiming is being denied is precisely the Cartesian self.

Though Wittgenstein claimed to have rejected the *Tractatus* before writing the *Investigations*, it is issues such as this one that show us that the insights of the *Investigations* would not have been possible without some of the insights that he had developed in the *Tractatus*. The similarities between Rorty’s pragmatist-naturalist view of the self and the Tractarian view of the self should make us take seriously the claim that the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ Ibid.

belief in a closed ontologically separate self is incoherent with the web of language games that we seem to have. This should be all the more convincing given the fact that such a view appears in a work which still held language to have a 'making true' relationship to the world.