



# The Place of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in the History of Philosophy

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## Abstract

In this article, I analyze the place of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in the history of analytic philosophy and, more generally, in the history of Western philosophy. After questioning and re-examining the meta-historical and metaphilosophical presuppositions of the former, I completely reformulate the very question of knowing what the place of this book is in the latter. The theory that is provocatively put forward (as concerns the established historiography) is that the focal problem in the *Tractatus* lies in the ultimate foundations of philosophy through logic, and that this desideratum takes up, in new terms, the modern conceptions regarding such foundations, from Descartes and Kant to Frege and Russell. Other fundamental theses advanced in this work should be understood from the perspective of this framework: that of the linguistic turn that it inaugurated; the thesis that places the theory of meaning at the heart of philosophical investigation; and principally, based on the idea that this investigation leads to the conception of the end of philosophy itself, the thesis that concludes in favor of mysticism.

**Keywords:** Descartes; Foundations of philosophy; Kant; Postmodernity; Russell; Theory of meaning; Wittgenstein

"Either my piece is a work of the highest rank, or it is not a work of the highest rank. In the latter (and more probable) case I myself am in favor of its not being printed. And in the former case it's a matter of indifference whether it's printed twenty or a hundred years sooner or later. After all, who asks whether the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, was written in the century X or Y? So really in the former case too my treatise wouldn't need to be printed [1]".

## Introduction: The Problem

Building on research that I have been conducting over the years under different pretexts, which I will mention, in this article I seek to elucidate the question of knowing what the place of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [2] is within the history of Western philosophy; in particular,

what the historico-philosophical framework of this work is within the context of its production and publication and the way how this framework can be interpreted and projected onto that history. The issue is far from harmless and uncontroversial, as I will show. Since its writing, even before it was published and starting with Russell's "Introduction," the *Tractatus* has always been subject to debatable, contentious readings and commentaries that have to do, fundamentally, not with the work in itself but, if it is possible to separate the two things, with the respective contexts of interpretation. To give a couple of examples, which I will discuss in more detail later: initially, up to the late 1970s, the *Tractatus* was read as if it belonged to the philosophical context of Russell's logical atomism, which it was supposed to continue and develop in new terms [3,4]; then, in a second phase, it was clearly interpreted as a clear departure from that same philosophy, and, within what Rorty and others

will come to call “the linguistic turn” [5], as inaugurating contemporary investigations on the philosophy of language and, most particularly, on the analytic theory of meaning [6]. Surprisingly, there have been renowned commentators, such as D. Pears, who, given their considerable philosophical longevity, seem to have successively subscribed to both interpretations, as if there existed absolutely no conflict between them [3,7]<sup>1</sup>. From the perspective of the former, and as the philosophical historiography of the time confirms, Wittgenstein was supposedly a minor or secondary figure of no special prominence (see Urmson [8])<sup>2</sup>, whereas from the latter’s viewpoint, he was directly at the origin of a whole entirely new philosophical tradition (the analytic tradition in philosophy)<sup>3</sup>. It is obvious to us today that one thing is to reduce the importance of the *Tractatus* to Russell’s investigation program (or programs), and another, very different thing to view him as leading that same tradition, as is the case with analytic philosophy; not because the two things would be mutually exclusive, with absolutely no room for compromise between them (which, as will be shown in this article, is far from having happened), but because otherwise we would never be truly able to understand its originality. In any case, the latter interpretation, which is undoubtedly the most current and up-to-date, raises tremendous problems concerning what may be called a “history of the history of philosophy,” among which that of knowing how the abovementioned tradition can itself be included in the broader context of the history of Western philosophy. The main point to be emphasized seems to be that philosophical readings, whatever they may be, are necessarily produced within a specific context, being the result of the projection onto the works of the authors under consideration of premises that are in part not related to the works themselves, but rather, as mentioned, related precisely to those interpretive contexts<sup>4</sup>. (Besides analytic philosophy as such, another example of this type of context, of particular importance when studying Russell, is that of the “tradition of British empiricism in philosophy,” proposed by Ayer in the 1930s and which I have carefully analyzed

in several publications.)<sup>5</sup> Having the proper hermeneutical awareness of such projections is absolutely key for historians of philosophy in order to be able to distinguish, as far as possible and where practicable, between, on the one hand, what belongs to the author or the philosopher and their respective period, and, on the other, what belongs to the period itself or to the commentator’s interpretive context. But more generally: such an awareness allows them to bring the philosophical interpretations involved into conflict, dialectically speaking (that is, comparing or contrasting them), inferring from them what can be inferred in order to gain a better understanding of the philosopher’s work itself. From this viewpoint, as some renowned commentators and historians have argued, philosophical historiography can be systematic and have the highest philosophical relevance and the broadest philosophical reach [12]. The interpretations of the *Tractatus* will be analyzed along these lines in the present article.

### The Analytic Prejudice in Philosophical Historiography

Let us go back to Rorty and his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*—a book edited and published in 1967. After what has been said, it is significant to note that Wittgenstein’s philosophy in *Tractatus*, in particular, though also in *Philosophical Investigations* [13], does not seem to merit any importance or relevance at all in Rorty’s book when compared to other, minor authors who did not go down into the history of philosophy (the so-called “monumental history”) and are now virtually unknown. Only about a decade later did Wittgenstein emerge on scene. The same type of observation concerning this great philosopher could be made in regard to other famous philosophical historiographies of the time [14]. What are the reasons for that? Basically, at the time the context was not favorable or conducive to it, i.e., there existed no reading framework that would highlight Wittgenstein’s importance or originality. It was necessary to wait until the problematic of the theory of meaning, and in particular, that of holism, emerging from a variety of sources, though particularly from Quine’s philosophy, took the history of philosophy stage itself. It was necessary to wait for what in the last few decades we have come to call, “postmodernity in philosophy” (a complex cultural and interdisciplinary phenomenon with other strands besides the philosophical). Some of Quine’s works in the 1950s, such as “Two dogmas of empiricism” and above all the book *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, in the late 1960s, played an absolutely key

1 See Pears write: (1956) [3] and (1987-1988) [7]. This is surely a unique and very interesting fact from a historiographical perspective.

2 See also Urmson (1956) [9]. This text is perhaps the first major meta-historical account of what we might call “the philosophy of analysis,” which is far from corresponding to what would come to be known as “analytic philosophy.”

3 See Glock (Ed.) (1997) [10] and Glock (2008) [11]. Unfortunately, nowhere in Glock’s historiography do we find an analysis and discussion of the proto-histories of analytic philosophy such as the one that I have just mentioned.

4 See Ribeiro 1999 [15]. This interpretation allows us to make sense of readings of the *Tractatus* that appear to be mutually conflicting, particularly when they come from a single author or commentator, as is the case with Pears’s.

5 See Ribeiro (2005b) [16]. From this perspective, it is worth mentioning several of Ayer’s works that are closely interrelated. See Ayer (1935), (1940) and (1971). Of particular importance is Ayer [Ed.] (1956). Ayer’s historiography does not seem to have had a major impact on contemporary analytic philosophy [17-20].

role in this respect, clearly showing that such a problematic is what lies at the heart of the philosophy of language and the foundations of philosophy in general<sup>6</sup>. (It is no surprise that Quine, who, in contrast to Wittgenstein, has always maintained close collaboration with what at a given time M. Dummett called “British philosophy of ordinary language” [Austin, Ryle, and others]<sup>7</sup>, has pride of place in *The Linguistic Turn*, as well as in other coeval anthologies.)<sup>8</sup> In this light, one could reread Wittgenstein’s works, including the *Tractatus*, from a perspective that was entirely different from the traditional one, that is, based on the reading framework of Russell’s philosophy of logical atomism, as Pears had done in his early works. It is important to start by noting that, as we shall see in more detail below, this philosophy, with its nonetheless significant impact on the *Tractatus* (as is immediately clear in its first three sections, on the theory of proposition), was, when correctly interpreted, far from being identifiable either with the problems discussed in this book, generally (the metaphilosophical status of logic, issues concerning ethics and the defense of mysticism, etc.), or even with those that lay at the root and led to the development of Russell’s philosophy itself from 1900 on, from *The Principles of Mathematics* [27] to *Our Knowledge of the External World* [28] and his lectures on “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” [29]. From then on, Russell’s problems themselves have to do, at least in part, with issues such as Wittgenstein’s, in the *Tractatus* and in *Philosophical Investigations*, on the theory of meaning and the foundations of philosophy.

*In principle*, the *Tractatus* became part of the history of Western philosophy through what came to be known, from the 1970s on, as the “history of analytic philosophy.” However, as I will be arguing, considering that the historians of this latter philosophy clearly distinguish it from the former, based on the well-known “divorce” between analytic philosophy, on the one hand, and “continental philosophy,” on the other, the question of knowing what the true place of this work is within the broader context of Western thought, from Plato and Aristotle, to Frege and Russell, including also Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, has, in a way, always remained unanswered. (This is a paradoxical consequence of analytic historiography in recent decades and the establishment of the “analytic tradition in philosophy” as a completely distinct and separate tradition from the “continental tradition.”) Indeed, only exceptionally and sporadically do those who *explicitly* claim

to belong to analytic philosophy try to place the *Tractatus* within that context (this is not Pears’s case, as his last works on Wittgenstein [7], show). The official conception is that the book is supposed to somehow constitute the proto-history of contemporary analytic philosophy, in general, i.e., that it is supposed to constitute a founding, normative period containing, more or less potentially, the seed of the field of problems that underlies the development of that philosophy. (This is how Hacker [6,30], possibly the most prestigious of Wittgenstein’s commentators today, sees it.) And from this perspective, as I have suggested, the theory of meaning plays an absolutely fundamental role in the *Tractatus*; because, in one way or another, that development is precisely about such a theory, from Viennese logical positivism (in the 1920s and 1930s) and British ordinary language philosophy (in the 1940s and 1950s) to Quine, Putnam, and other more recent philosophers. Now, that the concept of the history of analytic philosophy, as we can understand it even today, is a historico-philosophical construct that has been progressively developed; that it is indeed a *construct* rather than some entity or reality that exists on its own, virginally untouched by or immune to our interpretations (as at first sight one might naively and unwittingly be led to believe), is something that shows its birth and evolution from the late 1960s to our day, that is, throughout the last sixty years (see Wright [31], p. 41ff). As I have mentioned, *before this period*, in which all of Wittgenstein’s philosophy is significantly included (being an Austrian author, he was therefore geographically “continental”), from the *Tractatus* to *Philosophical Investigations*, there is no “history of analytic philosophy,” or, in fact and strictly speaking, no “analytic philosophy”—which some analytic historiography (such as Hacker’s) readily admits and acknowledges, although it fails to draw all the important consequences that should be drawn from it. One such consequence, possibly the most important, is the characteristically manipulative ideological-institutional function that the concept of “analytic philosophy” has now acquired: new models and criteria emerge to evaluate philosophical production, namely the one that does not comply with the abovementioned proto-history and its developments, as is, from the start, the case with Bertrand Russell’s. Among those models and criteria is that of M. Dummett’s above-mentioned historiography, in the 1970s and 1980s [25, 32-33]. Another consequence is that the analytic tradition in philosophy gains a social, cultural, and political identity that is again clearly distinct from so-called “continental philosophy” (an issue that I have discussed elsewhere and will not be addressed in this article)<sup>9</sup>. A key aspect concerning the first consequence mentioned is that philosophical historiography emerges as a legitimizing tool of both analytic philosophy and the reading of the *Tractatus* that is made possible under its premises: placing

6 See Quine (1953), and also Quine (1962) and (1969) [21-23]. For a comparison between Quine’s and Wittgenstein’s perspectives on holism, see Arrington & Glock (Eds.) (1996) [24].

7 See Dummett (1978, pp. 432-433) [25]. Dummett is a central figure when it comes to assessing the impact of Quine’s philosophy on so-called “analytic philosophy” in general.

8 See Rorty (Ed.) (1967, pp. 168-172) [5], and Lewis (Ed.) (1963, pp. 100-131) [26].

9 See Follesdal (1997) [34]; and Ribeiro (2001, pp. 45-49) [35].

this work in the broader context of the history of Western philosophy, thus showing its more or less close connections with so-called “continental philosophy,” is basically out of the question for that historiography. According to this conception, philosophy, or the philosophy that is worthwhile doing in the present does indeed start with Wittgenstein and his direct predecessors; not exactly Russell, but principally Frege [35].

### The *Tractatus* Revisited: Russell vs. Wittgenstein

For analytic historiography from the 1960s on, given the choice of the proto-history that was mentioned above, the task consisted in highlighting the originality of the philosophy presented in the *Tractatus* in contrast to Russell’s philosophy as if, again, no more or less fundamental compromises existed between them; such compromises have to do not only with the period and its context, but also, mostly, with the history of Western philosophy itself as a whole. Anecdotally: at the time, the *Tractatus* was supposed to be the cause of the “bankruptcy” or “collapse” of Russell’s philosophy: from the same perspective, and on the other hand, everything Russellian in the book should be either expunged for being inadequate, or completely reinterpreted [36]. As for the former argument, it is completely unreasonable, as I have argued in several of my works: after the reception of the *Tractatus* manuscript and the “Introduction” to the book, Russell’s philosophy was more alive than ever before, as demonstrated by his writing of *The Analysis of Mind* [37], where, from his own point of view, the author advances a number of theses which Wittgenstein comes to develop later. An example is the thesis that meaning is fundamentally a result of the use of language itself [38,39]. And, as is known, Russell would only retire from philosophy about forty years after his “Introduction” to the *Tractatus*, around the time when *My Philosophical Development* was published [40]. In contrast to the established historiographies, this reading deservedly places this British philosopher in a vibrant dialogue with the philosophy of his day, at least during the first half of the 20th century.

The latter contention, directed against the readings that prevailed from the 1930s onward in the Anglo-Saxon world (in the 1960s Urmson [9], p. 18,) mentions a “Cambridge school” supposedly under the philosophical patronage of Russell), such as Pears’s, mentioned above, involves prematurely attributing to the *Tractatus* the core thesis of *Philosophical Investigations*: that language, and the theory of meaning in particular, is the fundamental, decisive subject of philosophy. Some commentators, such as Hacker, do not deny the significant differences between the two books, which, with the latter, presuppose the emergence of a naturalist and behaviorist perspective on meaning; however, the theory of

meaning is chosen as being their common framework (see Hacker [30], pp. 1-33.) This is the perspective from which the ontology, the metaphysics and the epistemology of the *Tractatus*, which are clearly questioned by *Philosophical Investigations*, are understood: it was not about continuing or developing conceptions such as those found in *Our Knowledge of the External World* [28] and the lectures on “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” [29], as in the reading framework of the philosophy of logical atomism, which Pears had started by partly endorsing, but rather, in a complete break with those conceptions, highlighting precisely the fundamental importance of the theory of meaning for an entirely novel and revolutionary conception of philosophy. Supposedly, Russell was not interested in a philosophy of language or a theory of meaning in themselves or in making them the key subject of philosophical investigation, since he places them both at the service of the same *desiderata* as traditional philosophy, in particular the Cartesian and the Kantian aspiration to “our knowledge of the external world.” In any case, faced with the impossibility of denying that the *Tractatus* actually deals with such matters (as becomes immediately clear in the first two sections), the commentators who support the latter claim, which I have been discussing, suggest that, in contrast to what happens with the British philosopher, they are supposedly free from the “inconsistencies” and “contradictions” that can be found in the texts by Russell mentioned above. (This would supposedly involve “pure” ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology, if the concept makes any sense, which presuppose the elimination of that which, in a philosophy such as that of logical atomism, is the role of the idea of a subject of knowledge.) Russell’s “Introduction” to the *Tractatus* emerges here as a key text for the Wittgensteinian critics of the philosopher throughout the last four decades: because he supposedly failed to understand Wittgenstein’s fundamental thesis in this book, according to which ordinary language is “in order as it is,” needing no correction or reformulation such as those that would be provided by a “logically perfect language”—like, allegedly, the language of *Principia Mathematica* and the language that Viennese logical positivism endorsed in the wake of this book [41,42]. As I have demonstrated in other works, this accusation is philosophically unsubstantiated and completely inadequate, because, for Russell also, around 1918-1920, language is “in order as it is.”<sup>10</sup> However, for Wittgenstein’s followers the thesis in question should be considered from the perspective of the theory of meaning in *Philosophical Investigations*: in contrast to Russell and logical positivism, logic as a tool for the investigation of ordinary language is dismissed in the *Tractatus*, and the theory of meaning is identified as being at the heart of philosophical

10 See Ribeiro (2005a, 2005d, 2007b, p. 43ff, 2010) [39,43-45].

investigation.<sup>11</sup> As I explained earlier, the result of all of this is: the “bankruptcy” of Russell’s philosophy with the publication of the *Tractatus*; Russell’s exclusion from the more general development of philosophical ideas throughout the 20th century [46]. But what is “Russellian” about that work in the systematic sense of the concept of philosophy, which is the one that truly matters? What is there in common, with that book, between Russell’s “program”—consubstantiated in his famous expression “logic is the essence of philosophy, in *Our Knowledge of the External World*—and Wittgenstein’s “program,” despite all the well-known divergences between them? Having stripped the study of the ideological context of the *Tractatus*, without which it cannot be understood, of a truly positive philosophical interest, and having eliminated virtually all of Wittgenstein’s commitments to and alignments with that context, what other connections *with the past of the history of Western philosophy*, particularly with the modern era, from Descartes to Kant and to Hegel (that is, with “continental” philosophy proper) does Wittgenstein’s famous work have? By making it the starting point of the analytic tradition in philosophy, analytic historiography does not offer any answer to these questions because, in light of the reasons described above, it has no interest in it.

### The Ideological Function of the Philosophical Historiography on the *Tractatus*

A key point in what I have said so far, one that needs to be clarified before we proceed, is the ideological, institutionally legitimizing function of the historiography that concerns the *Tractatus* and was produced within the analytical paradigm in philosophy. The core idea, as I have expounded in a number of publications [35,39], is that such an historiography plays a clearly institutional role in the Anglo-Saxon academic world in the defense and legitimization of the analytic tradition in philosophy itself. That is the role of the *Tractatus* as proto-history of this tradition. In the 1950s, Gellner [47] was the first to draw attention to this from a sociological point of view, and the subject has been taken up by several authors in recent decades. In the Anglo-Saxon universities that embody this tradition, that ideological function involves keeping it and developing it, possibly excluding the readings and interpretations that fail to conform to it, that are not “analytic” in the strict conceptual sense of the word [48]. Russell’s exclusion from the analytic movement by analytic philosophers in general falls into this context. As for Ayer’s abovementioned “tradition of British empiricism”, it seemed

to play exactly that role, emerging as the framework that legitimizes Locke, Berkeley, and Hume’s true place in the history of philosophy. (Historiographies that were not aligned with this paradigm could be disparaged and, at least potentially, excluded.) For a “continental” philosopher, in the analytic sense of the word, what I am saying is at first sight surprising, because the *institutional conceptions* of philosophy (the way how philosophy is conceived of and practised in the institutions where it is taught) are, in principle, not philosophically relevant as such. (This subject is only sporadically and exceptionally mentioned in so-called “continental” historiography, as is the case with Mulligan’s [49,50]; and this clearly shows how, in general, continental philosophers do not consider it to be of major philosophical interest.) I wrote “in principle” because, ultimately, continental philosophical hermeneutics in general serves the same legitimizing function, which usually goes unnoticed, considering that its object is the broad context of the history of Western philosophy as a whole, not this or that specific tradition. From a perspective that is quite similar to mine, Kuhn’s sociological approach to the philosophy of science [51,52] evinces the essential connection between science as revolutionary theoretical production and its institutionally legitimizing interpretations within the framework of what the author calls “normal science.” What I am arguing is that a type of concepts similar to Kuhn’s can and must be applied to philosophy, leading, at least in part, to the same conclusions as the ones that can be drawn from his philosophy of science [53]. What actually happens is that philosophical historiography, whether continental or analytic, should not be viewed as something separate, alien to philosophical production itself; that is, as simply constituting the commentators’ role and duty in contrast to those of the philosophers themselves. This is what the famous controversy between the two fields, mostly from the 1960s and the 1970s onwards, was about; according to it, in the continent, philosophy was essentially *history of philosophy*, while analytic philosophy ignored history, or was even ahistorical because it was creative and original. Such controversy no longer makes sense, as shown by the extensive analytic (as well as continental) historiographical production on the *history of analytic philosophy* itself. Both philosophical historiographies legitimize this production historically, at both the institutional and, more specifically, the university level, emerging as the “true text” or the “true narrative,” the one that must be unveiled and brought to light as original.

### Readings of the *Tractatus* in Postmodernity

Significantly (from the perspective that I adopt here, which was outlined in the introduction to this article), the major changes in the reading frameworks of the *Tractatus*, as well as of the history of analytic philosophy in general, were

11 This interpretation does not appear to be endorsed by Wittgenstein himself in the first book mentioned: “It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of tools in language and of the way they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)” (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 128 [13]).

made on the margins of the analytic tradition itself, if not entirely against it. They were indeed presented and based on meta-historical and metaphilosophical assumptions that were entirely different from those of the analytic tradition, and, in the case of the *Tractatus*, irrespective of any reading, commentary or interpretation of the work itself. I am referring to the historiography that emerged in the 1970s and sought to incorporate the analytic movement itself as a whole and from its (supposed) foundations, with Frege and Russell, into the broader context of the history of Western philosophy. The most remarkable example of this is the book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, by Rorty—the same author who, in the late 1960s, introduced the proto-historical concept of a “linguistic turn,” which I have mentioned a number of times [54]. Rorty’s merit in that book initially lies in the fact that analytic philosophy, or its “tradition,” is historically contextualized in such an ambit, shared with “continental philosophy,” showing that only in an ancillary or secondary way (“rhetorically”, if you prefer) can one talk about them as autonomous entities divorced from that “philosophy” (p. 257ff). In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the “history of analytic philosophy,” which cannot be reduced to the authors and topics published and addressed ten years before in *The Linguistic Turn*, is now part of the “history of Western philosophy” in its own right. It is indeed included in this history as its last or final chapter, as being, for all intents and purposes, the one that, according to Rorty’s interpretation, marks its end as systematic investigation, from Plato and Aristotle to the present. (All this does not mean that Rorty’s theories were accepted by analytic philosophers in general. On the contrary. Their conceptions remained faithful to the ideas analysed in section 2 of this article, as shown in some recent analytic historiography, particularly Glock’s [11], pp. 3-20[12]). The fundamental historico-philosophical assumptions of both analytic philosophy and continental philosophy are basically the same today: Cartesian and Kantian modernity, and the idea that philosophy can found all the other fields of knowledge (as argued in the famous “tree of knowledge”, in Descartes’s *Principia Philosophiae* [56]) and, through this, our knowledge about the world and human action as a whole. Philosophy plays this foundational role by providing a neutral, systematic investigation framework, *whatever it may be* in historical terms (because this framework has been differently conceived of from the 17th and 18th centuries to contemporary times, although from the beginning its distinctive features have been basically Kantian, that is, those of the “transcendental logic” of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*),<sup>13</sup> but in any case, including Frege’s and Russell’s mathematical logic, and, by extension and comprehension, the “philosophical logic” of the *Tractatus* itself. In Rorty’s

interpretation, this conception means or implies that the “enemy” of analytic philosophy, or of its respective tradition, i.e., Descartes, Kant, and continental philosophy in general, has always lived inside their own household, and not outside. To this representation of philosophy in modernity the North-American philosopher contrasts (in a way that I do not find relevant to analyse in depth here) a different, post-modern one, which he himself develops following James’s and Dewey’s pragmatism, Heidegger’s philosophy, and other contemporary authors and currents, and which, at least in part, is consistent with Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (a “post-modern” work, according to a reading like Rorty’s in 1979, that is, a work where, in contrast to the *Tractatus*, that foundational and systematic conception that I mentioned above is abandoned).<sup>14</sup> Rorty’s theory, which brings to the forefront and reformulates such problematics as those addressed by Quine from the late 1960s on (such as ontological relativity), is that analytic philosophy was unable to meet its goals, particularly as regards the theory of meaning. This may have happened not so much (or not only) because this philosophy became involved in the same difficulties, inconsistencies, and contradictions as continental philosophy (this conclusion, which is nevertheless true and pertinent, was drawn by other coeval historiographies, such as Katz’s and Coffa’s),<sup>15</sup> but because the foundational and systematic modern project, with its Cartesian and Kantian inspiration, is itself non-viable. Whether through logic or in any other way, philosophy cannot and should not provide the foundations for anything at all, as it was ambitiously and generously assumed to be able to do after Descartes and Kant.

### The Dialectics of the *Tractatus’* Reading Frameworks

Let us call this reading of contemporary philosophy in light of the distinction between modernity and postmodernity, and, in particular, of the question of knowing what foundations can philosophy provide for knowledge and human action, a “postmodern” reading. (The term was first used by J.-F. Lyotard around the time of the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [60]). This question, I insist, is the central theme of modernity. There is no doubt that both Russell’s investigation program, from 1900 onwards, and Wittgenstein’s in the *Tractatus* and in contrast to *Philosophical Investigations*, are modern in the sense that both may be read in light of the foundationalist paradigm in philosophy, which, as I mentioned, is understood differently in the two cases. I will expand on this below. With a reading such as Rorty’s in his second book, what this is about is, again,

12 Cf., in this regard, Martinich (2001) [55]

13 See Kant (1787/1998, p. 153ff) [57].

14 See Rorty (1979, p. 3357ff) [54].

15 See Katz (1990) [58] and Coffa (1995) [59]

a reading framework, that is, the explanation of assumptions from whose perspective contemporary philosophy, and analytic philosophy in particular, should be contextualized and interpreted within the broader context of the history of Western philosophy as a whole, *with the thesis that philosophy itself has reached its end* [54]. Analytic historiography, with its ideological obsession with the idea that it will become part of a philosophical tradition that is completely separated from this history, can in no way claim to be able to achieve the same fundamental result. But the question of modernity in regard to foundations (Kant's question in the *Kritik der reinen Verunft* being, as we know, "What can I know?") is not just theoretical or metaphilosophical: it is also a social, cultural, and political question that has to do with the period (or periods) in which it was raised. (It is from this point of view that it becomes important to Lyotard.) Especially, and in light of a work such as the *Tractatus*, it is also (as Toulmin and Janik show in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*) an ethical question, i.e., a question about the meaning of life and of human existence [61]. (The *Tractatus* is primarily a modern work in the Rortyan sense of the concept, exactly because in it, philosophy encompasses all fields of traditional philosophy, including science and ethics, although, as I will be arguing, this happens in a completely innovative way.) All of this does not mean, as I started by saying in the introduction to this article, that we should completely abandon the reading framework provided by analytic historiography. The conception according to which the core issue in the *Tractatus* is the theory of meaning, thus foreshadowing *Philosophical Investigations*, can and should be revisited and reformulated in the ambit of modernity and the question of foundations. Nor does it follow from what was said that the classical conception, from the 1930s to the 1960s, according to which the former book is part of Russell's "philosophy of logical atomism" program, should be discarded, because the *Tractatus*, at least in part, is only intelligible from the perspective of this conception. As regards the hermeneutics of this book, the key point is that any reading framework will prove useful provided it allows us to understand both its totality and its parts in the context of the history of Western philosophy. And this aim may, of course, involve a dialectic of frameworks, that is, contrasting them, when this is deemed relevant for the best interpretation of the texts under analysis.

### The *Tractatus* and the Foundations of Philosophy

From this perspective, the first thing to do is to completely set aside the theory of analytic historiography according to which, around the time when the *Tractatus* was published, there were no substantive, constitutional compromises between Russell's investigation program, on the one hand, and Wittgenstein's, on the other. The reason

is that what actually happens in that book is that it seeks to offer new foundations for the British philosopher's idea—from 1900 and *The Principles of Mathematics* [27] to *Our Knowledge of the External World* [28] and the lectures on "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" [29], including also the *Principia Mathematica* [62]—that logic ("mathematical logic," or "formal" or "symbolic logic," as it was also commonly called in the second half of the 20th century), lies at the core of the foundations of knowledge and human action in general, or that such foundations can only be provided through it. As specialized research has thoroughly demonstrated to this day, Russell's program (known as "logicism") is essentially based on an attempt to solve and overcome the contradictions that existed within certain areas of mathematics, such as set theory, in the late 19th century ([63]. This philosopher's theory is that only mathematical logic, not traditional metaphysics (or what in some of his texts he calls "a theory of substance" [64], can do this. As I said, Russell's program is consubstantiated in the idea that "logic is the essence of philosophy," which, in his own way, Wittgenstein explicitly and eloquently subscribes to in several sections of the *Tractatus*. Presumably, nothing could be more characteristically "Russellian" in this book than this idea. Saying that logic lies at the very core of the abovementioned foundations means, in a modern, Kantian sense, and, specifically as regards Russell, saying that it is through logic that the "conditions of possibility" of mathematics are presented, and, insofar as mathematics is the language of physics and of scientific knowledge in general, it is through it that the conditions of possibility for human knowledge itself as a whole (and similarly, those of ethics itself) are presented. Obviously, the *Tractatus* is not just about the subject matter of "knowledge" (as in Russell and in traditional philosophy, and as argued by analytic philosophy), which raises inevitable epistemological issues, but about that of "language" and the theory of meaning in particular. This is how logical atomism should be reinterpreted in the *Tractatus*: for Wittgenstein, it is not an epistemological subject matter that has to do with knowledge (with a direct, immediate knowledge of the world, or with Russell's "acquaintance"), but rather with another, essentially semantic subject matter that concerns the foundations of language in general as well as those of logic itself. However, this does in no way mean that, in the *Tractatus* and according to potential reading frameworks, Wittgenstein ignored or circumvented the traditional problematics of philosophy; or what may now—from the perspective of such readings as Rorty's and others'—be termed "the problematics of philosophical modernity." As I explained, the revolution started by the *Tractatus* (till the 1970s, a silent revolution, as suggested in section 2) is undoubtedly based on the reframing of traditionally epistemological questions as semantic questions, as questions about meaning in ordinary language. This includes the emphasis placed on physics and classical mechanics, in particular, within H. Hertz's

interpretation of the latter in *The Principles of Mechanics*.<sup>16</sup> For Wittgenstein, it is all about the idea, as in the Cartesian and Kantian paradigm, that not only mathematics but also physics, when philosophically or metaphysically founded, constitute the framework within which the conditions of possibility of human knowledge in general should be understood, because it is exactly within such a framework (that of Kant's "synthetic *a priori* judgements") that this knowledge is universal and necessary.<sup>17</sup> (In *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* the field of physics is basically that of Newton's laws of motion, whose justification is provided precisely within the ambit of "transcendental logic" and the "analytic of principles" in particular.) But a similar interpretation could be applied to ethics in the last two sections of the *Tractatus*: as in that paradigm and in particular in the version presented in *Kritik*, ethics is only approached—"systematically," I would say—after the question of knowing what follows from the problematic of knowledge itself has been clarified, that is, after it has been semantically reinterpreted as a whole. From this systematic point of view ethics is the ultimate and the most fundamental part of philosophy (this is also how Wittgenstein himself always understood it.)

In the *Tractatus* the semantic territory of philosophy fully covers, if not even maps, field by field, the epistemological and metaphysical territories of traditional philosophy. Obviously, this does not happen by chance. As Pears pertinently suggested in *The False Prison* (and Toulmin and Janik argued in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*), the fundamental question of *Kritik* can still be reformulated in an essentially modern sense. Instead of "What can I know?", the true question is "What can I say?"; or, more precisely "What can I say that has meaning?" (see Pears [7], vol. 1, p. 191).<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, as we saw, we have not yet completely moved beyond modernity and the metaphilosophical questions that characterize it, such as those directly concerning Russell. Russell's foundationalist program of logic as the "essence of philosophy," in *Our Knowledge of the External World* and the books that followed, is metaphilosophically resumed in *Tractatus* as a program about the foundations of philosophy itself through logic. As Wittgenstein writes: "Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.—We cannot therefore say in logic: This and this there is in the world, that there is not.—For that would apparently presuppose that we exclude certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case since otherwise logic must get outside the limits of the world: that is, if it could consider these limits from the other

side also.—What we cannot think, that we cannot think; we cannot therefore say what we cannot think." (Wittgenstein [2], p. 149, 5.61) It is in this ultimate foundationalist sense, and only in this sense, that logic is dismissed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, in contrast to what happens in *Philosophical Investigations*. For him, it is not about belittling or disparaging its role, as some analytic historiography suggests, but, on the contrary, ennobling it and bringing it to the forefront of philosophical reflection.

### The *Tractatus* and the Idea of A "Philosophical Logic"

This is the broad context within which the very title of the *Tractatus*: "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*," and, in particular, the (at first glance enigmatic) idea of a "philosophical logic" should be read and (most importantly) reinterpreted. How and why should logic be "philosophical"? Is it not, according to analytic historiography, basically a legacy from the 20th century and the foundations of mathematics in particular? That, long before it became "mathematical," with Frege and Russell, logic was the foundational matrix of philosophy, as mentioned above, is evident in the second part of Kant's *Kritik*, titled precisely "transcendental logic." This is already a "philosophical logic:" logic is identified with the discursive processes of pure reason in that it aims to justify the possibility of knowledge and human action in general through mathematics and physics. (The question of knowing how we have arrived at this fundamental conception, from the point of view of the history and the historiographies of logic, cannot be addressed in this article. Actually, following the impact of analytic philosophy, the most relevant historiographies in the second half of the 20th century, such as Bochenski [67], Kneale & Kneale [68] and Blanché [69], do simply, ostensibly, and grossly ignore the idea of a "philosophical logic" as well as Descartes's, Kant's, Hegel's and others' contributions to it. This is surprising, or even paradoxical, but it is an uncontroversial fact.) Following the elimination of the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, German absolute idealism expands Kant's concept of logic, and it emerges in Hegel [70] as a "science" properly so-called. Though no longer explicitly mentioning logic or associating it to philosophy, Descartes's main aim in *Meditationes de prima philosophia* and, most particularly, in *Principia Philosophiae*, was potentially the same as Kant's in *Kritik*. As mentioned above, Descartes introduces the famous "tree of knowledge," of which philosophy (or metaphysics) is the trunk, with the different sciences being the branches: therefore, the role of philosophy is to found the other sciences as well as human knowledge in general. As shown by Rorty and others in the 1980s, Descartes's, Kant's, and Hegel's *desideratum* about the foundations leaves a decisive, indelible mark on philosophical modernity as a whole, extending through the contemporary era to the dawn of postmodernity,

16 See Hertz 1890 [65]. See also Wittgenstein (1922/1933), pp. 71 (4.04), 173-175 (6.341), 175-177 (6.342) [2].

17 See Kant (1787/1998, p. 193ff) [57]. Friedman (1992) [66] offers an interesting application of this idea to logical positivism in the 1930s and the following years.

18 See also, in this regard, Toulmin & Janik (1973, p. 167) [61].

after World War II. And, as I suggested, it is through it that Russell's investigations into the subject of logic starting in 1900 with *The Principles of Mathematics* and his subsequent books should be viewed. According to Rorty's historiography, it is also through it that Carnap's, Quine's, Lakatos's, and Feyerabend's investigations, as late as the second half of the 20th century, i.e., within the framework of postmodernity in philosophy, should also be examined—otherwise we will not be able to finally understand them (Rorty [54], pp. 315-355).

It must be borne in mind that Russell had been a neo-Hegelian before the 1900s, a time when, as he explains in his intellectual autobiography, whenever he had to decide between Hegel and Kant, he usually "sided" with the former philosopher (Russell [40], chap. 2). This neo-Hegelianism and the foundations *desideratum*, as I have argued elsewhere, runs through his philosophy in a more or less covert manner, virtually from beginning to end. Strictly speaking, for Russell there is philosophy only in the foundationalist and systematic sense of the concept, which means that he would reject such conceptions as Wittgenstein's in *Investigations*. The core idea of what has come to be termed "logicism" is that *mathematical* logic now plays, in new terms, the role that was traditionally ascribed to philosophy and metaphysics in particular. Insofar as physics can be reduced to mathematics and mathematics can, in turn, be reduced to logic (as demonstrated by Frege and Russell himself), the latter can be presumed to constitute the ultimate foundation of knowledge and human action as a whole. However, Russell's mathematical logic was already, in its own way, a "philosophical logic," in the Wittgensteinian sense of the concept as used in the *Tractatus*.<sup>19</sup> Logic, as we saw above, and as stated in *Our Knowledge of the External World*, is claimed to be the "essence of philosophy," since all there is to be said about the latter, in whatever domain (including ethics), fundamentally includes it in one way or another. (As seen above, with *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is saying nothing different from this [again, enigmatically, at least at first glance].) It was an optimistic idea from the start, that is, from *The Principles of Mathematics*: reducing mathematics to logic went hand in hand with the aim of eliminating or, at least, setting a clear boundary between the roles of traditional epistemology and metaphysics, including Kant's and, in particular, his notion of a "synthetic *a priori*" (the British philosopher's key concept in this book) [see Russell [27], pp. 456-461]. This is the "program" that Viennese logical positivism will seek to develop from the mid-1920s onward, principally through Carnap and Schlick,

as demonstrated in 1929 by the "Vienna Circle" manifest (Neurath [72]).<sup>20</sup> However, on the other hand, as Wittgenstein argued even before the *Tractatus* in regard to several issues concerning Russell's philosophy at the time (namely, his manuscript titled "Theory of Knowledge"), and leaving aside the details, this optimistic idea, which I mentioned above, was a clearly inconsistent and self-contradictory one, because its calling could not be anything other than epistemological and metaphysical: the philosophy of logical atomism and, more generally, Russell's program for "our knowledge of the external world" show exactly that.<sup>21</sup> Is it possible to justify logic as the ultimate foundation for knowledge and human action without getting involved in the difficulties and contradictions that characterize a project such as Russell's? This is the *desideratum* of the *Tractatus*, ultimately based on Descartes and Kant, but also strongly inspired by Russell.

### Conclusion: The Originality of the *Tractatus* in the History of Philosophy

As has been shown, the question of knowing what the place of the *Tractatus* in the history of Western philosophy is, is far from uncontroversial or inoffensive. The so-called "history of analytic philosophy" offers an unacceptable answer to this question; for all intents and purposes, it means and implies a more or less complete break with the history of the evolution of philosophical ideas as we know it in the realm of "continental philosophy." This history does not begin with Frege, Russell or Wittgenstein, but rather with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and, with modernity, through Descartes and Kant, it underwent a decisive turn that is essential for understanding the contemporary period and what Lyotard, Rorty and others called "postmodernity," a name that has endured to this day. The *Tractatus* should be read today from the perspective of these contexts, as Wittgenstein himself suggested even before this book was published, in his correspondence with Russell, regarding his work and that of Kant (a text quoted in the epigraph to this article.) All of this does not mean that the reading framework of analytic philosophy cannot be useful or yield its fruits; much less that it should be entirely discarded. (I have said the same about other alternative, competing frameworks.) The idea, originating in analytic historiography, that the theory of meaning and the problematic of language in general are the focal themes of the *Tractatus* is pertinent and relevant when viewed within the context of Wittgenstein's major and most essential problem: that of the ultimate foundations of

19 It is debatable whether in Russell's mathematical logic, mathematics includes physics. This inclusion is evident in *The Principles of Mathematics*; however, it is debatable in *Principia Mathematica*, given that the volume intended to be devoted to physics (volume 4) was never published. In Ribeiro (2003) [71], I showed that, although the issue is problematic, Russell's mathematical logic does, in fact, apply to physics.

20 I have addressed this topic in some of my articles in Portuguese, such as Ribeiro (2005c) [73] and Ribeiro (2007a) [74].

21 See Russell (1913/1984) [75]. In this regard, see Eames (1989) [46] and Hylton (1990) [36]. For more on the philosophical framework I referred to, particularly in the context of Wittgenstein's time and perspective, see Wittgenstein (1969) [76].

philosophy through logic (and, especially, through Frege's and Russell's conceptions of it). As we saw, only from the perspective of this theory can one say, with some limitations or reservations that I have carefully examined, that the *Tractatus* forestalls *Philosophical Investigations*. In its own way, the *Tractatus* closes or brings to an end the great cycle of philosophical modernity inaugurated by Descartes and Kant, of which it undoubtedly is, alongside *Meditationes de prima philosophia* and *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, one of the major highlights.

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