

Tractatus 5.1362

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the conception of free will defended by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, and in contrast to Pasquale Frascolla's verificationist reading of 5.1362, it argues that Wittgenstein's conception of free will squarely places future contingencies within the boundaries of truth-conditional semantics.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Tractatus; free will; future contingencies; verificationism.

5.1362 The freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future. We could know them only if causality were an *inner* necessity like that of logical inference. — The connexion between knowledge and what is known is that of logical necessity.
(‘A knows that *p* is the case’, has no sense if *p* is a tautology).¹

Section 5.1362 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) has been regrettably neglected by commentators.² Only Pasquale Frascolla's most sophisticated *Understanding Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (2006) devotes to 5.1362 the space it deserves.³ Nevertheless, I think that Frascolla misconstrues Wittgenstein's argument and Wittgenstein's conception of free will. In his book, Frascolla argues that 5.1362 seeks to establish that the causal nexus is not a necessary nexus, and that 5.1362 suggests a verificationist reading of the *Tractatus*. In contrast to him, I will argue that, in the section in question, Wittgen-

¹ “5.1362 Die Willensfreiheit besteht darin, dass zukünftige Handlungen jetzt nicht gewusst werden können. Nur dann könnten wir sie wissen, wenn die Kausalität eine *innere* Notwendigkeit wäre, wie die des logischen Schlusses.—Der Zusammenhang von Wissen und Gewusstem, ist der des logischen Notwendigkeit. („A weiss, dass *p* der Fall ist“ ist sinnlos, wenn *p* eine Tautologie ist)“.

² There is no trace of 5.1362 in Anscombe (1959), Fogelin (1976) and White (2006). Morris (2008) refers only to Wittgenstein's use of the word “sinnlos” in 5.1362 (n. 25, 379). Also Kenny (2006) ignores 5.1362. On page 80, he only refers to Wittgenstein's parenthetical remark (“A knows that *p* is the case”, has no sense if *p* is a tautology), which is not discussed in the present paper.

³ See also Frascolla (2007).

stein seeks to prove that we have free will, and that Wittgenstein's conception of free will sits squarely within truth-conditional semantics.⁴

Frascolla represents Wittgenstein's argument as follows:

- (1) The causal nexus is a necessary nexus, whose necessity can be matched to that of the relation of logical entailment.
- (2) If the causal nexus were a necessary nexus, then a subject *X* could know his/her own future actions.
- (3) If a subject *X* could know his/her own future actions, then his/her will would not be free.

From the three premises of the argument, the conclusion can be easily drawn that the will of the subject *X* is not free, but this is the negation of a statement which, although on merely epistemic grounds, is accepted as true by Wittgenstein; one of the premises, then, must be false. According to Wittgenstein, both premises (2) and (3) are true, hence the *reductio ad absurdum* is to be directed at premise (1), which must be recognized as being false. (2006: 132)

So, Frascolla first assumes that Wittgenstein took the existence of free will for granted and then, in the subsequent pages, he contends that the existence of free will requires a verificationist interpretation of Wittgenstein's semantics. In particular, he argues that since the rigid semantic determinism of the *Tractatus* seems to preclude the existence of free will, Wittgenstein's conception of free will suggests a verificationist approach to future contingencies. The claim is noteworthy, but, as I will attempt to show later, false. In any case, there are some more palpable problems with Frascolla's reconstruction of 5.1362. (2) says that if the causal nexus is necessary, then the subject can know his or her future actions. But Wittgenstein claims the converse: "We could know them *only if* causality were an inner necessity like that of logical inference" (my italics). In addition, (3) appears to be weaker than "The freedom of the will *consists* in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future" (my italics). Frascolla's (3) is a conditional. In contrast, Wittgenstein's claim appears to be a biconditional.

These discrepancies strongly suggest that Frascolla's reconstruction is inadequate: it takes an unwarranted amount of textual manipulation to claim that in 5.1362, Wittgenstein seeks to prove that the causal nexus is not a necessary nexus. So, in order to fully appreciate the structure of Wittgenstein's argument, we should reconsider Wittgenstein's plan for 5.1362.

⁴ Frascolla (2006) represents the most compelling verificationist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, but in the present paper, I only focus on his treatment of future contingencies in connection with 5.1362.

Let us suppose that 5.1362 seeks to establish the following thesis: the subject has free will. Nowhere in the *Tractatus* does Wittgenstein explicitly claim that we in fact have free will. However, this conclusion logically follows from these premises:

- (A) The subject has free will *if and only if* he or she cannot know his or her future actions.
- (B) If a subject could know his or her future actions, then the causal nexus would be a necessary nexus.
- (C) The causal nexus is not a necessary nexus. (In the sense that propositions about the future cannot be *logically* derived from propositions about the present).

(A), (B) and (C)'s structures faithfully mirror Wittgenstein's text. (C) is derived from section 5.1361: "We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present". While (A) and (B) are directly derived from 5.1362. In contrast to (2), (B) has the same direction of Wittgenstein's implication; and in contrast to (3), (A) is a biconditional that better captures Wittgenstein's *consists* ("besteht"). So, once we assume that 5.1362 argues for the existence of free will, we can fully appreciate Wittgenstein's argument.⁵ Nevertheless, unless we explore Wittgenstein's understanding of free will, we cannot properly assess Frascolla's claim that 5.1362 suggests a verificationist reading of the *Tractatus*.

In order to bring forward Wittgenstein's conception of free will, Frascolla attempts to trace (3) back to the venerable Aristotelian argument of the sea battle. If it is true *now* that a sea battle will take place tomorrow, then regardless of what we do, a sea battle *will* take place tomorrow. More generally, if future contingencies have *now* a determinate truth-value, then fatalism is true. Accordingly, Frascolla argues that in order to avoid fatalism, and consequently, to allow for free will, the notion of truth of the *Tractatus* must have a hidden temporal dimension; that for Wittgenstein, future contingencies lack of

⁵ To further clarify, both Frascolla and I attribute to Wittgenstein the following claims:

~N: The causal nexus is not a necessary nexus.

~K: The subject cannot know his or her future actions.

F: The subject has free will.

Yet, we disagree on their relations and on the aim of Wittgenstein's argument. According to Frascolla, Wittgenstein aims to establish ~N *via* the following implicit argumentative line: if N, then K (premise); if K, then ~F (premise); F (premise); ~K (by modus tollens); conclusion: ~N (by modus tollens). In contrast, according to my reading, Wittgenstein aims to establish F *via* the following implicit argumentative line: F iff ~K (premise); if K, then N (premise); ~N (premise); ~K (by modus tollens); conclusion: F (by modus ponens).

truth-value;⁶ and finally, that Wittgenstein's treatment of future contingencies "provides [...] a significant clue for understanding the absence of a clear-cut opposition in the *Tractatus* between a truth-conditional and a verificationistic approach in the theory of meaning" (134).

In summary, in Frascolla's interpretation of 5.1362, free will depends upon the fact that since future contingencies lack of truth-value (and since knowledge implies truth),⁷ we cannot know the future. If reality could now settle the question of the truth-value of a sentence concerning the future, then we could know the future. But how could reality do that? For Frascolla, it cannot. He thinks that for Wittgenstein, "only states of affairs which either obtain or do not obtain *now* constitute reality" (133). But Frascolla unduly restricts Wittgenstein's *Wirklichkeit* to present reality. For Wittgenstein, "the sum-total of reality is the world" (2.063), and the *world* is neither the totality of present events, nor the totality of past, present and future events, for that matter, but the totality of facts in logical space (1.13).

So, in contrast to Frascolla, I contend that Wittgenstein's conception of free will squarely places future contingencies within the boundaries of truth-conditional semantics. In fact, for Wittgenstein, free will does not depend upon an indeterminate future, but upon the impossibility to logically infer the future from the past: "We *cannot* infer the events of the future from those of the present" (5.1361). In other words, we can safely assume that for Wittgenstein, "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" has *now* a determinate truth-value without calling into question the existence of free will. Since our inferences from the present to the future are merely hypothetical, they do not guarantee truth, and a fortiori knowledge: "It is an hypothesis that the sun will rise tomorrow: and this means that we do not *know* whether it will rise" (6.36311). Accordingly, even if "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" is true now, since we cannot know that there will be a sea battle tomorrow, we can act as free agents.

⁶ "That Wittgenstein invokes [the venerable Aristotelian argument of the sea battle] which shows how fatalism cannot be avoided if a truth-value is accorded to future contingencies, proves that the notion of truth of the *Tractatus* has a hidden temporal dimension. Reality cannot now settle the question of the truth-value of a sentence asserting that *X* will do action *A* at a future instant *t* simply because only states of affairs which either obtain or do not obtain *now* constitute reality: since now it is not a fact either that *X* carries out action *A* at the future instant *t*, or that *X* does not carry it out at the future instant *t*, the sentence asserting that *X* will do *A* at *t* is now neither true nor false. The treatment of propositional logic in the *Tractatus* clearly shows that Wittgenstein was not willing to admit the Possible as a third value besides the True and the False: future contingencies and all complex sentences built up by applying truth-operations to them simply are to be dealt with as lacking truth-value. Contingent sentences which are not decidable now are confined by Wittgenstein to the limbo of neither true nor false sentences" (Frascolla 2006: 133-134).

⁷ Or as Wittgenstein puts it, "The connexion between knowledge and what is known is that of logical necessity" (5.1362).

Finally, like Frascolla, I would also like to bring forward the ancient background of Wittgenstein's claim that the freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future. Its origin is not in Greek philosophy, but in Greek tragedy: in the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles. In order to escape his destiny, Oedipus ended up making all the necessary steps to fulfill the prophecy of the oracle. His destiny inexorably prevailed on his will. This is the case for all of us, for in Wittgenstein's words, "the world is independent of [our] will" (6.373). Nevertheless, in spite of what many believe, the so-called "tragedy of fate" does not deny human freedom *tout court*, but only Oedipus' freedom, for our freedom is not grounded in our ability to determine the future, but in our ignorance about the future.

On the opposite side of the interpretative spectrum, in "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*" (1966), Eric Dodds argues that although it may not satisfy the "analytical philosopher", "neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are predetermined" (42). Accordingly, Dodds argues that Oedipus acted as a free agent and that it is wrong to think that his tragedy denies human freedom.⁸ But even if it might be true that divine foreknowledge is compatible with free will, Dodds fails to take into account the peculiar fact that not only the gods, but also Oedipus knew about his future. The oracle put Oedipus in an extraordinary epistemic position. We do not know our futures. Oedipus did, and according to Wittgenstein, this made all the difference.⁹

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⁸ According to Dodds, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud is among the many who fell for this "heretical" interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy.

⁹ I wish to thank Erik Thomsen and two anonymous referees for their insightful comments.

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