

BEYOND THE *TRACTATUS* WARS

The New Wittgenstein Debate

*Edited by Rupert Read
and Matthew A. Lavery*

First published 2011
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beyond the Tractatus wars: the new Wittgenstein debate / edited by Rupert
Read and Matthew A. Lavery.

p. cm.

1. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1889–1951. Tractatus logico-philosophicus.

I. Read, Rupert J., 1966– II. Lavery, Matthew A.

B3376.W563T732158 2011

192—dc22

2010047956

ISBN: 978–0–415–87439–7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978–0–415–87440–3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978–0–203–81605–9 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper by
Walsworth Publishing Company, Marcelline, MA



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks are due to Nadine Cipa for her help in organizing the early push to produce this book, (specifically) the philosophy division of (in general) Routledge for their heroic patience during its compilation, Nicholas LaRousse for his help in editing and compiling the manuscript, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments that have improved the book.

Matt would like to thank Kimberly, Keeghan, Shea, and Flynn, for the occasional restful night during the book's completion, and David O'Connor of Seton Hall University for inspiring, perhaps unbeknownst to him, an interest in Wittgenstein that has persisted.

Rupert wishes to thank Juliette Harkin, for being there.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

In this book, authors draw English text from either published versions of the *Tractatus*, or from translations of their own. When they believe it necessary, to avoid confusion or to note possible concern about differences between translations, they note the source.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew A. Lavery and Rupert Read

This book is intended to provide the reader with an overview of the general themes of the most recent phase of Wittgenstein research, “the New Wittgenstein debate,” which takes its name from the title of a book published by Routledge more than a decade ago, in 2000. In some obvious ways this book serves as a “sequel” to that; they share some contributors, considerable references to frequently the same texts, and much philosophical disposition. In some important ways, however, its purpose is divergent: *The New Wittgenstein* was concerned in general with *laying out* the basics of and applications of “resolutism”—the reading of Wittgenstein’s corpus emphasizing a “therapeutic” continuity between what are traditionally seen as his “early” and “late” periods. It was essentially a philosophical “coming out” party for the viability of a resolute approach, for the light that “resolutism” could shed on a host of philosophical themes (like politics, private language, methodology, etc.) previously understood almost solely from a “standard” viewpoint. While traces of this project clearly remain here, resolutism’s potential viability is no longer questioned; in fact it is even assumed in some circles, and so this book (which, unlike *The New Wittgenstein*, tends to focus somewhat more singlemindedly on the *Tractatus*) allows that reading to bear its own fruit by revealing the nuances, internal conflicts, and sometimes opposing further commitments of now not-quite-so-new readings of Wittgenstein. (And this book brings together also a few of those whom “resolute readers” regard as their most perceptive, important, and sympathetic critics: namely, Roger White, Peter Sullivan, and Adrian Moore.) Thus we aim to be part of a movement beyond “the *Tractatus* Wars” of the last decade and a half, and into a new phase of (1) development of the resolute, therapeutic approach, and (2) genuinely productive engagement with genuinely engaged detractors or constructive critics of that approach.

Warren Goldfarb begins this effort by acknowledging the same indebtedness to the early manoeuvres of resolutists and offering an impressive overview of the landscape in which they maneuvered, in “*Das Überwinden: Anti-Metaphysical Readings of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*.” This long-awaited paper, which created a sensation in one of the key moments in the public emergence, lionization, and contestation of “the new Wittgenstein” approach—the Wittgenstein congress at Kirchberg in summer 2001, on the fiftieth anniversary of Wittgenstein’s death—outlines the terrain by laying out the essential claims about nonsense (perhaps the key term in the “*Tractatus Wars*” between standard interpreters and “resolutists”), with an emphasis on claims about the use of that term in the *Tractatus*, up to the period just after the publication of *The New Wittgenstein*.

Goldfarb’s paper sets the tone for the book, and gives it historical background. The remainder of this book consists of pairs of papers, authors in conversation with one another. Against the backdrop provided by Goldfarb, these pairings demonstrate both the vitality and the range of a full-blown philosophical approach, one that has moved beyond merely concern over its fundamentals, in two ways. First, they show the variety of thoughts that can be fostered by resolutism’s arrival on the scene of “grown-up” philosophical ideas and accepted exegetical strategies by including both resolutists and those who would hesitate to be so called but whose thinking has been influenced by resolutism nonetheless, even if only in an agonistic spirit. Second, they also demonstrate in greater detail than has ever previously been the case the variety that exists within resolutism itself. In some senses, Chapters 2–9 all comment on each other, all work together to defy a facile classification of what resolutism is, all point in the directions that resolutism may travel in the future.

As Goldfarb’s paper shows, moving beyond the *Tractatus* “Wars” may first require seeing them through to their end, and this is the work of the book’s next two chapters. First Roger M. White’s “Throwing the Baby Out with the Ladder,” also long-awaited by scholars of Wittgenstein, a powerful critique of Conant and Diamond, argues that it is too hasty to let go of all of what standard readers see the *Tractatus* as doing in a reading that harkens back to the standard interpretation while acknowledging the central “claim” of resolutism: that all nonsense is just pure nonsense. Following this—in the spirit of dialectic and vigorous debate that *The New Wittgenstein* embraced by including a response to its contents by the standard reading’s standard-bearer, P.M.S. Hacker, at its conclusion—James Conant (a key contributor to that book and of course one of the first and leading “resolute” readers) and Ed Dain reiterate resolutism’s demands to this new kind of hybrid reader: such clinging results, in their view, in one of two unworkable outcomes, ineffabilism or logical positivism. Not only does this exchange help enumerate the wealth of sophisticated options potentially available to the reader of the *Tractatus* in the wake of the New Wittgenstein debate, it also marks an important moment in that (ongoing) debate: it shows the standard reading adapting to the resolute reading and sophisticating itself in the process, rather than the

previous norm of resolute readers simply being seen as obliged to answer objections offered by standard readers.

This exchange suggests, however, that the groundwork of a resolute approach may not yet be complete, and that task is taken up in novel ways in the two pairs of papers that follow. The fourth essay in the collection, Silver Bronzo’s “Context, Compositionality, and Nonsense in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” takes up the resolutists’ flag, arguing that the *Tractatus* already rules out the standard reading by undercutting compositionality as a stand-alone explanation for any linguistic act and thus the ability for there to be anything like substantial nonsense, on which the standard reading depends. The overall impact, however, looks beyond a defense of “resolutism” to a continuation of its “therapeutic” project: compositionality fails not because there is a better explanation, but because seeking a definitive explanation of the working of language is a chimera. In “The Dialectic of Interpretations,” Oskari Kuusela sets out to repair the austere conception of nonsense argued for by Conant and Diamond in response to criticisms raised against it by Hacker in 2000. Thus in a certain sense Kuusela manages the extraordinary feat of dialectically synthesizing the (Hackerian) ‘standard’ interpretation with the (Conant and Diamond) “resolute” interpretation. This project is not merely retrospective, as it suggests a strikingly novel view of what Wittgenstein was after in the *Tractatus* and of how the project of the *Tractatus*—in particular, how outlining a “concept script” that (Kuusela holds) tacitly embodies some dogmatic commitments without being committed to any metaphysical doctrines—can satisfy exegetical demands of both standard and resolute readers.

In the fifth and seventh papers in the collection, the argument/response dynamic is continued, but in a way that argues for the value and applicability of resolution as a philosophical, therapeutic approach to more than merely interpreting Wittgenstein. In “Toward a Useful Jacobinism,” his response to Bronzo, Lavery argues that a too impassioned quest for a “philosophically superior” reading of the *Tractatus* misses a key point in the study and the philosophy of Wittgenstein: moving beyond cloistered academic debates and into applying philosophically honed critical intelligence to the problems of the lived-world. This is a radical questioning of any “*Tractatus wars*”: the claim is that any reading of the *Tractatus* can be successful only if it takes us away from philosophy about the meaning of a reading and returns us to the everyday world, and to philosophical and not merely scholarly ways of taking and changing that world. Rupert Read (one of the editors of *The New Wittgenstein*, as of the present book) and Rob Deans respond to Kuusela (and to Conant and Dain too); they continue the work on a “stronger,” more “Jacobin” (to use Goldfarb’s term) vision and version of “resolutism” (than that present in the recent work of Conant and Diamond) that they began in earnest in 2003 in the pages of *Philosophical Investigations*.¹ Read and Deans thus make an impassioned call for fully embracing “resolutism” in “The Possibility of a Resolutely Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*.” By way of responding to Kuusela, and taking up his suggestion that there appears to be a philosophical unclarity—a

hovering—in the resolute stance unless it moves either somewhat in the direction of the standard reading or toward the kind of more radically post-metaphysical approach that Read and Deans, like Juliet Floyd, have argued for, they suggest that resolutism's contribution, and in fact the *Tractatus's* brilliance, can best be seen when resolutists move beyond the need to compromise their key assertions in the face of criticism. The reading they put forward sticks to its guns and suggests, to borrow their words, that what is most important is “to be on the path to doing philosophy aright. And that path is what ‘severism’—the resolute (as opposed to irresolute) application of ‘the resolute reading’—does for us” (p. 166).

One further way in which the book moves beyond the *Tractatus* wars is by taking the issues that have preoccupied philosophers in those *into* the discussion of later Wittgenstein. In certain respects, Lavery's and Read's and Deans's papers do this; but it is most pronounced in the exchange between Sullivan and Moore, in which they “shift the primary focus of discussion from Wittgenstein's earlier to his later thought” (Sullivan, p. 170). In other words: an issue that Sullivan and Moore have tended previously to focus most explicitly around early Wittgenstein is now brought to bear more focally on the reading of later Wittgenstein. In that way, appropriately, they make clear how *Beyond the Tractatus Wars* continues strongly in the spirit of *The New Wittgenstein*, in the sense of laying out in concrete terms how questions of interpretation in early and later Wittgenstein are most fruitfully brought together. For the issues that preoccupy Sullivan and Moore (primarily in later-Wittgenstein interpretation, and in substantive philosophy) are best seen as “projected” from questions about what reading the *Tractatus* resolutely is / would be / could not be like. This is a powerful for-instance of what Wittgenstein himself famously said: that the one book ought to be read directly after and against the background of the other.

That is how and why Sullivan and Moore continue here their long-running debate about idealism in Wittgenstein, but take it forward, in the course of these two papers, from the arena in which they have previously largely conducted it—early Wittgenstein—into Wittgenstein's later work. In the first of these final two papers, “Synthesizing without Concepts,” Peter Sullivan argues that the need to acknowledge that there is a “way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation” is the same as the need to acknowledge that the concepts through which we might articulate experience in basic perceptual judgments are already prefigured in that experience. Sullivan challenges what *could* be seen as a consequence of some standard “ineffabilist” readings of the *Tractatus* (or at least: of *A. W. Moore's* broadly ineffabilist reading thereof): that in his early work Wittgenstein in effect embraces transcendental idealism, even if he does so against his better judgment, while his later thought offers us more “resolutely” powerful ways of resisting it. In contrast, Sullivan holds exactly the reverse, thus in one respect at least allying himself with the central consequence of the resolutists' continuist “program”; namely, that there are not two distinct phases of Wittgenstein's philosophy in anything like the way normally assumed in *Wittgenstein studies*. In “A Response to Sullivan,” Adrian Moore

explores the relation between the Wittgenstein who is ultimately hostile to transcendental idealism on the one hand and transcendental idealism itself on the other, by suggesting that, while he repudiates transcendental idealism as nonsense, it is a kind of nonsense whose attractions his own work engenders, and to whose attractions he himself is susceptible (at least in his early work). While Moore goes on to argue exactly that Wittgenstein ultimately rejects it (looking specifically at how his conception of the limits of rule following developed between the *Tractatus* and the later works), this approach obviously and powerfully challenges those commentators who deny that there are *any* interesting or deep questions about the relation between Wittgenstein and transcendental idealism.

What is remarkable about these final essays, what they exemplify about the status of the New Wittgenstein Debate, about “resolutism,” and “the *Tractatus Wars*,” is what philosophy that embraces or at least considers resoluteness can do as philosophy. While theirs may not be—in fact, very clearly is not—the “Jacobinism” that some previously discussed contributors to this book envision, the exchange between Sullivan and Moore shows an *interest* in “resolutism” and in the issues and methods that it has helped to foreground that is full-grown, and provoking as a philosophical tool for purposes other than simply understanding the workings of the *Tractatus*—a text that, if the resolute reading is right, there is strictly no such thing as *understanding* anyway. Sullivan and Moore move us “beyond the *Tractatus Wars*” by helping us to *think* Wittgenstein (early and later) as a philosopher whose sticky engagement with idealism sheds distinctive valuable light on the entire post-Kantian philosophical problematic.

As a whole, then, the essays in this book demonstrate both the rich vastness of post-standard interpretations of Wittgenstein (and particularly of the *Tractatus*) as well as making and embodying arguments for (and against) these interpretations. If the explosion of interest in Wittgenstein made evident by the success of *The New Wittgenstein* ten years ago now could engender such diverse and powerful thinking as is presented in the pages that follow, we are confident that the period of Wittgenstein scholarship that follows this book will promote more, and even more important thought (and, hopefully, action). We hope that our four pairs of essays in debate and dialogue with one another, plus Goldfarb's magisterial scene-setter, will be a key part of and directly conduce toward that aim. We hope, that is, that, taken together, the essays in this collection already *instantiate* a vital movement beyond “the *Tractatus Wars*” of the last twenty years, and set out a healthy agenda for the years to come.

Note

- 1 *Philosophical Investigations* 26:3 (July 2003), 239–268 (see <http://www.uea.ac.uk/~j339/replytomounce.pdf>).