

# Wittgenstein's Limits of Language and Normative Theories of Assertion: Some Comparisons

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## §1. Introduction

**I**N HIS CLASSIC WORK ON WITTGENSTEIN'S *TRACTATUS* (1960) Erik Stenius described Wittgenstein's study as a critique of pure language, thus pointing to a connection between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Kant's critique of pure reason. Besides similarities, there also seem to be important differences between the two philosophers. In Kant's critique, one discerns a subject who does something, namely, constructs the world of experience, while Wittgenstein draws a picture in which neither an agent nor an act is visible. Despite the lack of agency, *Tractatus* includes a subject, "I", which is identical with "my world". Many scholars have convincingly argued that Wittgenstein's subject has affinity with Kant's transcendental subject.<sup>1</sup> However, Wittgenstein does not present a subject that would construct the world; his "I" is not a term for an agent who acts. Partly for that reason, it may sound far-fetched to argue that normative theories of assertion, or any theories of assertion, have something to do with the *Tractatus*. One might suggest, perhaps somewhat more convincingly, that the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* has influenced theories of assertion with his pragmatic orientation, although the idea of philosophical theories is certainly not what he was after, quite the contrary. One may notice a few superficially sounding similarities between the *Tractatus* and the normative theories of assertion. Like Kant and Wittgenstein, contemporary normative theories are interested in limits, although in limits set to assertions. However, unlike Wittgenstein, they pay special attention to the one who asserts and to the

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Kannisto (1986). Also see Pihlström (2004) and (2006), and Appelqvist (2016) and (2020). Cf. Haaparanta (2020).

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act of asserting.

Despite the obvious differences between the *Tractatus* and the normative theories, this paper searches for features of those theories in Wittgenstein's early work. My approach is anachronistic in the sense that I apply the distinction between the one who uses language and the limits given to that use, which is present in the normative theories, to the *Tractatus*. By that move I hope to show that Wittgenstein and the normative theories of assertion share an ethical point of view. Wittgenstein's idea of the limits of language has been interpreted in a number of ways in relation to ethics. Those alternatives cannot be easily found in the theories of assertion. However, I will argue that despite the differences in the ways of construing the limits of language and understanding the relation between ethics and language, the *Tractatus* and normative theories of assertion have similar ethical concerns.

This paper begins with a presentation of normative theories and one of their sources, namely Frege's distinction between thought, judgment, and assertion. It then proposes that even if Wittgenstein critically discusses Frege's distinction, he shares some of his views on asserting. It argues that Wittgenstein suggests a normative theory of assertion for philosophers, even if he does not present any theory explicitly. That is also one of the ways in which ethics forms the frame of the *Tractatus*, just as it forms the basis of normative theories. I will then move to various ways of understanding Wittgenstein's view on ethics. Those ways cannot be easily detected in the normative theories of assertion, perhaps except for the general emphasis on the limits of human knowledge. Still, it is useful to compare Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with Robert B. Brandom's and Sanford C. Goldberg's theories of assertion.

## §2. Normative Theories of Assertion as the Interpretational Framework

Gottlob Frege was an important background for Wittgenstein as well as for normative theories of assertion. In the *Begriffsschrift* (1879) he distinguished between a thought (*Gedanke*) and a judgment (*Urteil*), by which he meant the acknowledgment of the truth of a thought (BS, § 2). On Frege's view, assertions (*Behauptungen*), which are overt expressions of judgments, include assertoric force (*Behauptungskraft*).<sup>2</sup> By that force, we intend to take the step from the

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., BS § 2, and "Der Gedanke" (1918), KS, p. 346.

mere thought to the truth-value “the True”. In his later writings “Einleitung in die Logik” (1906) and “Meine grundlegenden logischen Einsichten” (1915) Frege points out that assertoric force is hidden in the word “is”, when we assert, and that it is bound up with the predicate (NS, 211, 272).

Partly following in Frege’s footsteps, normative theories of assertion distinguish between mere sayings and assertions. Unlike Frege, they seek to specify the characteristic features of assertions, which make them differ from the rest of sayings, by presenting constitutive norms for assertions. A famous representative of those views is Timothy Williamson’s theory (1996, 2000), which argues that assertion is governed by the following norm: “one must: assert *p* only if one knows that *p*” (Williamson 2000, pp. 238–269). Besides the knowledge norm proposed by Williamson, other candidates for a norm of assertion are the norm that “*p*” must be true, that there must be warrant for “*p*”, and that the speaker must believe that *p*. Robert B. Brandom’s theory is close to normative theories. However, as John MacFarlane describes, normative theories are interested in norms for making assertions, while Brandom’s commitment account is concerned about the normative effects of assertions.<sup>3</sup>

Brandom’s account ensues from the idea that we as human beings are in the normative attitude. On this view, the asserter has both authority and responsibility. What this means is that one who asserts is entitled to make inferences from what is asserted and to use the assertion as a reason. Moreover, it means that one who is committed to a belief and expresses the acknowledgment of that commitment is also committed to give reasons for her assertion if her addressee asks for them (Brandom 1994, pp. 157–168). The asserter is responsible for giving reasons, and the addressee is allowed to ask for those reasons.<sup>4</sup> Sanford C. Goldberg and Jennifer Lackey suggest that if we think of assertions as testimonies, normative theories show their strength compared to other theories of assertion. According to Goldberg, the norm required in the case of testimony is either a knowledge norm or a norm that requires a justified or a warranted belief.<sup>5</sup> He further maintains that it is common knowledge that testifying works this way and that this knowledge is in our practices, even if we do not make it explicit (Goldberg 2011, p. 184).

<sup>3</sup> See MacFarlane’s characterization of the theories, Mac Farlane (2011, pp. 80, 91).

<sup>4</sup> For the similarities and differences between Wittgenstein and Brandom, see Haaparanta (2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Lackey (2008, pp. 103–140, and Goldberg (2011 and 2015, pp. 72–92).

### §3. Assertions in the *Tractatus*

On the first reading, it seems misguided to argue that Wittgenstein has something to do with assertions. He criticizes Frege for introducing the distinction between thought and assertion. Pragmatic approach, which characterizes theories of assertion, is already present in the way Frege describes hypothetical judgments in the *Begriffsschrift*. What anticipates the truth-tables of those judgments are four alternatives of combining the affirmation and the denial of two thoughts, which are judgeable contents (BS § 5). In “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (1892) Frege construes the sentences of fiction as non-assertions, because we are not interested in their truth-value; hence, we do not require that the proper-names that they contain have references (KS, pp. 148–149). Later in “Der Gedanke” (1918), Frege points out that the sentences of fiction are non-assertive, because they do not seek to connect the sense with the truth-value “the True” (KS, p. 347). If the speaker of a language does not know that the existential presupposition of the sentence is not fulfilled, the sentence lacks a truth-value in Frege’s analysis, even if the speaker intends to make an assertion. On pure semantic analysis, which disregards the speaker, the sentence resembles sentences of fiction, but from the pragmatic point of view, it differs from them, because the speaker believes that each name it contains has a reference. Frege says that the requisite seriousness is lacking in a fiction.<sup>6</sup> In fiction the assertoric form of a sentence does not suffice to guarantee that the sentence is an assertion.

Unlike Frege, Wittgenstein does not introduce any asserter. However, as Maria van der Schaar has argued, Frege’s subject cannot be a real living person, either, because then Frege’s view would be psychologism, which Frege rejects. Therefore, his subject must be construed as transcendental in the sense that it determines the first-person point of view. Frege’s asserter, who does not have any spatio-temporal location, cannot be characterized in terms of psychology or anthropology.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that no asserter can be found in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein states as follows:

The proposition shows its sense. The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says, that they do so stand (TLP 4.022).

<sup>6</sup> See Haaparanta (1985, pp. 137–138).

<sup>7</sup> See van der Schaar (2018).

Hence, for Wittgenstein it is the proposition that says something, not a speaker. Colin Johnston argues that Wittgenstein rejected the distinction between thought and judgment, and further assertion, because he was interested in entailment and not in inference (Johnston 2011). Frege was certainly interested in inference, and that may explain the presence of a speaker and an asserter in his philosophy. For Wittgenstein, it was language and its propositions that say something, but they do not use assertoric force. Wittgenstein states:

A proposition must communicate a new sense with old words. The proposition communicates to us a state of affairs, therefore it must be essentially connected with the state of affairs (TLP 4.03).

He also adds:

the verb of the proposition is not “is true” or “is false”—as Frege thought—but that which “is true” must already contain the verb (4.063).

As noted above, Frege had the idea that assertoric force is bound up with the predicate, but that is not to say that the verb of any proposition would be “is true” or “is false”. Wittgenstein further argues that assertion cannot give a sense to a proposition, for “what it asserts is the sense itself” (4.064) In this passage, he clearly rejects the distinction between sense or thought or judgeable content and assertion. He also remarks:

The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing. If I wrote a book “The world as I found it”, I should also have therein to report on my body and say which members obey my will and which do not, etc. This then would be a method of isolating the subject or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject: that is to say, of it alone in this book mention could not be made (TLP 5.631).

No doubt, the above passage testifies that Wittgenstein does not discuss actual speakers or asserters. Still, as interpreters have pointed out, there is a transcendental subject in his text. He writes:

In fact what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself. That the world is my world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language

which I understand) mean the limits of my world (TLP 5.62).

Wittgenstein thinks that we can talk of a non-psychological I in philosophy, but that I cannot be named or made into an object in philosophy. For him, the philosophical I is “not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit —not a part of the world” (TLP 5.641). Hence, despite that Wittgenstein denies the importance of assertions and ignores acts and agents living in the world, he welcomes the non-psychological I, the transcendental subject. Like Frege’s asserter, Wittgenstein’s subject determines the first-person perspective, which shows itself, but is not located in this world of ours.

From this transcendental point of view, *Tractatus* delivers norms for philosophers. Occasionally, Wittgenstein gives prohibitions in the following manner:

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 (TLP 5.61).

These instances of “cannot” may be interpreted as expressions of our inability to say certain things. However, they can also be construed as prohibitions; philosophers are not allowed to step beyond the limits of what is transcendental, and that is what logic is (TLP 6.13). In the same passage Wittgenstein notes that logic is not a theory; if it were a theory, it could be made an object and a topic of discussion. For Wittgenstein, logic forms the frame of any discussion. Wittgenstein is concerned about philosophers’ temptation to make nonsensical assertions, and that kind of normative, or one might say, ethical, project is clearly present in the *Tractatus*. He notes:

Philosophical propositions are nonsensical, not false (TLP 4.002).

Philosophers try to make into objects what cannot be treated as objects and to present as facts what cannot be presented as facts. Wittgenstein points to several fields, such as ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics, that do not allow theoretical

consideration. Therefore, his book can be construed as setting an ethical demand for philosophers' assertions.

#### §4. Ethics in the *Tractatus*

What has been said above proposes one way of interpreting the role of ethics in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein is concerned about the ethics of philosophical assertions, which also makes him exclude ethical assertions from philosophy. He ponders upon the possibility of ethical theorizing, and states that in the world, in the world of facts which is shown by sentences, there is no value. Therefore, he concludes that there can be no ethical propositions. On his view, ethics is transcendental and beyond the reach of language. Wittgenstein adds that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward, which are events or consequences of action. Instead, he remarks that ethical reward and punishment must somehow lie in the action itself. He also rejects theorizing about the will as the subject of the ethical (TLP 6.41–6.423). He advises philosophers as follows:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method (TLP 6.53).

The book ends with the famous expression of an obligation:

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent (TLP 7).

There are various ways of understanding Wittgenstein's reservations concerning ethics and the consequences of those reservations. Scholars have quoted his letter to Ludwig von Ficker, where he confesses that his *Tractatus* is actually a book on ethics, even if he has not written that part of his book.<sup>8</sup> If the ethical is limited from within, as Wittgenstein suggests, his view on ethics allows the interpretation that I suggested above. The above reading is true to the idea that ethics is beyond what can be said in language, or to put it differently, we are in the ethical

<sup>8</sup> See Luckhardt (1979, pp. 94–95). Also see Appelqvist (2020, p. 9).

framework or under the norm, when we say something. Ethics is beyond what we say, because language cannot express its own limits.

As noted above, like logic, ethics is transcendental for Wittgenstein. In his “Lecture on Ethics” he expresses his view clearly by stating that if ethics is anything, it is supernatural, and our words cannot express it, because they can only express facts (E, p. 7). He claims that ethical propositions are nonsense, because they go beyond the world, hence, beyond language, or they run against its boundaries (E, pp. 11, 12). Friedrich Waismann reports Wittgenstein’s saying as follows:

If I were told anything that was a *theory*, I would say, No, No! That does not interest me. Even if this theory were true, it would not interest me —it would not be the exact thing I was looking for. What is ethical cannot be thought. If I could explain the essence of the ethical only by means of a theory, then what is ethical would be of no value whatsoever. At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person: I think that this is something very essential (Waismann 1979, pp. 116–117).

Scholars draw somewhat diverging conclusions from Wittgenstein’s words. Cora Diamond argues that in the *Tractatus* “ethics” is not a term for a subject matter alongside other subjects, any more than “logic” is. She maintains that for Wittgenstein, ethical propositions are simply nonsense, and rejects the idea that we could find a place for ethics in the *Tractatus* by referring to the distinction between saying and showing, or between hinting at ethical truths and making ethical claims (Diamond 1996, pp. 251–253). Still, on her interpretation, Wittgenstein means that we are within ethics all the time, we live in the ethical attitude without making it explicit as a theory. Anne-Marie Christensen also argues that for Wittgenstein there cannot be any ethical theory; we use ethical words and we live in the ethical attitude, as we live in logic. She emphasizes that like logic, ethics is precisely transcendental in the sense that it is our view of the world, and it is a part of the conditions of our experience of the real (Christensen 2011, p. 802). On her reading, the normative structure of our world is ethics, there is no way to step outside that structure. Søren Overgaard finds similarities between Wittgenstein and Levinas, on whose view ethics disappears if it is made into a philosophical theme (Overgaard 2009, p. 228). Like Diamond, he rejects the interpretation that Wittgenstein hints at ethical truths, even if he does not make direct ethical claims (*ibid.*, p. 223). Overgaard’s comparisons between Wittgenstein and Levinas open up new dimensions, because for Levinas ethics is the relation towards the Other and neither the Other nor the relation can be



taken as an object, if we wish to preserve ethics. The connection between Wittgenstein and Levinas is also discussed by Hanne Appelqvist and Panu-Matti Pöykkö; however, they also emphasize Wittgenstein's affinity with Kant, who argues that ethics cannot be said in the limits of theoretical reason (Appelqvist and Pöykkö 2020). Despite Wittgenstein's own expressed view that logic and ethics are transcendental, one might also be tempted to argue that in the *Tractatus* ethics is transcendent, if we think that what is transcendent is what is *an sich* like in Kant's philosophy, and saying what it is, is saying what cannot be said. What is ethical, then, for us is to understand our limits. What I have argued for, and what is compatible with various interpretations, is the view that Wittgenstein's book both offers ethics of philosophy and reveals an ethical framework which we live in and which cannot be taken as an object of philosophical theorizing.

If we think that ethics is transcendental in the sense that we are always already in the normative attitude, we may find similarities between Brandom's and Goldberg's ethics of assertion. Unlike Brandom, Wittgenstein does not regard it as possible to make ethics explicit. However, like Wittgenstein, Brandom does not propose any ethical theory. He uses ethical vocabulary, for example, in his *Making It Explicit* (1994), but for him ethics is not strictly speaking explicit in the sense that he would give explicit rules or principles and would thus be a regulist (Brandom 1994, pp. 18–19). Instead, he proposes models by using normative vocabulary. Models are more familiar to us than what they are models of; they make us understand, even if they do not give a theory of phenomena. Brandom proposes that besides scientism and the thesis of the impossibility of systematic philosophical theorizing about discursive practice, there are other alternatives in the philosophy of language (Brandom 2009, p. 44). By means of his ethical vocabulary, he describes linguistic practice. He also argues that “even the most rigorous versions of Wittgensteinian quietism allow philosophers to describe features of our linguistic practice” (*ibid.*, p. 45). In *Making It Explicit* ethical vocabulary is precisely the vocabulary that is used to describe its features. Brandom's model of deontic scorekeeping is a description of assertive speech acts. Brandom *uses* ethical vocabulary, but he does not present any ethical theory.<sup>9</sup> Like Wittgenstein, he directs our attention to ethics.

For Goldberg, the ethical basis of asserting is common knowledge, and what he does is to describe some of that basis that lies in our practices, without,

<sup>9</sup> See Haaparanta (2019).

however, giving an ethical theory for our speech-acts. He argues that it is mutually manifest to all competent speakers that assertion answers to a robustly epistemic norm (Goldberg 2015, p. 171). Assertions must comply to epistemic norms, on his view; moreover, there is also moral responsibility involved. His asserters have both responsibilities for having asserted and responsibilities to assert or obligations to assert (*ibid.*, p. 179). The normative attitude that we have as speakers and as hearers, is opened up, but not fully theorized, in his treatment. The epistemic norm of assertion, along with authorities and responsibilities that are linked to it, ties each and every member of the community of language-users.

## § 5. Conclusions

I argued above that in his *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is interested in norms; he is, as it were, giving norms for the community of philosophers. On his view, philosophers tend to assert what cannot be asserted, in other words, language tends to overcome its limits by saying what is nonsensical. Wittgenstein judges what philosophers are allowed to say and what they are prohibited to say if they wish to avoid nonsense. The norms that he gives can be construed as norms which advise us philosophers to avoid ethical, aesthetic and metaphysical assertions if we wish to make meaningful assertions. On Wittgenstein's account, assertions do not give meaning to propositions. His idea of giving ethical foundation for the norms of language comes close to what the normative theories of assertion are after, even if those theories are not particularly directed to philosophers and even if they propose different norms from those which Wittgenstein introduces. Wittgenstein avoids all talk about persons; still, there is a subject, a transcendental subject in the *Tractatus*, as Wittgenstein himself suggests. As for the ethical foundation of language that Wittgenstein emphasizes, similarities can be detected between Wittgenstein and Brandom as well as Wittgenstein and Goldberg. What Brandom and Goldberg do is to describe our discursive practices by means of ethical vocabulary and thus make ethics somewhat more explicit than Wittgenstein does in his *Tractatus*. Still, they do not give up the idea that ethics is present in our practices, that we are always already in the ethical attitude. That is also the view held by Wittgenstein, for whom ethics is the framework that we cannot escape.

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### **Wittgenstein's Limits of Language and Normative Theories of Assertion: Some Comparisons**

In his classic work on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1960) Erik Stenius described Wittgenstein's study as a critique of pure language, thus pointing to a connection between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Kant's critique of pure reason. Besides similarities, there also seems to be important differences between the two philosophers. In Kant's critique, one discerns a subject who does something, namely, constructs the world of experience, while Wittgenstein draws a picture in which neither an agent nor an act is visible. Like Kant and Wittgenstein, contemporary normative theories of assertion are also interested in limits, although in limits set to assertions. They appear to pay special attention to the one who asserts and to the act of asserting. This paper is an effort to search for the traces of normative theories of assertion in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by focusing on the one who uses language and on the limits of that use. It is shown that both in Wittgenstein and in the normative theories of assertion, there is an important ethical dimension, which, however, plays different roles in the two approaches. It is argued that despite the differences in the ways of construing the limits of language, *Tractatus* and normative theories of assertion share similar ethical concerns.

**Keywords:** Language · Assertion · Ethics · Normativity · Action.

## Los límites de lenguaje de Wittgenstein y las teorías normativas de afirmación: algunas comparaciones

En su obra clásica sobre el *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein (1960) Erik Stenius describió el estudio de Wittgenstein como una crítica del lenguaje puro, señalando así una conexión entre la filosofía de Wittgenstein y la crítica de la razón pura de Kant. Además de similitudes parece que también hay importantes diferencias entre los dos filósofos. En la crítica de Kant se distingue un sujeto que hace algo, a saber, construye un mundo de experiencia, mientras que Wittgenstein dibuja una imagen en la cual no se ve ningún agente ni ningún acto. Igual que Kant y Wittgenstein, las teorías normativas de afirmación contemporáneas también están interesadas en límites, aunque en límites impuestas a afirmaciones. Parece que prestan atención particular al que afirma y al acto de afirmación. El presente trabajo se esfuerza a buscar vestigios de teorías normativas de afirmación en el *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein concentrándose en aquel que usa el lenguaje y en los límites de ese uso. Se muestra que tanto en Wittgenstein como en las teorías normativas de afirmación está presente una dimensión ética importante, la cual, sin embargo, ocupa papeles diferentes en los dos planteamientos. Se arguye que, las diferencias en la manera de construir los límites del lenguaje no obstante, el *Tractatus* y las teorías normativas de afirmación comparten preocupaciones éticas similares.

**Palabras Clave:** Lenguaje · Afirmación · Ética · Normatividad · Acción.

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