

Luciano Bazzocchi

The Tree of the Tractatus

Preface

As is well known the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* in its printed versions appears as a series of propositions, each designated by a decimal number, in increasing order of magnitude. Moreover the *Tractatus* is normally read and commented on by treating of each proposition as it comes up on the page, a procedure which renders impossible any consideration of the role played by the decimal numbers.

The thesis sustained in the present work is that on the contrary Wittgenstein meant the decimal numbers to indicate a different structure for the work and hence a different reading from a merely sequential one. Indeed Wittgenstein himself in the note at the beginning of the *Tractatus* tells us why its propositions are codified in this way:

... The propositions n.1, n.2, n.3 etc are comments on the proposition no. n; the propositions n.m1, n.m2, etc. comments on the proposition n.m; and so on

and Bazzocchi uses this note as a key to the reading of the *Tractatus*. It is a simple perhaps obvious move but it transforms totally the interpretation of many passages which till now have been thought recalcitrant or difficult to understand.

Take the propositions whose numbers begin with the number 5. The ancestral (“paternal”) node here is 5, from which we proceed to the nodes that are its “sons” 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, then to the “sons of sons”, e.g. 5.21, 5.22, 5.23, 5.24, 5.25, each proposition finding its place in a (n inverted) tree-like structure which we can call “the tree generated by the proposition cardinal number 5” (cf. para.2 above). It follows that the progress of our reading cannot be either linear or univocal: at each node of the tree the reader may proceed on the same level, passing on to node 5.2, 5.3 as far as 5.6, or may on the other hand, go further down the tree, viewing the detailed comments, from 5.2 to 5.21, 5.22, as far as 5.25. Once again it is Wittgenstein himself who encourages this way of reading:

In teaching you philosophy I'm like a guide showing you how to find your way round London. I have to take you through the city from north to south, from east to west, from Euston to the embankment and from Piccadilly to the Marble Arch. After I have taken you many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, we shall have passed through any given street a number of times – each time traversing the street as part of a different journey.

When the last node at a particular level is reached, as in the case of 5.254, for example, it is important to be aware that a certain line of investigation is at an end and that the proposition immediately following in the sequence of the printed book (5.3 in this case) may have no special connexion with what has gone before. The decimal codification alone determines what line of thought a proposition belongs to and hence the context in which it should be viewed.

Part One of the volume proceeds by examining a series of paradigmatic cases and showing what can be achieved by using the suggested key of interpretation. There are many surprises here and it is fascinating to see how the exploration by means of branches and sub-trees reveals a coherent and consequential text. Passages that have seemed ambiguous or obscure are found to be the result of forcing into a single context propositions that really belong to different levels of analysis, which only the constraints of print have placed side by side. Even some of the best-known passages, for example the reflections on ethics and the metaphor of the ladder that should be thrown away after use, are seen in a new light when placed where their decimal codification intends them to be seen. I will mention here only the tree generated by the cardinal proposition no.2: the theory of picturing is displayed before our eyes in a compact and transparent manner by the propositions from 2.11 to 2.19 (staying always on the same level) and the hidden link between 2.17 and 2.18 can be discovered by a method that Bazzocchi identifies as “word-play”.

Part Two is devoted to an examination of the original, MS104 in the Wittgenstein catalogue, often called the *Prototractatus*. This manuscript proves that the tree-structure is not something imposed on the work by Wittgenstein later; on the contrary the work was composed by progressively “making the tree grow”. The keystone that holds together the two parts of the book, one as it were the mirror image of the other, is given by the fact that when we read the propositions of the *Tractatus* in their order as a tree, we find that we are reading them in the order in which Wittgenstein composed them, or at least inserted them in the manuscript volume. After the first page of the manuscript, where the first two levels of the tree are laid out, Bazzocchi shows us how the tree grows as it is enriched by further comments added one by one. To be sure, the list of propositions on p.5 of MS104, consisting as it does of 3.01, 3.11, 3.12, 3.13, 3.21, 1.12, 2.03, 2.04, 2.05, 2.06, 2.07, 2.031, 2.14, 2.161, is incomprehensible taken by itself: one has to bear in mind the tree constructed up to p.4. Wittgenstein is simply adding comments to nodes already reached, “jumping from branch to branch” when necessary. The tree grows in a continuous manner, now carrying further one series of observations, now another, now starting a new line of comment on a different proposition. Here, according to Bazzocchi, we have the reason why the manuscript of the *Tractatus* has been incomprehensible until now. It seemed the enigmatic result of the caprice of a genius and so little use has been made of it in the critical literature. It is not surprising that the

editors of the manuscript, who published it under the title *Prototractatus*, felt the need to print the propositions in increasing order of their numbers, but in so doing they destroyed the true sense of the work. MS 104 in fact gives us the chronological order of the elaboration of the work. It is of profound interest that the reading as a tree proposed in Part One on the basis of a mere theoretical assumption about the function of the number-coding finds decisive confirmation in the manuscript. Here too one example will suffice, that of the 2.17 and 2.18 with the word-play involved.

When Wittgenstein specifies in his initial note the sense of the number-coding, he is not only suggesting how we should read his propositions but also describing for us how he himself composed them. “The propositions n.1, n.2, n.3 etc” really came into being as “comments on the proposition n”, and “the propositions n.m1, n.m2, etc” turn out to be, in fact, in the manuscript, a subsequent series of “comments on the proposition n.m”.

This interpretative proposal if Bazzocchi’s is, of course, not meant to be an exhaustive exegesis of the *Tractatus*. The observations made in the course of it are meant principally as examples and illustrations of his methodology and not as a systematic analysis. It is more than possible, therefore, that in addition to the passages discussed here there are other considerations and consequences waiting to be brought to light.

Bazzocchi’s suggestion lends a new dynamic also to the relations between the *Tractatus* and *Notebooks 1914-16*. In the printed version the “quotations” from the notebooks or diaries are distributed at random throughout the whole text, with no recognizable reason for their order. But of course these quotations in fact passed first and in an order which can, more or less, be determined from the diaries to the manuscript volume and hence to the definitive typescript of the *Tractatus*, TS202. The last twenty pages of the manuscript volume, not published in printed form in the volume entitled *Prototractatus*, allow us to reconstruct the final additions and re-elaborations which entered into the definitive version, all in perfect continuity with the development hitherto observed. At this stage it is if anything still more evident what extreme care Wittgenstein took of the *form* of the overall architectonic and of the mutual relations between propositions, evinced by subtle variations in the decimal numbers assigned them.

The reading of the *Tractatus* proposed in this volume was presented in December 2008 in a seminar “Modi della logica e forme della scienza” (“Modes of Logic and Forms of Science”) in the Department of Philosophy of the University of Bologna, since which occasion I have followed with the passion of an addict the intellectual adventure of a method of reading suggested by the author and perfectly exemplified in the *Tree of the Tractatus*.

Bologna, August 2009

Giovanna Corsi