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ONTOLOGY AND THE EARLY WITTGENSTEIN

A review of Martin Stokhof, *World and Life as One: Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein's Early Thought*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

IN THE BLURB on the back of Martin Stokhof's *World and Life as One: Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein's Early Thought*, Goran Sundholm remarks that "owing to its broad and balanced scope, I know of no better book on the *Tractatus*." After conducting my own investigation into this latest addition in the impressive Cultural Memory in the Present series, I readily concur with Dr. Sundholm's assessment. For anyone seriously interested in Wittgenstein and the fundamental questions that arise in interpreting his enigmatic work and deciphering its significance, Stokhof's book will prove indispensable. His rendering of the Tractarian worldview is both cogent and persuasive, and certainly all future attempts to understand the *Tractatus* as a whole will have to consider the basic argument of this book. Its arguments and prose are not for those seeking a quick handle on Wittgenstein, but like all specialized work worth its weight, Stokhof's book contains much that might be of interest to those engaged in the perennial questions of philosophy, particularly those involving words and life and their relation to one another.

As implied in the subtitle, the main thesis of Stokhof's book is the fundamental interrelation between ontology and ethics in the *Tractatus*. This thesis arises out of a basic desire, or presupposition, that governs Stokhof's interpretation of early Wittgenstein—that we "regard the *Tractatus* as a coherent whole" (1). This starting point marks both the important contribution that Stokhof offers to *Tractatus* scholarship and opens the door to a deeper understanding of the hottest question in Wittgenstein scholarship, that of the relationship between the early and late work. All too often, Stokhof notes, by failing to think through the ethical component of the *Tractatus*, previous commentators have both failed to properly understand the ontology of the work and diminished its ethical significance. And indeed, if one does not understand the *Tractatus*, how can one possibly claim to know what really changed in Wittgenstein's thinking?

Stokhof's insistence that the ethical and ontological aspects of the *Tractatus* form

a coherent whole leads him to interesting articulations of both. Within the theme of ontology, Stokhof utilizes the basic question of Wittgenstein's realism as the framework for his inquiry: "in what sense and to what extent is Wittgenstein a realist?" (1). Indeed, after his introductory chapter and a superb (might I suggest the best in print?) summary of the *Tractatus'* main themes in Chapter 2, the issue of Wittgenstein's realism takes center stage in Chapter 3, "Language and Ontology." Here Stokhof carves out his own position between the various stances that other scholars have taken on the relation between thinking, language, and reality in the *Tractatus*. The primary issue involved, as Stokhof understands it, is not the internal, logical coherency of the linguistic system explicated in the *Tractatus*, but "whether the tractarian system itself contains a theory about [an] extralinguistic reality that is independent of the linguistic theory that it provides" (182). In other words, there is no question about an "extralinguistic reality", but rather what logic, and thus the *Tractatus*, have to say (or show) about this reality.

Stokhof's own position is that the *Tractatus* implies a language-dependent ontology. "The ontological views are construed from a linguistic perspective," Stokhof writes, so that "[w]hen Wittgenstein talks about objects . . . he is not phrasing insights into the ultimate constituents and basic makeup of reality as it is. Rather, he is stating what the world looks like from the viewpoint of language, that is, any language" (183). Therefore the question of realism need not arise, according to Stokhof, because "the world as it shows itself in language, in thinking, is exactly this: the world as it must show itself in language, in thinking" (185). These conclusions, of an ontology that is "essentially a linguistic, logical construction" (185) and a corresponding "extralinguistic" reality beyond this ontology, further serve Stokhof's overall project of outlining the mutual dependence of the ontological and ethical dimensions of the *Tractatus*. On the significance of this language-based ontology for Wittgenstein's ethics, Stokhof remarks, "[B]ut the crucial thing to observe is that precisely for that reason [ontology being tied to language] there is also room for reality to confront us in other ways, which are not amenable to linguistic expression but are nonetheless as real" (185).

Here Stokhof approaches, with appropriate trepidation, the task of producing a positive articulation of the notoriously ineffable ethical dimension of the *Tractatus*. Stokhof aligns this problem with the notion of language-based ontology when he declares, at the beginning of his fourth and concluding chapter, that "the ontological theory of the *Tractatus* implies that there can be no ethical values in the world" (187). Ethics has nothing to do with the "world" for Wittgenstein. The world is all that is the case, that is, all possible combinations of logical and thus linguistic expression. And this world, the only world available to us in thinking and in language, is awash in sheer possibility and contingency.

The only necessity of the world, according to Wittgenstein, and Stokhof notes this profusely, is logic. Logic is rock-bottom of the Tractarian worldview, and like all foundations and absolutes, it remains entirely beyond the possibility of proof. Thus the question of the status of ethics is analogous in Wittgenstein's thought to status of logic. Wittgenstein's absolutism about logic in the Tractarian period is here perfectly mirrored in his absolutism about ethics. Ethics, like logic, is that which is absolute; it cannot be said or proven but only shown. Thus Wittgenstein's proscription of ethical talk at the end of the *Tractatus*, which is certainly not an attack on ethical values but, as Stokhof points out, a protection of ethics "from the intrusions of the discursive intellect" (187), provides Stokhof with the key ingredient in his claim that "Wittgenstein's ethical views provide an argument for a language-dependent interpretation of the ontology of the *Tractatus*" (xv). Ethical values are (like?) the "extralinguistic reality" implied in the ontology—they are all that is truly important and yet cannot be referenced or represented directly. And here Stokhof completes his portrait of a coherent whole, as well as his original articulation of the internal meaning of the *Tractatus*. This insight and its implications, are, in fact, the prime value of Stokhof's work.

A difficulty with this reading, one that Stokhof addresses at length in his final chapter, is the possibility of speaking meaningfully about the ethical dimension of the *Tractatus*. If the point of the *Tractatus* is ethical, as Wittgenstein declares in his letter to Ficker, and ethics cannot be said but only shown, then what is the ethical significance of the *Tractatus*? Or, in Stokhof's vocabulary, if ontology is language-dependent, and ethics cannot be spoken, then what does ontology have to do with ethics? If the bulk of the *Tractatus* shows logic without even attempting to prove it, how does the end of the work show the ethical?

In attempting to positively formulate the ethical meaning of the *Tractatus*, Stokhof relies on the familiar blend of Schopenhauer, Buddhism, and a 'seeing the world aright' that changes one's behavior. There is nothing particularly new in this aspect of Stokhof's work, and like all others that read the *Tractatus* with care and seek to speak positively about the ethical meaning of the book, Stokhof's words lead him to profoundly paradoxical formulations. In explaining where to find ethical values Stokhof advises seekers to "look for them outside the realm of what can be said and thought, outside the realm of spatio-temporal located situations and the contingent relationships between them" (238). How someone who has read deeply of Wittgenstein can write such a sentence without it collapsing under the weight of its own irony is baffling. Or, again, consider the irony of this rather trite formulation of a positive Tractarian ethic: "By keeping ethics free from the primarily discursive and rationalizing aspects of our human intelligence, it paves the way for a practical, down-to-earth way of coping with moral problems" (245). After pondering the sentences like this that punctuate the finale of Stokhof's book, one has to wonder whether Stokhof includes himself

among those exercising their discursive and rationalizing aspects to find ethical values and approach moral problems. If I take Stokhof seriously, I am left asking: does silence really help? Isn't this kind of silence just another move in language? Is the discursive realm really futile for helping to negotiate one's ethical choices?

While these questions may seem to be critical of Stokhof, it is certainly more accurate to suggest that they are a critique of early Wittgenstein. In fact, it is obvious that Stokhof has drunk quite deeply from the cup of early Wittgenstein. Stokhof's articulation of the ethical dimension of the *Tractatus* speaks to a desire that I would not dare ridicule, to paraphrase Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics." Indeed, the chief contribution of this work is that it puts its finger on the pulse of the problematic of the *Tractatus*, that is, *how* can be world and life be one? Or, how can a language-dependent ontology have any relation to an ineffable ethic? Or, to connect this theme to Wittgenstein's later thinking, is the logico-ethical language game the only ethical language game? It is the tension of these questions that animates Wittgenstein's thinking in the Tractarian period, and this book traces this *aporia* beautifully. Stokhof's presupposition of the internal coherency of the *Tractatus*, and thus the intimate connection between ontology and ethics, between logic and value, between (lack of) words and life, is exactly Wittgenstein's presupposition. Stokhof's book revolves about this nodal point of Wittgenstein's thinking, and its words show the difficulties involved in early Wittgenstein's project as well as the central motive for the transformation in his thinking. As such, this book represents a thoughtful contribution to Wittgenstein scholarship and the broader problems of connecting words and life that plague us all.

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