

Luis Villoro, the *Tractatus* and Analytical Philosophy in Mexico

I) *The background*

I should perhaps start off by recognizing that, within Mexico's philosophical horizon, analytical philosophy was the last great philosophical school to make its appearance. Incidentally, it turned out to be the most persistent one and the trend of thought with the greatest vitality, since as a matter of fact it ended up by displacing the other ones without, however, making them disappear altogether. Right now there are lots of people in Mexico working in philosophy and devoted to phenomenology and hermeneutics and, less and less every time, to existentialism, Marxism and Thomism. Now, it should be pointed out that analytical philosophy's delay in being introduced in Mexico is to some extent explainable and understandable. In retrospect, we now see that it was obviously a phenomenon that couldn't last too much more in happening. Putting aside all sorts of speculations about the conditions of cultural transformations that some way or another have to take place anyway, it seems to me that some of the factors which contributed to the philosophical change in Mexico was the weakening of certain themes (like the discussions concerning the nature of Mexican culture, Mexican mentality, etc., or about the Mexican or the Latin American identities) and also the atomization of Marxism into multiple sects (orthodox Leninists, lukacsians, althusserians, Maoists, Guevarists and so on). It was therefore natural that the bringing about fresh subjects and a new terminology was received with great enthusiasm by many lecturers and students and it almost immediately had a powerful effect on both academic programmes and institutions. We should add to that incipient situation the fact that academic exchanges with foreign universities started to be implemented, that books and papers started being translated into Spanish on a massive level (not only in Mexico, but in Argentina and Spain as well) and the publications of journals and books written already in Spanish. All that made it clear that the liveliest philosophical trend was precisely the just arrived one. Papers were produced on, for instance, Russell's Theory of Descriptions, the so called 'Private Language Argument', the "analytic-synthetic" distinction and on lots of related subjects. Again, this doesn't mean that no Kantians, Heideggerians, Husserlians and so on remained, but only that analytical philosophy became something like the main axis of philosophical life in Mexico.

Now, I think that if what we have in mind are books, analytical philosophy in general has basically two backbones: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. And it was precisely about some aspects of the *Tractatus* that one of the most important contemporary Mexican philosophers

wrote in the early 70s a quite original essay which immediately gave rise to a polemics which even nowadays inspires new and fresh discussions.

I think that before critically analyzing Villoro's reading of certain parts of the *Tractatus* it would be useful to say a couple of words about him. I would say that Villoro's conception of philosophy is slightly old-fashioned. In fact he is an excellent representative of a certain class of thinkers, namely, that kind of philosophers who aim at combining rational reasoning and argumentation with what could be called 'wisdom', that is, someone who is able not only to argue rationally and critically about a particular issue, but also someone who would aspire at speculating about things like human nature, the meaning of history and themes like that. Not only was he a marvelous teacher and lecturer and a very learned man, but also a thinker who did involve himself in philosophical research on a variety of subjects of the history of philosophy. It could probably be asserted that some of his essays and books are somewhat overridden, but it remains true that Villoro produced very interesting texts on Descartes, Dilthey, political philosophy, as his very nice and useful little book on the concept of ideology, philosophy of religion and of course the history of ideas in Mexico, since the Independence of Mexico onwards. He has written on Medieval philosophy and he has what he certainly would like to be seen as a text in analytical philosophy, that is, a book on the theory of knowledge, with a title somewhat difficult to translate into English. The title in Spanish is '*Creer, Saber, Conocer*'. Now just as in French, where we have the two verbs '*connaître*' and '*savoir*', in German ('*kennen*' and '*wissen*') and in Polish (where we have '*wiedzieć*' and '*znać*'), in English there's just one word, namely, '*to know*'. So the title of Villoro's book being '*Creer, Saber, Conocer*', I really don't know what would pass as an acceptable translation. But regardless of how we are tempted into translating such a title, the fact is that in his book Villoro examines our basic cognitive concepts, like 'belief', 'knowledge', 'epistemic justification', 'reasons to believe', 'reasons to doubt' and so on, and he advocates the idea that there exists two kinds of knowledge, together with their respective justification normativity. There would be, on the one side, the standard sort of knowledge with its well-known canons for establishing and justifying propositions and there would be, on the other side, another form of knowledge, more personal, irreducible to the first one and which could be better labeled as 'wisdom'. I must say I don't feel particularly convinced by Villoro's approach and treatment of the subject, but one could hardly deny that it's an interesting and well argued book. This is, however, a much later work. Regardless of what we think of his philosophical adventure into the territories of analytical philosophy, what is undeniable is that to a great extent it was papers like his on the *Tractatus* that were the seed of contemporary Mexican analytical philosophy. It's therefore about it that I'd like to say some words.

II) Villoro and “*The Unsayable in the Tractatus*”

Actually, Villoro’s reading of the *Tractatus* is quite original. He does perceive the logical foundations of Wittgenstein’s peculiar mysticism. According to him, the global meaning of the book is the outcome of an effort to pass from the analysis of what can be said to the realm of what cannot be put into words. Villoro, therefore, grasps and explains the paradox of the *Tractatus*, as Wittgenstein himself states it at 6.54. After a detailed exposition of the logical theory of language, that is, the Picture Theory, Villoro draws an interesting classification of the propositions of the *Tractatus* which deal with the (so to speak) forbidden subjects: logical form, the nature of propositions, the world as a limited whole and, of course, the last propositions of the book about the important questions (ethics, the meaning of life, God, etc.). He divides them into affirmative and negatives ones, being the most important perhaps the latter, that is, those who “say” what something is not (ethics is not about empirical norms, God does not manifest Himself in the world, the world of the happy man is not like the world of the unhappy man, etc.). Villoro admits that in both cases we are dealing with pseudo-propositions but, according to him, with signs that nevertheless, somehow, manage to pass on a message. “The propositions of the *Tractatus* must communicate something if we are to understand that they are senseless” (p.7). Based on this idea, Villoro develops his view which ultimately may be contradictory but that at any rate is a faithful reflection of the ambivalence we found in the *Tractatus* itself. “Before keeping quiet”, says Villoro, “Wittgenstein gives in into babbling what, strictly speaking, cannot be said” (p. 14). For Villoro, therefore, the propositions of the *Tractatus* about the unsayable are meaningful although of course they represent nothing; they are senseless collections of signs which somehow elucidate something saying or showing nothing at all, expressions that have some kind of indirect reference. What does this mean? Well “For instance, ‘object’ no longer refers to any perceptible changing object, but to the unchangeable substance (2.071), ‘life’ no longer applies to certain psychophysical events in the world but to the world itself as it is contemplated by me (“World and life are one and the same” (5.621)); ‘God’ no longer designates a supernatural being but ‘the meaning of life; ‘ethics’ no longer refers to sentences about the qualities of things, but they are about “what is most worth living up to’. (pp. 31-32). And, as was to be expected, from Villoro’s perspective the ultimate understanding of all these nonsensical expressions of the *Tractatus* presuppose a metaphysical experience, that is, the experience of the world as a limited totality.

It goes without saying that Villoro’s text, which is quite long, contains a variety of interesting and original remarks about many other subjects that Wittgenstein considers and about which many English speaking scholars would examine exhaustively during the next 40 years. So far as I’m concerned, I think that Villoro’s interpretation of the *Tractatus* is radically wrong, but before saying something about it I’d like to establish a couple of points.

The first thing I'd like to make clear is that what Villoro offers is what could be called a 'religious interpretation' of Wittgenstein's book, which is not a very common one. I'm not sure whether his way of reading the *Tractatus* would have pleased Wittgenstein himself, but what for our purposes is important is to notice that there's something like a personal explanation of that, which is Villoro's pedagogical and philosophical upbringing. He was educated in an atmosphere of strict religiosity and religious themes were always for him crucial. I would even say that more than political philosophy, more than the history of philosophy, the philosophy of religion constituted for him the most important branch of philosophy. It couldn't possibly be doubted that his interest in the *Tractatus* was genuine, but it nevertheless seems to me that deep below his interest in Wittgenstein's thought lied his search of support for certain fundamental religious beliefs. His religious inclinations, however, don't prevent him from understanding that the mysticism of the *Tractatus* doesn't represent a defense of transcendence, but only of the transcendental. Villoro does understand that the Wittgensteinian idea of there being something that cannot be put into words is not useful to recover the theistic conception of God, the idea of an eternal life after death, etc. But his upbringing time and again leads him to try, I'd say 'desperately', to rescue whatever remains of traditional religious beliefs and he certainly seems to have thought that the *Tractatus* was the best tool to achieve that. It's difficult not to feel, therefore, that his paper is terribly biased in the sense that from the very beginning he ascribes to the *Tractatus* goals that he certainly had, but that could hardly be ascribed to Wittgenstein himself.

III) *The refutation of Villoro*

Obviously, this is not the right occasion to start a work of exegesis of the *Tractatus*, but I think that it would be interesting to examine critically some of Villoro's views and try to assess whether or not he's right. So roughly I'll raise two objections to Villoro's interpretation, objections which he should or could have foreseen. These are:

- 1) it's a mistake to think that there is such thing as elucidatory nonsense
- 2) the *Tractatus*' paradox can be explained in a different way from the way Villoro explains it and it spares us all sorts of engagement with experiences of a special kind.

Villoro assumes, wrongly in my opinion, that there is such thing as a subject-matter concerning the unsayable. However, the unsayable for Wittgenstein is not something about which we can say something meaningful in order to discover later that what we thought we had said cannot be put into words. It's more simple than that: there's nothing to be said because, among other things, there's no genuine subject involved. Wittgenstein has no ethics of silence, no religion without dogmas, etc. The meaning of life is something that

shows itself not as something to be discovered after death but as something internal to the world attained through morally correct actions and artistic creation, which is what leaves us satisfied or makes us happy, not of course in an empirical sense but in a transcendental one. This non factual or non empirical satisfaction arises out of our being aware that the actions carried out (by each of us in our own cases) contribute to mould our lives in a particular way. The morally correct action has no phenomenal features by means of which we could distinguish it from other sort of actions. That's why Wittgenstein asserts that "The world of the happy man is different from the world of the unhappy man", because there's nothing else we could possibly say. It's because of its contribution to the meaning of my life that an action is characterized by the subject as "good" or "bad". So expressions like 'ethics of silence' which are so often used to speak about the supposed Wittgensteinian ethics are most misleading, since they induce us to think that actions have objective moral features, features which cannot be described in purely "naturalistic" terms. I think that that's not Wittgenstein's stance. So about this particular issue I think Villoro is definitely wrong.

My second objection has to do with the *Tractatus*' paradox, the big problem that Russell had already pointed to in his "Introduction". The trouble with Villoro's interpretation is that it doesn't enable him to explain the problem which, to a certain extent, he doesn't even seem to perceive. Rather, Villoro sees Wittgenstein's problem positively, as a contribution, as an effort to say something meaningful and important precisely there where others had failed. But things are not as Villoro sees them. I think rather that the final paradox of the *Tractatus* suddenly springs as an undesirable consequence of pronouncements made in other parts of the book and it is certainly something Wittgenstein would have preferred to avoid. The problem has its roots in the logical universalism of the *Tractatus*. For Wittgenstein, logic constitutes the ultimate platform or basis for both language and reality. Logic is always the logic of language and the logic of the world. The world is intelligible because we can describe it and we can describe it because our language is governed by logic. The problem arises because when he states his views on the nature of logic Wittgenstein has to do it in a particular language and thus he realizes that there is after all something more universal than logic, that is, natural language. It's because language turns out to be more universal than logic itself that the paradox arises: there's something more universal than what is more universal than anything else. This a mistake that the later Wittgenstein certainly didn't make.

I would say that the fact that Villoro's paper contains some rather definite errors doesn't diminish the value of his contribution. Much more important than the content of a particular text is the fact that thanks to it analytical philosophy in Mexico was strongly motivated and was propelled ahead in a context in which there already were many other contenders. It's to the issue of the development of analytical philosophy in Mexico that I now turn.

IV) *Analytical philosophy in Mexico and in the world*

There's no doubt that XXth century philosophy in Mexico has as a landmark the arrival at the end of the 30s of the Spanish philosopher, José Gaos. Gaos' own work is indeed impressive; he also did important contributions in translating classic texts into Spanish (I think that his translation of the pre-Socratics deserves respect, in spite of the progress made in this field since then), but above all he was an excellent lecturer and teacher. In fact, almost all Mexican philosophers of that period, Leopoldo Zea, Emilio Uranga, Alejandro Rossi, Fernando Salmerón, etc., were his pupils. Naturally, Villoro too. The problem was that Gaos was a philosopher educated in the German tradition, a great scholar of Husserl and Heidegger, some of whose works he translated into Spanish, notably Heidegger's *Time and Being*, a task that took him 10 years to achieve. Thus, both phenomenology and existentialism constitute Villoro's main philosophical background. So it's somewhat curious that the first seeds of what nowadays is the most important philosophical trend in Mexico came from some of Gaos's students who had not been raised as analytical philosophers at all.

Why is analytical philosophy here and now so important in Mexico and what role does it play? Well, it's important because as a matter of fact classes, seminars, conferences, papers, books, academic exchanges, all that is linked to this philosophical school. We have had in Mexico as invited lecturers people as diverse and important as G. H. von Wright, W. V. O. Quine, D. Davidson, S. Kripke, P. Strawson, C. Hempel, G. Evans, H. Putnam, E. Anscombe and many others, being almost all of them recognized important analytical philosophers. Our students and post-graduate students go on with their masters and Ph. Ds mainly in British and American universities and therefore go on working in analytical philosophy. All this sounds very good and I think that we are in a position to assert that we are on a level with both Spain and Argentina, the most important Spanish speaking philosophical centers for a long time. Does it mean that we can speak of philosophical progress in Mexico? I think we can. However, there's a problem, which worries me, and about which I'd like to present my own point of view. It has to do with a kind of misunderstanding related to analytical philosophy not just in Mexico, but as such, as it is understood and practiced around the world

My view requires me to do some elementary historical reminders. As is well known, analytical philosophy got begotten during the first 25 years of the XXth century. **Formally**, this philosophical school distinguished itself from others by the clarity of its language and by its close association with science and logic. Putting aside Frege, who belonged to another century, the most outstanding thinkers linked to the new way of conceiving and doing philosophy were people like Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, L. Wittgenstein and R. Carnap. Now, from the point of view of its goals, in its origin analytical philosophy lacked the kind of unitary character that other schools had, like neo-Kantianism,

phenomenology and British Hegelianism (Bradley, McTaggart), but it had instead two defining or essential features. On the one hand, it was the philosophical trend which gave priority to the philosophy of language above all other branches of philosophy. In fact I would say that it is with analytical philosophy that the philosophy of language became an autonomous branch of philosophy. It's very important to understand this. It means that for the first analytical philosophers the perplexities which up to then were conceived as (so to speak) "substantial" problems, as objective difficulties but so abstract that no science could in principle deal with them, those difficulties had now to be faced and rephrased as difficulties related to the meaning of words and, more generally, were conceived as dependent upon language. For instance, instead of trying to discover the good by means of intuitions or insights through an introspective sort of research, what analytical philosophers tried to do was to grasp and describe the meaning of words like 'good' so that traditional ethical questions were now seen to be founded on linguistic or semantic confusions. Little by little this new analytical approach tended to replace the traditional way of doing philosophy and assigned philosophy a new task. So thanks to this new way of conceiving philosophical work analytical philosophy left behind traditional philosophical speculations and theorizing, philosophers' eternal aim to obtain *a priori* but non vacuous truths, synthetic *a priori* truths and the like. Naturally, this emphasis on language, that is, on words and their applications led to the second feature I just mentioned, namely, the conviction that philosophical problems were essentially linguistic. Thus, through a natural evolution, the **original** analytical philosophy transformed itself into linguistic philosophy. This way of understanding philosophy and its complexities had great advocates, like J. L. Austin, but in fact it attained its zenith in the later Wittgenstein's work. Putting aside Wittgenstein, in my view the best practitioner of the sort of analysis that this school favoured was the great American philosopher, who passed away in England, Norman Malcolm.

It follows from what I've said that we do have now a serious problem of identification. First, for a variety of reasons the philosophy of language stopped having priority in the philosophical world. The philosophy of language is not particularly fashionable nowadays and as a consequence very few philosophers still think that philosophical problems are linked to or dependent upon language. So it is a fact that contemporary philosophers, just as the great philosophers of the past, are mostly interested in construing philosophical theories and many of them are totally convinced that it's only thanks to scientific progress that philosophical problems can in principle be solved. For instance, except for some honorable exceptions, nobody is interested in investigating, say, the concept of consciousness. In general philosophers simply assume that they know what the word 'consciousness' means and then they turn to neurophysiology to try to show that consciousness is indeed to be found in the brain. It is assumed that there can be a science of consciousness, since consciousness is seen as a phenomenon that takes place in space-time and therefore, it is argued, it has to be physical and if it is physical, then the only place to find it is inside the skull and

more specifically in the brain. All this may sound appealing to more than one, but the question we still have the right to raise is: is that analytical philosophy? The answer, in my opinion, is relatively simple: in the original sense of the expression ‘analytical philosophy’, certainly not. So contrary to what the vast majority of philosophers, not only in Mexico, who conceive themselves as doing analytical philosophy think, we can say that the only thing they don’t do is just that. I would say that if, due to habits, laziness, etc., we want to keep the word ‘analytical’ in use, then we should speak of “analytical metaphysics” (even is that expression is in fact nonsensical), “analytical theory of knowledge, “analytical ethics” and so on, as long as we don’t lose sight of the fact that what is being done is something radically different in goals from what the first analytical philosophers, the truly ones, used to do.

If I’m right in what I’ve been saying, the expression ‘analytical philosophy’ is not only misleading but rather useless and it enables us to assert that what is being done in Mexico, in the United States, in England, etc., is whatever you want except one thing: analytical philosophy. Although of course I don’t submit this as an argument, it nevertheless seems to me that an “analytical philosopher” like Lewis would feel more comfortable with Leibniz than with Hacker; Searle would feel in better company with Descartes than with Malcolm, and so forth. I infer from this situation that there is a sense in which the real analytical philosophy is something that belongs to the past. Now it’s just a label, but it has to be remarked that it used to be a school of thought which passed away without ever being refuted. It had, so to speak, a natural death. This demands an explanation which very roughly I’d like to sketch out.

V) *The future of analytical philosophy in Mexico and in the world*

It is obvious that the future of the so called ‘analytical philosophy’ in Mexico is linked to and dependent upon the fate of analytical philosophy in other parts of the world and specially, of course, in the United States. I think that if we are to provide the expression ‘analytical philosophy’ with a more or less precise and specific meaning, if we don’t use it just to refer to any kind of technical reflection on traditional philosophical subjects (the mind-body problem, the existence of God, the nature of numbers, the structure of scientific theories, etc.), if to speak of analytical philosophy will simply be to speak of philosophy in which formalization of language is permanently used and in which abundant mention is made of the latest scientific discoveries, then the future of “analytical philosophy”, in this present sense of the expression, looks just brilliant and assured. At first sight, nothing could in principle modify the way philosophy is understood and practiced nowadays. But it is equally obvious that there is a confusion involved here, a confusion which amounts to a trivialization of the very notion of analytical philosophy.

Everything indicates that the fundamental insight which underlies contemporary philosophy is that human knowledge is a unique, complex propositional body and that the goal of philosophy is to contribute to its enlargement. Philosophy is thought of as a kind of inquiry in which its practitioners are in search of truths, just as in science but in or for different domains. From this perspective, philosophy is nothing but the avant-garde of science. It investigates what science for the time being can say nothing about. I think that the original analytical philosophers had an utterly different conception of philosophy. For them analytical philosophy was something quite different. In my view, the best exponent of real analytical philosophy was precisely Ludwig Wittgenstein. Already in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein pointed out that philosophy is something below or above science, but not something to be put on the same level; he made it clear that the goal of philosophy is not theory-construction but the clarification of thought, a kind of exercise which can be carried out in any philosophical context. Nothing of this, however, seems to appeal to the majority of contemporary philosophers. They are not interested in conceptual analysis nor, more generally, in the kind of clarity that Wittgenstein advocated, but in rational speculations and in (I would say pseudo-scientific) theorizing. Someone who represent very well this non-analytic tendency is to my mind Karl Popper. As we all know, Popper views philosophical research as providing, for any philosophical subject one deals with, conjectures, that is, high level hypotheses, which are immediately subject to objections and depending upon whether or not they are refuted we discard them or we polish them and submit them again to new refutations and so on. I think it's unquestionable that it is the Popperian conception which now prevails. But this, I hold, is not analytical philosophy.

So if I'm not totally mistaken, we are now at a crossroads, we face a dilemma. The problem is a problem of self-identity, the requirement to determine what exactly we do when we do philosophy, what do we want to achieve and how should we pursue it. ¿Do we study philosophy to become some sort of guide for scientific research? If so, we are Russellian, Popperian, Quinean, etc. ¿Or rather we are in philosophy because we are convinced that, induced by our language, our thought creates intellectual knots, puzzles, enigmas and that our function as philosophers is to try to disentangle them, not of course by elaborating more complex ones? If so, then we are Wittgensteinians. It seems to me that in our days this is an alternative we just cannot ignore and with respect to which we have to choose. There is of course a collective tide leading us in one direction but, given the autonomy of our thought, I still believe that the last decision about the direction to take in philosophy falls upon each of us in particular.

