BOOK REVIEW

Language, Limits, and Beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore. By Priyambada Sarkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xxiii + 182. Hardcover $68.45, ISBN 978-0-19-012397-0.

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This intriguing and original work may be viewed as something like a conjoined study of certain obscure issues in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and some ideas and images in Rabindranath Tagore's literary pieces, especially his mystical poems and plays. As the title suggests, the work is pretty much restricted to just one lingering theme from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the possibility of grasping this obscure theme in poetic terms of Tagore, rather than in terms of the standard discourse of analytic philosophy. The author deserves a round of applause for conceiving this work.

The author embarks on the project by setting aside the so-called "resolute" reading of the *Tractatus* proposed by Cora Diamond and James Conant in the *Realistic Spirit* (MIT, 1991). According to Diamond and Conant, the enigmatic propositions of the *Tractatus* are to be viewed as a "therapy" against the human urge to philosophize. Without getting into the intricate, and often obscure, discussion that followed Diamond and Conant's work, Sarkar simply adopts a non-resolute reading of the *Tractatus* under which the propositions of the *Tractatus* are metaphysically significant. Sarkar's main evidence in favour of the non-resolute reading consists of a flurry of remarks from Wittgenstein himself on what he considered to be the significant aspect of the book (pp. 3-6). One is thus motivated to directly engage with the purported metaphysical significance of perhaps the most enigmatic theme in the *Tractatus*.

The theme under study is Wittgenstein's puzzling remark, "What we cannot talk about, we must pass over in silence." Adopting a non-resolute understanding of the remark, the author suggests that Wittgenstein advocates a limit to what can be expressed in language. However, following the non-resolute reading, Wittgenstein *cannot* be viewed as advocating that whatever is thus passed over in silence lacks significance. In fact, citing Wittgenstein (pp. 6-7), Sarkar contends that drawing the limits of what can be expressed cannot indicate boundaries of thought because that will mean thinking the unthinkable. Once a limit is drawn, what falls on the unexpressed side of thought—the silent thought—necessarily becomes ineffable in the context of the language in use. One may then undertake an inquiry into the significance of the ineffable.

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The work roughly divides into three parts. The first two chapters are devoted to Wittgenstein's sketch of a factual language and its limits and how one may be led from the notion of limits to some notion of ineffability. As we will see, a non-resolute reading of the limits of factual language leads to two notions of language: language of facts and language of feelings. Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate different aspects of the language of feeling with individual studies of the domains of ethics, aesthetics and religion from the writings of Tagore and Wittgenstein. The concluding Chapter 5 may be viewed as a test case of how the scheme of explanation developed so far may be used to explain Wittgenstein's abiding interest in Tagore's mystical play *The King of the Dark Chamber*.

To show the limits of a language, Wittgenstein develops a fragment of the familiar *Principia*-type logistic language to illustrate what may be said in a language. In this language, call it the "factual language" (FL), atomic propositions of FL state what is the case. A rigorous enumeration of all the propositions of FL thus constitutes what may be said in FL in terms of the truth conditions so obtained; for example, a proposition of the form not-p, where p is atomic, says what is not the case.

However, there are two exceptions: propositions of the form p & not-p, a contradiction, and p v not-p, a tautology. Since tautologies are true of all facts and contradictions are true of none, the very form of these propositions suggest that they do not really amount to factual statements about the world even if their constituent atomic propositions do. These propositions may be viewed as "showing" by their very form the limit of what may be said in FL. In that sense, these propositions indicate the boundary of the factual language. Generalising the idea, one may say, from the very form of each proposition whether it falls inside FL or on the boundary of FL. Nothing else can be said in FL. Whatever else may be uttered or thought of in silence must be held to be unsayable (i.e., ineffable); hence they must be nonsense in FL.

Wisely, instead of getting bogged down to examine the credibility of postulating FL, the author simply investigates the consequences of adopting FL. Most interestingly, an immediate consequence is that, strictly speaking, as with all philosophical propositions, the propositions of the *Tractatus* themselves must be deemed to be nonsense since they are not factual in character. One may thus adopt a resolute position in which all philosophising must be dispensed with once the message of the *Tractatus* is grasped. The resolute reading is problematic because, if we grant that the propositions of *Tractatus* are nonsense, then the notion of grasping the message of the *Tractatus* remains unexplained: how does one grasp the content of nonsense?

Alternatively, one may conclude that the scope of FL is severely restricted with respect to the unbounded possibilities of human expression. Adopting the alternative reading, the author asks if there is a realm of non-factual thought that is essential for human expression. The logical point is that, since such expressions, if any, cannot be formulated in FL, there must be some other language in which

they find their form if they are not to be viewed as nonsense. I think a crucial point of clarification is needed at this point. As the chart on p. 5 makes it clear, the notion of ineffability of the entire non-factual realm arises from the only form of effability allowed in the framework of the *Tractatus*, namely FL. Beyond FL then, other forms of effability arise for what is ineffable in FL. I will return to this critical point.

Once the non-resolute understanding of the "beyondness" is so established, the author goes on to develop the idea of what is ineffable in FL may be held to be significant in a language different from FL. While mentioning a general approval for such languages in some of Wittgenstein's later writings such as *On Certainty*, the author cites extensively from Tagore's writings to illustrate how the language of poetry in particular demands a conception of a "language of feelings," as Tagore put it. According to Tagore, the uniqueness of the poetic form often lies in its ability to somehow express what is otherwise inexpressible: the grandeur and complexity of inner experiences, the quest for and contemplation of the infinite, the state of the spirit of the poet when undergoing such experiences, etc.

To generalize from these observations on the language of poetry, the author carefully contends that such expressions, even if they are found explicitly and in abundance in poetry, in fact pervade much of literature and other forms of human non-factual expression. The presence of poetry thus opens up a vast landscape of human thought which is basically expressed in the literary mode thus satisfying Wittgenstein's striking contention that philosophy really ought only to be composed in the way in which a work of literature is. To illustrate the idea of discourse beyond FL, the author enters, apart from the allegedly metaphysical concerns of the *Tractatus*, the non-factual domains of ethics, aesthetics and religion, each of which find repeated mention in Wittgenstein's work, including some cryptic remarks in the *Tractatus* itself.

The chapters that follow are most interesting in the following way. I do not know if it is a deliberate strategy, the presentation of the material in these chapters is largely exegetical. Without getting into analytic argumentation about the significance of expressions in these domains, the author simply cites profusely from the writings of both Wittgenstein and Tagore to show how these authors upheld the value of human expression in these areas. In fact, the author seldom discusses what it means to engage in multiple forms of discourse in factual and non-factual domains. It appears that, for the author, simply the presence of the discourse shows its validity. In my view, the strategy enabled the author not only to present a poet and a philosopher side by side to bring out a phenomenon in human discourse, it also bypassed the need to deliberate on various analytical issues that have engaged many philosophers, such as whether there are separate discourses for ethics, aesthetics and religion.

However, one uneasy consequence of the exegetical strategy is that it appears to conflate, as hinted earlier, a distinction between two modes of ineffability: ineffability due to limits on what can be expressed in FL and what

cannot be expressed in the linguistic mode at all. As a result, there appears to be a conflation between two notions of beyondness: beyond FL and beyond any language. Hence, while ably bringing out the similarities between Tagore and Wittgenstein in the general area of ineffability, the author might have either missed or failed to emphasize a subtle difference between the poet and the philosopher.

The citations from Wittgenstein, especially in the domains of ethics and religion, seem to indicate a more direct concern with the first notion of ineffability. These citations suggest that Wittgenstein was more concerned about his own conception of the classical distinction between fact and value, rather than with the phenomenon of ineffability itself; ineffability appears to be a by-product of the unbridgeable divide between fact and value. In contrast, the exemplary translations from Tagore signal an engagement with the second, more prominent notion of ineffability, especially in the area of aesthetics. In fact, as supported by some of the scattered remarks of the author, Tagore's primary concern was to find the expression, even with "indirect meaning," for what can be experienced but which remains essentially unsayable, the hallmark of mystical literature, especially poetry. The play, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, may be viewed as an enigmatic effort to that end as it explores the silences that ensue when (feminine) love is constrained by (masculine) power. But then, by highlighting Wittgenstein's fascination with this play, the author seems to indicate, without much analysis, that the two forms of ineffability could be overlapping. I wish the author devoted some more space to this topic.

The crucial distinction between two notions of expressibility leads to perhaps the most obvious criticism of the work. As noted, the first notion of ineffability depends on locating different linguistic forms for factual and non-factual domains. In his later writings, most notably in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejected the very idea of FL as a model for human language. Instead, he proposed a unified, unbounded, and public form of linguistic significance; the distinctions between factual, ethical, aesthetic and religious discourses may now be viewed as expressing different forms of life within a general symbolic format. So the division of human domains of reflection in terms of a division of languages is no longer required, and the entire basis for postulating limits of language and beyondness collapses.

However, as noted, the criticism applies only to the first notion of ineffability which was based on the distinction between FL and non-FL. The second, poetic notion of ineffability of human experiences still obtains. However, it is unclear from the way the relevant material is presented whether Wittgenstein, while rejecting the first notion of ineffability in his later work, continued to recommend the second. If not, then the coveted convergence on ineffability between the philosopher and the poet also becomes questionable. Maybe the desired convergence resides in the engagement with non-linguistic forms of human expression such as music. The author does mention the lifelong involvement with

music of both Tagore and Wittgenstein, but does not develop the notion of ineffability of music that might have been the attraction for music for these two great minds.