

ON THE FRONTIER OF LANGUAGES
- The language of science / the language of theology -

Călin SĂPLĂCAN

“Babeş-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca

Abstract:

The differences in recognizing what we see (because of the different significances of reality) ask for an analytical approach of clarifying the language of science (of facts) and theology (of values), in order to see how a theologian can speak of one Truth (the Kingdom of God) inaccessible to scientific knowledge.

Keywords: mathematical (formal) language, scientific language, theological language, frontier, description.

*Motto: The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical. We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. (...)*¹

*What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.*² The conclusion of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* highlights the premises for an investigation regarding the frontiers between the languages of science and theology:

- a. Is there a difference in recognizing what we see?

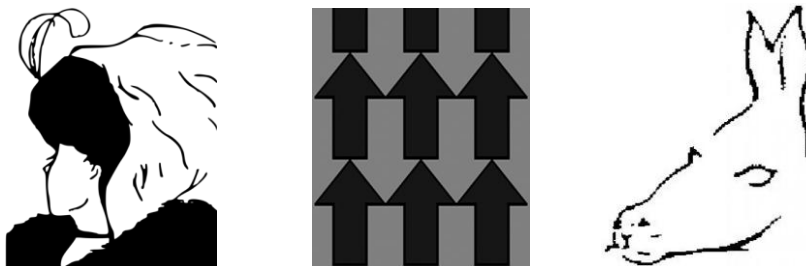
¹ Wittgenstein, L., 2002, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, London, P 5.6 ; P 6.522 ; P 6.52.

² *Tractatus* P 7.

- b. What is the relationship between the scientific and the theological truth in a Wittgensteinian perspective?
- c. Are we, as theologians, forced by scientific truth to silence ourselves? How can the theologian speak if he relates his discourse to a Truth inaccessible to scientific knowledge?

a. What is given, what we see

Any reading in science or theology (about man, the world, or history) can be qualified as phenomenological, in the broad meaning of describing that what there is. My interest in phenomenology is connected to the problem of “givenness” and “seeing”, of how reality is offering itself to us and how it is perceived, of this “in-between-ness” of subject and object. How can it happen that we see differently that what is shown to us? Let us look at the three drawings below. If you ask several people to tell you what they see, you would (perhaps) be surprised by their answers.³ The fact of seeing poses a problem to the givenness, or in other words, there are legitimate differences in recognizing what we see.



Let us think now of the answers given by a biologist, a psychoanalyst and a theologian when describing man. This descriptive reading of man sends us to different horizons of meaning, but also to the origins of their appearance (an *arché*) and the perspectives of meaning opening up to them (a *telos*).

Accordingly, some will see man as an object of evolution (Darwinism), others as an unconscious structure (psychoanalysis), yet others as a creation of God (theology). Starting from the description of

³ A lady young or old? (first drawing); arrows pointing up or down? (second drawing); a donkey or a seal? (third drawing).

human bodies or skeletons, a biologist may see a process of evolution (going back to the origins and perhaps even to prediction). Starting from the description of symptoms, a psychologist may be interested in their development in order to establish the psychological problems of that individual and the perspectives of restoration and integration in people's lives. A theologian interested in man will connect the creation of man by God to its eschatological meaning.

With the help of these examples we have found several sets of meanings regarding man: biological, psychological, theological. These sets of meanings are expressed in different languages. This is precisely where one can find interest in an analytical viewpoint, in interrogating the status of phenomenology in relation with the languages used. As Jocelyn Benoist emphasizes, analytical philosophy has certain questions to ask from the philosophy of „regard,, of this „philosophical gaze,, to which phenomenology relates: *What is the nature of this regard? How far is it reliable or legitimate? What is it that is offered to us to see precisely? Is it not always determined in relation with a language that precedes it and which it has always dissimulated?*⁴

By way of analytical philosophy, the author touches upon the very status of phenomenology: what do we actually do when we describe? Benoist attacks the method of phenomenology (seeing) and its limits: *Marion sees God, I don't see him, and this is a problem.*⁵ If *doing phenomenology means to describe first,*⁶ says Jocelyn Benoist, the description of what we see (and its transposition into a language) is always related to a language that precedes this seeing. These readings would win if confronted with an analytical perspective in order to clarify their relation with the language (languages) they use. I shall go on with the presentation

⁴ *Quelle est la nature de ce « voir »? Quelle est sa fiabilité, sa légitimité? Que nous donne-t-il à voir exactement? N'est-il pas toujours déterminé en rapport à un langage, qui le précède et en même temps qu'il a toujours occulté?* in BENOIST, J., 2001, *L'idée de phénoménologie*, Beauchesne, Paris, p.38.

⁵ *...Marion voit Dieu, je ne le vois pas, et c'est un problem* in BENOIST, J., 2001, *L'idée de phénoménologie.*, Beauchesne, Paris, p.39.

⁶ *faire de la phénoménologie, c'est d'abord decrier* in BENOIST, J., 2001, *L'idée de phénoménologie*, Beauchesne, Paris, p.38.

of an analytical (mathematical vs. philosophical, theological) attempt to clarify the various types of languages.

Scientific truth / Religious (theological) truth

The true propositions of empirical sciences stand for existing facts. The *correspondence theory of truth* is suggestive in this respect. The correspondence theory of truth makes a correspondence between logic, mathematics and facts.⁷ Truth or falseness is established by scientific protocols consisting of comparisons with reality.⁸ The *criteria of truth* specific to all sciences are established by the respective scholarly communities.

The true propositions of theology stand for the fundamental truths of faith. The *coherence theory of truth* is suggestive in this respect. The truths of faith are those embraced by the faith community (possibly also including Tradition, the recognized Authority of the Church, etc.)

The world and everything that might exist (the factually possible worlds) as existing facts or possible alternative facts (the weather is clear now, but it could be cloudy) are scientifically representable only in the *field of logic*, and for modern science (after Galilei) also in the *field of mathematics*. The propositions of logic and mathematics are necessary conditions for the scientific description of the world of facts (implying their formal truth); however, these propositions are not sufficient conditions for the description of the world of facts (and implicitly for the correspondence truth of propositions about facts with the reality of facts).⁹ The following is a simple, yet highly suggestive example in this sense: let us presuppose to make the affirmation “There are 2 apples and 3 oranges on the table, which totals 7 fruits.” Since this violates the mathematical (formal) truth of $2 + 3 =$

⁷ *The agreement or disagreement or its sense with reality constitutes its truth or falsity.* Tractatus P 2.222.

⁸ *In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality.* Tractatus P 2.223.

⁹ *It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic. And so too it is a very important fact that the truth or falsity of non-logical propositions cannot be recognized from the propositions alone.* Tractatus P 6.113.

5, in other words the mathematical (logical) proposition behind the facts is false, scientifically speaking one cannot proceed to the establishment of correspondence with facts. Let us now presuppose that the mathematical proposition behind the facts is true, or in other words, it is affirmed that there are 2 apples and 3 oranges on the table, that is 5 fruits. This proposition meets the necessary condition of mathematical (logical) truth, but scientifically speaking it is not yet true. In order to find out its truth, its correspondence with the state of facts must first be established. If there are 2 apples and 3 oranges on the table, it is true, while if there are 2 apples and 3 bananas, it is false. The truth or falseness of the propositions which speak about the facts of our world (scientific propositions) depends on their correspondence with reality.

These aspects are clearly stated in Wittgenstein's treatise: [...] *This throws some light on the question why logical propositions cannot be confirmed by experience any more than they can be refuted by it. Not only must a proposition of logic be irrefutable by any possible experience, but it must also be unconfirmable by any possible experience.*¹⁰

These conditions are most restrictive for science. In what regards the religious truth, the logical or mathematical truth is not such a restrictive requirement; however, this does not mean a logical arbitrariness or indifference to formal truths, but the fact that there are situations in which the value of a message overrules formal correctness. Here are two simple and suggestive examples:

How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? (Deuteronomy 32, 30)

A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill. (Isaiah 30, 17)

Does all this really means that they did not know how to make simple calculations, or that if the calculations were correct, then their people only counted 5000 persons? Not at all. What really matters is the content of

¹⁰ Tractatus P 6.1222.

the religious message. It matters what the numbers *show* (in an analytical Wittgensteinian sense). The religious truth is principle-based on the level of another content than the scientific truth, an aspect that must be emphasized.

“The logical or mathematical truth” is a restrictive condition for the “scientific truth”, but it is not so for the “religious truth”. A mathematical proposition is a chain of symbols and thus it lacks any factual significance, but by “loading” the mathematical symbols with empirical (physical, biological, economic) evidence, the proposition becomes scientific, and only thus can it speak about the facts of this world.

Logic and mathematics are necessary conditions for the scientific truth of propositions which *describe* our world of facts, but not for the religious propositions whose “religious truth” goes beyond the facts of this world. The religious truth targets an existential horizon of meaning beyond the facts, or a sense of our world through the theological-existential value of facts.

From this perspective of existential values or meanings, all propositions about facts have the same value, or, what is the same, they have no value.¹¹ As for the „religious (theological) truth,, it must be explicitly said that it refers not so much to facts but to their existential values or meanings. The meanings that theology „burdens,, on facts and implicitly the content to which all religious truths refer, are about God and the Revealed Word, and not the fact as such. The theological meanings of facts – which are incidental and relative for science – represent the absolute religious horizons of meaning. Science only has relative truths, while theology (also) has absolute truths. Wittgenstein is most explicit in this respect: *The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists--and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What*

¹¹ *All propositions are of equal value.* Tractatus P 6.4.

*makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.*¹²

*How things are in the world [the objective of scientific truths, author's note] is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world. [God is not a fact of this world, the truth about God (the religious truth) is not that of the facts (the scientific truth), author's note].*¹³

Once the world was created, science has got its – let's say – „object,, to describe how the world is. God's implication or presence in the world cannot be reduced to the strict level of facts. It is an implication on the level of meaning, the divine-religious meaning of facts. What does this limited world of facts become then through God? It becomes another “world”. It is a world in which the values of man go beyond the value of the scientific truth of facts. Speaking somewhat metaphorically: the religious truth begins where the scientific truth “ends”.¹⁴ In the next proposition, there is thus a possibility of finding a theological meaning complementary to the previously cited proposition (of the *Tractatus*): *If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts [...].*¹⁵ *In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. [...].*¹⁶

How can a theologian speak if he relates his discourse to a Truth inaccessible to scientific knowledge?

Whereas sciences engage a series of representations to *describe* the real (man, the world, history), theology's reference point is the Kingdom of

¹² Tractatus P 6.41.

¹³ Tractatus P 6.432.

¹⁴ Not only does theological research not exclude factual truths, but it also embeds them into its interpretations. This statement has nothing to do with the positions of scientific creationism.

¹⁵ More precisely, the Divine implication in the world is not on the level of changing factual scientific theories. This implication does not change „physics,, „biology,, „geology,, etc. in itself as a science.

¹⁶ Tractatus P 6.43.

Heaven.¹⁷ Thus, in order to describe the real, the man of science uses laws and descriptive models (scientific and mathematical) starting from observation, while the theologian uses as reference *the norm of an a priori truth (the Kingdom of Heaven), which is enunciated and confessed as relevant neither for observation nor for the experience of the real.*¹⁸

How can the theologian elaborate a discourse when his reference – the Kingdom of Heaven – is inaccessible to his own experimental knowledge? Saint Paul offers an astounding answer: *Now we see but a poor reflection (αἰνίγματι) as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.* (1 Cor 13,12). Saint Paul shows not only the limits of our human knowledge (αἰνίγματι – enigmatic), but also the fact that this knowledge is based on human intuitions which are not rooted in factual experience, nor are they directed towards such an experience, so that this knowledge cannot be touched by discourse. Mystical experiences accepted by theology are such kinds of examples: they are the mystical forms of silence.

¹⁷ Houziaux, A., 1992, Le royaume de Dieu, d'Épiménide et de Gödel, in *Autres Temps. Les cahiers du christianisme social*, 33-34, 75&78.

¹⁸ *la norme d'une vérité (le Royaume de Dieu) a priori qui, est énoncée et confessée, comme ne relevant ni de l'observation ni de l'expérience du réel*, Idem, p.78.