On the Pseudo-Ontology of the *Tractatus*

I) *Ontology and the* Tractatus

The *Tractatus* is a difficult book. According, for instance, to Prof. M. Black, "No philosophical classic is harder to master."[1] This implies that it would be useless to deny that any possible reader will need help in order to understand it. The book represents a real challenge for its potential readers for a variety of reasons: the topics the author considers in the book are in themselves complex, Wittgenstein's novel insights are anything but easy to grasp, the powerful arguments on which Wittgenstein supports his ideas are almost hidden due to the extremely original and concise style in which the book is written. Even the propositional order turns out to be misleading. Many scholars have maintained that the fundamental platform of Wittgenstein's thought is constituted by the so called 'Picture Theory', which starts being exposed only at 2.1, whereas other have advocated the view that it is rather the radical version of logical atomism with which Wittgenstein starts off that is the basis for the philosophy contained in the book. Indeed, it could be argued that the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a hyper-text, probably the only one in the history of philosophy, and therefore one could initiate the reading by what Wittgenstein has to say on, for example, ethics, aesthetics and God and pass from it to the philosophy of number and from them to the other parts of the text; or one could eventually start by examining Wittgenstein's pronouncements on logic and transit from there to the remaining parts of the text. In all cases, we would arrive at the same results and we would get the same philosophical message. It follows that the order which as a matter of fact moulds the book is not the real one for the simple reason that there is no such thing as "the" propositional order of its content. The latter can be presented in a variety of ways. This gives a rough idea of how difficult the understanding of the *Tractatus* is.

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[1] M. Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's* ***Tractatus*** (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 1

If we then admit that the *Tractatus* is a kind of labyrinth we must also acknowledge that we need our Ariadne's thread to travel across it safely. Is there such a thread? I am convinced that there is and that it can get a clear formulation. What we need is a number of conditions or guiding principles which above all would prevent us from putting forward radically mistaken interpretations of the book, even if such interpretations are not obviously wrong. Naturally, the first and most basic requirement for any interpretation whatsoever of the *Tractatus* is that it provides or makes room for a coherent reading of the text. Regardless of how obvious this might seem to us, it is certainly far from being an easy condition to fulfil. There are countless *prima facie* attractive interpretations of certain parts of the text which simply don't fit other parts. That alone justifies their rejection. This is not, however, the only requirement, for it entails others. Thus we should trace and keep in mind what can be considered as Wittgenstein's most fundamental insight, an insight to which he remained faithful throughout his life, namely, that there are no real problems in philosophy, that philosophical problems arise out of misunderstandings, that philosophical theses are nonsensical expressions and that philosophical theories are nothing but sets of nonsense. So we can affirm that any reading of the *Tractatus* which doesn't take into account these two guiding principles can be judged *ab initio* as simply worthless.

It should be observed that the second of our aforementioned principles has decisive consequences for any possible reading of the book for it not only allows us to infer, but rather implies, together with the other principle, that any proposal to ascribe to Wittgenstein a philosophical theory is totally mistaken. Now if in the *Tractatus* there are no philosophical theories *a fortiori* there cannot be ontological theories either. So one important consequence of this approach is that the book contains no ontology whatever and, accordingly, that the first sections of the book must be read in such a way that no ontological thesis could be found there. It is clear,

however, that our two principles play here only so to say a negative role, that is, they may be used mostly to reject possible interpretations. Something more, however, is needed in order to provide an interpretation which would match our guiding principles. Now do we have at our disposal the principles which would help us to construct an interpretation such that our previous requirements would be fulfilled? I think we do.

From my point of view, there are at least two more indispensable principles needed to elaborate a convincing interpretation of the *Tractatus* in general and in particular of its first part (**1-2.063)**. In fact more than principles what I have in mind are very general approaches to the content as a whole. I would label them as embodying:

a) the logical perspective, and
b) the first person perspective

It is, I think, undeniable that when he wrote the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein still had one foot within the standard or conventional philosophical tradition and the other foot outside, given his new and really revolutionary ideas. For instance, it is clear that he still accepted the Cartesian <mental/material> dichotomy and that he still succumbed to the temptation of saying things like “only the present is real” or “only my experience is real”. As is well known, in the *Tractatus* there is simply no place for “the other”, there is no talk of any kind of “linguistic community”, etc. In the *Tractatus* we only find the world and the subject. All this is what the second of this second group of heuristic principles accounts for. However, it is the first one which is relevant for us here. I’ll try to explain why in a few words.

What our first principle implies is that any subject-matter the *Tractatus* deals with is examined from the most abstract possible point of view, a purely formal one, that is, the logical one. What this

means is, among other things, that absolutely nothing empirical is to be taken into account. Logical and the empirical considerations simply cancel each other out. But then it becomes clear that what the *Tractatus* gives us are the logical features of language, of mathematics, of scientific theories, etc., and also of the world. But obviously to give us the logical or necessary features of the world is not to give us an ontology, in a Quinean sense of the word. This is not the same as giving a theory about what the world contains. We already agreed that Wittgenstein is not in the least interested in constructing any kind of philosophical theory or in stating any sort of metaphysical thesis. What Wittgenstein gives us are ***elucidations***, not metaphysical or, more generally, philosophical theses. To think otherwise would be to conflict with our first group of guiding principles and we would be making Wittgenstein incoherent from the very beginning.

So our challenge is: if it isn't an ontology what he gives us at the beginning of the book, then what is it?

As we said, if there are no philosophical theories, *a fortiori* there cannot be ontological ones. What is ontology? Roughly speaking, ontology is the general theory of what there is in the world, of the kind of things the world contains. There is no question that the vocabulary Wittgenstein has recourse to in the first part of his book coincides with the metaphysician's standard terminology, that is, it is the usual lexicon of metaphysicians of all times: 'world', 'facts', 'objects', 'properties', 'relations', 'logical space', 'possibilities' and so forth and this might give the impression that he is doing metaphysics as usual. Nevertheless, one can feel from the very beginning that Wittgenstein's assertions have, so to speak, a different flavor. One immediately senses that although akin to what metaphysicians do, what Wittgenstein does is something different, even if it is not at all easy to describe the difference between them. At any rate, what can be immediately grasped is that he uses those words in a somewhat special way, *i.e.*, he makes a peculiar use of

this terminology. One of our tasks is precisely to clarify what this peculiar use consists in. Incidentally, I would like to point out that it would be a total mistake to think that the words we speak about, as well as many others related to them and used by philosophers, belong to philosophy and that it is just by chance that they happen to be employed by normal speakers too. It's exactly the other way around: metaphysicians pick up words that belong to natural language but use them in a strange ways which wildly differ from the way normal speakers do, that is, they establish connections that plainly normal speakers neither establish nor recognize. It is the metaphysical use of words that creates conceptual confusion and endless discussion, not the words of natural language which are themselves neutral. Thus Wittgenstein indeed uses the same terminology as the metaphysicians, but he certainly does not use them in exactly the same way, to make the kind of assertions they make. It just would be a howler to think that Wittgenstein seeks to compete with metaphysicians in trying to elaborate a more sophisticated "theory of the world". Were we to assume such thing, we would be sinning against our basic assumptions, since we would be ascribing to Wittgenstein precisely the kind of construct that he explicitly repudiates.

Now if it is not an ontological theory that Wittgenstein puts forward at the beginning of his book, what is he then trying to achieve? The answer, in accordance with what I called the 'logical perspective', is that what he is trying to make clear is what conditions any ontological theory whatsoever has to satisfy in order to be a construction that could eventually be discussed. In other words, he is giving us what could be labeled the 'logical scheme of reality', a scheme that applies to all possible ontologies. Wittgenstein, therefore, is not offering any concrete theory of the world: he is rather making explicit the conditions that any theory about the world is logically expected to fulfil. That explains why when Wittgenstein asserts that the world is the totality of existing simple facts (*Sachverhalten*) and that these simple facts are

composed of objects, he is not forced to give a single example either of facts or of objects, but that is because he is not concerned with elaborating a more or less plausible empirical theory about the world, however abstract. Thus his stance could be presented as follows: he would be saying to philosophers something like "You may be willing to speak of material objects or of Ideas or of *sense-data* or of anything you opt for, but regardless of what you consider to be the ultimate stuff of the world, if you want to say something sensible about it you'll have to provide names for objects and use sentences to depict facts". This certainly does not amount to theorizing about the world. Once again, what we are given are the logical features of the language about the world as a whole.

If I am right in what I've been saying, plainly what at first sight was one more ontological proposal turns out to be a purely formal, *i.e.*, contentless scheme consisting of a list of conditions which must be satisfied by anyone who would like to speak about the world as closed totality in an intelligible way. It should be clear now that, contrary to what metaphysicians do, Wittgenstein makes a purely or strictly formal use of ontological vocabulary, as opposed to an empirical one, regardless of how abstract it can be. To put it in the most general way, Wittgenstein's point is that anybody is free to choose the ontology he or she prefers, but if one wishes to say something intelligible and logically understandable, one has to provide names for his or her objects and to picture facts. It is clear, I think, that Wittgenstein does not have "ontological commitments" of any sort.

We are in a position now to raise the decisive question: is what we find at the beginning of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* an ontology, in the traditional sense of the word? I think the answer is: not at all, for nothing could be farther from Wittgenstein's intentions and goals than to elaborate a philosophical theory about anything at all, reality included, that is, the kind of theoretical construction he was vowed to eliminate once and for all.

III) *World, facts, objects and properties*

Now, regardless of whether what Wittgenstein gives us is an ontological theory or rather a logical scheme for theories of the world considered as a whole, we must anyway explain or clarify his notions. To achieve that what we have to do is to briefly examine the use he makes of the ontological words. Here I'll concentrate on the categories of "world", "fact", "object" and 'property'.

According to Wittgenstein, the world includes everything that we speak about, but it is important to notice that when speak in general we don't use isolated words. What we use are sentences and what corresponds to sentences are facts. The world then is what is described by the totality of true propositions, the latter being nothing else than propositional signs (sentences) in their "projective relation to the world".[2]

It could be thought, and indeed it has been held,[3] that Wittgenstein distinguishes between two kinds of facts, namely, between *Tatsachen* (fact) and *Sachverhalten* (simple fact). This is grossly mistaken. The *Tractatus* certainly does not recognize kinds of facts. What is involved in what Wittgenstein asserts is rather a linguistic subtlety. What happens is simply that he takes seriously the way we speak and we normally say things like: **the fact (*Tatsache*) is that *p* (*Sachverhalt***, simple fact**)**. For example, the fact is that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo. Now, there are not two facts involved here. It is just the way we express ourselves. So to say that the world is the totality of simple facts amounts to saying that the world is the totality of those simple facts which happen to exist, which actually exist and which are picked up by expressions like 'the fact is that …'. It is on purely logical grounds that we know that there must be simple facts, but obviously that does not mean or imply that Wittgenstein should be engaged in the task of

[2] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 3.12 (b).
[3] Bertrand Russell, for instance, made this mistake. See his "Introduction" to the *Tractatus* (*op. cit*.), p. *xi*.

specifying which facts exist or do not exist. Since those simple facts that exist are logically independent from each other, this scheme of reality is precisely Wittgenstein's version of logical atomism. It is true that he doesn't give a single example of simple facts, but what has to be noticed is that he is under no obligation to do that, because what he is dealing with is a scheme for theories about reality, not with a theory about reality itself.

Now, regardless of how simple they might be, facts are nevertheless complexes, that is to say, they must be made out of something. The stuff they are made of are what Wittgenstein denominates 'objects'. Given that we cannot know what kind of objects we are dealing with in so far as we are not given names for them, Wittgenstein cannot be speaking about reality. He is just emphasizing that any possible ontological theory must include names for the objects out of which facts are made. However, we should be capable of saying something not about objects, since we do not know what sort of entities are being spoken about, but about the category of object. It must be possible for us to say what we are logically speaking entitled to assume in order to speak about objects and to achieve that what we must do is to enumerate what Wittgenstein calls their 'formal properties'. To speak about "formal properties" is to allude to the necessary, *i.e.*, the logical features of objects. Now real objects don't have necessary properties. So if we speak about formal properties we must be speaking about the concept of object, not about objects. To put it in another way, if we are to have a coherent concept of an object, we must presuppose certain characteristics or features which in turn will enable us to ascribe them real, that is, material properties. According to Wittgenstein, what we can say of objects from a logical point of view is that:

1) they must be constituents of simple facts;
2) they must be simple;
3) they are to be considered the substance of the world.

The first of these points is pretty obvious, given the parallel that holds between language and the world. It is evident that in order to **say** something, we must use sentences and not merely isolated words. *Mutatis mutandis*, objects cannot appear alone: they must constitute (simple) facts. This accords with what we said above about objects.

The second requirement is equally evident and follows smoothly from definitions previously introduced. We have to assume that objects are simple, for otherwise we would fall in a vicious regress. There must be a final point in the analysis of facts and when we reach this final state what we find are simple elements, that is, objects. So there does not seem to be any grounds to put this second condition (necessary property) concerning objects into question.

The third logical property of objects, that is, the third logical feature of the concept of an object, however, is a bit more difficult to account for. The first impression one might have in this case is that the propositional content of **2.0201** is utterly mysterious and in the end probably impossible to apprehend. To think this way, however, would be completely mistaken. What is true of this proposition is what is true of many other in the *Tractatus*: before we understand them, they seem to be dark thoughts, but once we have clarified their senses the thought involved turn out to be crystalline. As always in the *Tractatus*, after elucidating the problematic proposition one is concerned with what one is tempted to exclaim are things like "Oh, yes! But this is obvious", "Who on Earth could possibly deny such thing?" and things like that. I shall try that this is so in this case too.

The argument by means of which Wittgenstein aims at establishing the idea that the objects are the substance of the world runs as follows:

If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true[4]

Now what does this mean? Many scholars have tried time and again to clarify the somewhat puzzling connection that Wittgenstein establishes here, but I must confess that I have in generally remained unsatisfied with the explanations they have put forward. Since it is not my goal in this paper to critically analyze others' views, I shall limit myself to presenting my own reading of the text.

Now, in my view the key to understanding **2.0201** is **5.526**. There, what we are reminded of is that a purely abstract description of the world is possible. That is to say, it is in principle possible to have a complete description of the world by means of quantified propositions only. We would say things like *There is a black object in front of me which measures so and so and which weighs so and so*, *there is a person there who is linked to this other person in such and such ways*, and so on and so on. Let us then suppose that we have an expression like *'*(∃*x*) (*Fx*)' and that it is true. If it is true, then a sentence like '(*Fa*)' does make sense, but the problem is: why should '*Fa*' make sense **only** if *'*(∃*x*) (*Fx*)' is true? If '*Fa*' is a real proposition, it already has a sense which wholly independent of the sense of any other proposition; there is no reason why it would have to wait till another proposition, whichever it might be, is true. But that is exactly what would happen if the world had no substance. Wittgenstein's argument consists precisely in pointing out that a conjunction of true quantified statements would not yet constitute a real picture of the world unless we introduce names for objects. It is only ***after*** we have introduced names, and with them objects, that we can be sure that we are depicting *Sachverhalten*. It is the very fact that the world can be depicted which shows that it must have a substance. So the logical condition for the possibility of representing reality – and indeed any possible world – is just the existence of

[4] L. Wittgenstein, *op. cit*., 2.0201

objects. That is why objects are the substance of the world. They simply have to be assumed in order for language to function normally. They give the world a fixed form. That is the function of the substance of the world.

With respect to properties and relations, I would like to make no more than a couple of remarks. Contrary to the usual (Russellian) way of seeing them, in the *Tractatus* both of them are considered as objects. Now we should not lose sight of the fact that their being so classified derives from the logico-grammatical structure of language. An elementary proposition is a concatenation of names. Therefore, just as signs for "objects" are names, signs for properties and relations are names too. Moreover, the fact that certain words function as subjects and other expressions are rather predicative in nature is utterly contingent. Surely it is logically possible to imagine a language with a different structure, but by means of which we would give expression to exactly the same thoughts. For instance, instead of speaking of a table being black we could speak of blackness taking a table-form and thus what in one way of speaking is the subject of the sentence in a different language would be the predicate. This shows why it would be a complete mistake to let surface grammar lead us while doing philosophy. Once more, it is the picturing function of a proposition that is fundamental and the meaning of its elements are and can only be objects.

Concerning properties and relations Wittgenstein draws a distinction which is important, namely, the distinction between formal and material properties. The very distinction shows once more that Wittgenstein is not interested in ontological issues, but in the logical features of any ontological theory. Formal properties and relations are necessary properties and relations, but the world contains nothing which is necessary. Everything that happens in the world is contingent. So the mere fact of speaking about something as being necessary makes it automatically clear that we are not speaking of entities, but of concepts. To know the necessary

properties of an object is to know the constituting features of the corresponding concept, not to know something special about the object itself. Real knowledge appears only with material properties, that is, with propositions, not with elucidations.

I would thus maintain that if what we have been saying so far is basically correct, then we are totally justified in inferring that it makes no sense at all to ask what the ontology of the *Tractatus* is. Questions like 'What are those mysterious objects the *Tractatus* speaks about?' makes as much sense as to ask 'What are the facts Wittgenstein is alluding to?', that is, none. There is no justification for ascribing to Wittgenstein an ontology, regardless of how fantastic someone could make it appear.

IV) ***Final considerations***

We can, I think, hold that the *Tractatus* is or embodies the study of the logical features of language and the world (at least). From this point of view, it is simply absurd to suppose that the world has some kind of priority over language or the other way around. What is interesting is that even if in some sense logic has a certain priority over language and the world, it is equally true that logic too depends upon them, since logic is always the logic **of** language and the logic **of** the world. Logic is not a self-contained universe, existing or having being on its own. Its importance is linked to its application. Wittgenstein puts the idea forward through a beautiful argument: "And if this were not so, how could we apply logic? We might put it in this way: if there would be a logic even if there were no world, how then could there be a logic given that there is a world?"[5]. Accordingly, for the *Tractatus* it is hopeless to try to give an account of the nature of logic if the latter is conceived as something independent of language and the world. It could be that Wittgenstein

[5] L. Wittgenstein, *op. cit*, 5.5521.

is mistaken (which I do not think to be the case), but at any rate we have here the proof that it is possible to talk about the world as a whole without doing metaphysics, in the traditional sense of the word.

We can now give a concrete answer to the question: does the *Tractatus* contain an ontology? Our "resolute answer" is: no! There's no such thing in the *Tractatus*. This answer is compatible with what we took to be the right approach, whose main principles we outlined at the beginning of the paper. And one more advantage I would claim for the correctness of my stance is that it can help us to understand why Wittgenstein didn't contradict himself when he said that his propositions were both elucidatory and nonsensical. This outcome, however, is a subject that would require an independent investigation and cannot be pursued here.