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**The nature of logically simple objects
in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus***

THE SUBJECT of this paper is the problem of the nature of logically simple objects in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. An extensive bibliography has been produced on this controversial issue. Its significance consists in that it is in the core of the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*. The problem of simple objects is correlated with early Wittgenstein's conception of metaphysics, but it is also interesting by itself, as a kind of metaphysical exercise.

Simple objects, as the products of a complete logical analysis, constitute the substance of the world¹ and simultaneously the ontological background of all possible worlds.² All possible worlds are products of the various correlations of these logically simple objects. Simple objects are depicted by simple names. This pictorial relation is the foundation of the pictorial relation between language and the world.

Early Wittgenstein's atomism is quite different from ancient materialist atomism. His atomism is logical, linguistic. There is a closer connection between early Wittgenstein's metaphysics and 'Socrates' dream' in Plato's *Theaetetus*,³ to which Wittgenstein himself is referring in his *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴ Socrates says that the world consists of minimal simple entities, which cannot be described, but only be named. Only composite entities can

* This is a slightly modified version of a lecture given in the Sixth European Congress of Analytic Philosophy, 21–26 August 2008, Krakow, Poland.

1 *TLP*, 2.021: The objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound.

2 *TLP*, 2.014: "Objects contain the possibility of all states of affairs."

3 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 201d–202d.

4 *P.I.*, 46.

be described. Similarly in the *Tractatus*, only composite entities, like facts, can be described by composite propositions, whereas simple objects can only be named by simple names. So it seems that there is a gap between naming simples and describing composites. By analyzing simultaneously language and the world, Wittgenstein makes a kind of 'linguistic ontology,' producing simple names and objects. Language and the world are connected in the level of simples.

Wittgenstein's immediate philosophical ancestors were Frege and Russell. His objects can be compared to Frege's objects, to which his proper simple names refer. Nevertheless, Frege was not a logical atomist, aiming to a complete logical analysis and consequently his objects were not really logical simples like Wittgenstein's.⁵ A closer similarity could be found between Wittgenstein's and Russell's logical atomism.⁶ For Russell, the only genuinely referring entities are the demonstrative pronouns 'this' and 'that'. These demonstrative pronouns refer to Russell's individuals, which are very close to simple objects, as Wittgenstein himself acknowledges in his *Philosophical Investigations*.⁷ Such genuinely simple names cannot be described. On the contrary, composite names of our language can be analytically described by means of descriptions using these simple names. For both Russell and Wittgenstein, the meaning of their simple names is their non-describable reference. Despite this, Russell's logical atomism is quite different in character in that it is empirical and phenomenalist in contrast to early Wittgenstein's purely logical atomism. Russell's atoms are our minimal sense data out of which the objects of our empirical knowledge are composed. Wittgenstein's pure logical atomism endorses a kind of pure logical entities as a candidate for the role of simple objects. In that sense Wittgenstein's logical atomism is more radical than Russell's.

In contrast to ancient physical atomism or Russell's empiricist, phenomenalist atomism, Wittgenstein's atomism could be regarded as purely logical or linguistic. The role of language is of great significance in early Wittgenstein. He presents us a kind of downward analysis of the world and language, which is its depicting medium. Departing from macroscopic empirical entities of our everyday life, he is leading us to those minimal entities, logical objects. The world is gradually being analyzed in facts, facts are analyzed in atomic facts and the latter are analyzed in simple objects. Correspondingly, language is being analyzed in propositions, propositions are analyzed in elementary propositions and the latter are analyzed in simple names.

5 Frege 1891: 21–41, 1892a: 42–55, 1892b: 56–78 in Geach & Black 1980.

6 Russell 1905: 479–93, 1992: 133–46, 1956: 178–281.

7 *P.I.*, 46.

As Wittgenstein says in the beginning of his *Tractatus*, the world is the totality of facts, not of things or objects. This makes the nature of logically simple objects essentially different from facts. In contrast to facts, objects are colorless,⁸ non empirical, metaphysical, strange entities. Objects compose the substance of the world and the corresponding logically simple names refer to them. The pictorial relation of language and the world is founded in this level of simplicity.

Many interpretations have been developed in order to explain the nature of the simple objects of the *Tractatus* in the last fifty years, but there is still no consensus on this subject. The problem with most of these interpretations is that, although they are based on texts from the *Tractatus* and other works of Wittgenstein, they ascribe to his simple objects properties ascribable rather to empirical, complex entities, like facts. They confuse the various kinds of simplicity, like logical, epistemological and semantic. Although Wittgenstein occasionally refers to all these kinds of simplicity, it should be made clear that his objects in the *Tractatus*, as the substance of the world, are logically simple entities. Wittgenstein makes a 'shifting,' alternating use of the term 'object.'

There are various questions concerning the nature of simple objects. One of them is whether they are particulars or universals. According to the narrow interpretation,⁹ simple objects could only be particulars and consequently proper names refer to them. According to the wide interpretation,¹⁰ simple objects could be not only particulars, but also universals (properties and relations). In such a case, not only proper names, but also general names refer to them.

My interpretation is that logically simple objects of the *Tractatus* must be uniform 'naked' entities, in the sense that they have a common logical form and that their only difference is that they are not the same. If we adopt such a hypothesis, we should reject the wide interpretation, as for such an interpretation simple objects are both particulars and universals (properties and relations). Consequently, according to such an interpretation, objects could not be uniform. There is also not adequate textual evidence in the *Tractatus* supporting this interpretation, which confuses the various uses of the term 'object' made throughout Wittgenstein's texts. Wide interpretation of simple objects is mainly based on some texts before and after the *Tractatus*. The same could be said about the narrow interpretation of simples, according to which objects are only particulars. This interpretation is also based on

8 *TLP*, 2.0232: "Roughly speaking: objects are colorless."

9 Copi 1958: 145–165, Anscombe 1959: 25–40, Carruthers 1989: 108–9, 147–68, 1990: 85–106.

10 Hintikka 1986: 32–33.

a misunderstanding of some texts of Wittgenstein and his 'shifting' use of the term 'object'. Attributing characterizations like particulars or universals to logically simple objects is not the right way to follow on this matter. Such characterizations are rather attributable to the complex entities of our everyday life and not to logical simples.

Various answers have also been given to the question whether simple objects are physical, phenomenalistic or phenomenological entities.¹¹ According to the physicalistic interpretation, simple objects are physical and as such they are the causes of our sense data. This interpretation is quite close to the narrow interpretation and the ancient atomic theories. According to the classical phenomenalistic interpretation, simple objects are our sense data. The problem with such an interpretation is that it suits to Russell's atoms rather than to Wittgenstein's simple objects. There is also the phenomenological interpretation, according to which objects are universals or sensible qualities.

The views that the objects of the *Tractatus* are physicalistic or phenomenalistic entities (sense data) confuse the various uses of the term 'object' and consequently they must be abandoned. Wittgenstein does not give us any specific example of his objects. There is no direct evidence in the text of the *Tractatus* supporting the phenomenological interpretation, which takes the simple objects of the *Tractatus* as universals or sensible qualities and it is essentially an improved version of the phenomenalistic interpretation. We could only arrive in an indirect way at this view, which is also connected with Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic solipsism based on texts of his middle philosophical period. Due to the doctrine of the independence of the elementary propositions, simple objects could be neither sense data, nor sensible qualities, as the propositions depicting them would mutually exclude each other.

There is much contradictory evidence in the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein's other texts for and against these interpretations. Such evidence is not adequate to establish any of these interpretations conclusively. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein does not give us any description of his simple objects, he does not tell us what these objects are and does not give any example of them. He could not do otherwise as his objects are simple entities that could not be described. If we want to stay close to the text of the *Tractatus*, we should better adopt a kind of an empirically agnostic view concerning the nature of Wittgenstein's simple objects, in the sense that they could not be described in the same way as the empirical entities of our everyday life. If we follow such a view, simple objects should be considered as a kind of entities quite

11 Tejedor 2001: 285–303, Bradley 1992: 77–78, Cook 1994: 14–27.

mysterious for us. According to this interpretation, their logical form could be seen as their potentiality to be connected with other similar and uniform simple objects without any restriction.

The main point of this paper is that the only essential property that Wittgenstein ascribes to his logically simple objects in the *Tractatus*, taken as the products of a complete logical analysis and as the substance of all possible worlds is their capacity to participate in all possible states of affairs connected with other similar logically simple objects.¹² If they all have common internal essential properties, then we could only distinguish them through their external properties, which are their actual occurrences in the various states of affairs, even if such a distinction does not depict their inner substance.¹³ Logically simple objects must be entities completely different from those we have ever met in our empirical everyday world. Those entities are the common form and substance of all possible worlds. Simple objects do not have any material properties essential to them as such properties characterize complex entities. Logically simple objects have only internal formal properties consisting in their capacity to be connected with other similarly simple objects.¹⁴ In this way, simple objects somehow contain the possibility of all possible states of affairs.¹⁵ As it is essential and necessary for a visual spot to have some color (any color), similarly it is essential and necessary for a simple object to have the capacity to be connected with other similar simple objects. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* does not give us any other information concerning what is essential for his simple objects.

The nature of simple objects of the *Tractatus* is indeterminate and mysterious for us. Logically simple objects should be uniform in the sense that they all have some common logical form and their capacity to be combined with each other should not be restricted in the same way as the macroscopic unanalyzed objects of our everyday life could only have limited connections to each other. Even the most different entities of all possible worlds could be reduced to the logically simple objects in this way. Given such a view, logically simple objects could appear in all possible states of affairs and even be indistinguishable in respect to their logical form and only be distinguished by the fact that they are different numerically and participate in different

12 *TLP*, 2.01231: "In order to know an object, I must know not its external but all its internal qualities." 2.0124: "If all objects are given, then thereby are all possible atomic facts also given." 2.0141: "Objects contain the possibility of all states of affairs."

13 *TLP*, 2.0231: "The substance of the world can only determine a form and not any material properties. For these are first presented by the propositions – first formed by the configurations of the objects."

14 *TLP*, 2.0141, 2.033: "The form is the possibility of the structure.," 2.121.

15 *TLP*, 2.014.

states of affairs.¹⁶ As a visual point could have any color, in the same way, a logically simple object should have the capacity to appear in any possible state of affairs.

Such a view is based on the requirement of the logical independence of elementary propositions. If there were restrictions in the capacity of logically simple objects to participate in all possible states of affairs, then the logical independence of elementary propositions would not be possible, as they would exclude and contradict each other, in the same way as in the level of complex propositions. This is a good reason why we should rather not ascribe any positive property as essential to logically simple objects, except their capacity to combine with each other. Positive properties are restrictions to the range of the possible combinations of objects.

Another problem is whether Wittgenstein's objects could be viewed in a realistic way, that is, whether they should be considered as having an existence independent of us and our language.¹⁷ According to a 'nominalistic' interpretation, objects could not be considered independently of our language. Such an interpretation gives a completely different meaning in the existence of objects to that of the existence of the objects of our everyday empirical life, taking them as postulates of a theory of meaning. Nevertheless, even if we suppose that simple objects depend on our language as references of logically simple names, we should not forget that Wittgenstein was, at least programmatically, a realist concerning the existence of logically simple objects.¹⁸ He demanded the existence of his objects, as he saw it as the only way to secure the meaning of our language,¹⁹ that is, its propositions must have the possibility to be true or false in a logically necessary way. He thought

16 *TLP*, 2.0233: "Two objects of the same logical form, are – apart from their external properties – only differentiated from one another in that they are different." 2.02331: "Either a thing has properties which no other has, and then one can distinguish it straight away from the others by a description and refer to it. Or, on the other hand, there are several things which have the totality of their properties in common, and then it is quite impossible to point to any one of them. For if a thing is not distinguished by anything, I cannot distinguish it – for otherwise it would be distinguished." 4.023: "As the description of an object describes it by its external properties so propositions describe reality by its internal properties." 5.524: "If the objects are given, therewith are all objects also given. If the elementary propositions are given, then therewith all elementary propositions are also given."

17 Ishiguro 1969: 20–50, Pears 1987: 99–114.

18 *TLP*, 2.022: "It is clear however different from a real one an imagined world may be, it must have something – a form – in common with the real world." 2.023: "This fixed form consists of the objects." 2.024: "Substance is what exists independently of what is the case."

19 *TLP*, 3.23: "The postulate of the possibility of the simple signs is the postulate of the determinateness of the sense."

that the necessary existence of logically simple objects in the world and the necessary existence of simple names in language constitute the crucial points in which language and the world are connected with each other. In other words, the existence of both logically simple names and objects is a necessary condition of the picture theory of meaning of language.

In this paper, I maintained the view that simple objects are non empirical, metaphysical entities, which necessarily exist and they cannot be described by propositions. So we should better adopt a kind of an agnostic view according to which logically simple objects are mysterious non empirical entities, without any positive or material properties. All possible states of affairs are composed of them and they can occur in all possible states of affairs combined with all other logically simple objects without any restriction. Objects cannot be material entities having certain positive properties in the real empirical world. They must be purely logical entities. Not only our real empirical world, but all possible worlds are made of these objects. Such distant from our everyday empirical life entities seem to be quite strange, almost absurd. As Wittgenstein ascribes such a character to his objects, this makes our attempts to find out their nature hard. Such an attempt would unavoidably have a paradoxical character, as a complete logical analysis would be practically unattainable. Nevertheless such attempts can be irresistibly attractive.



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EMMANOYΗΛ ΠΕΡΑΚΗΣ

Η φύση των λογικά απλών αντικειμένων
στο *Tractatus* του Wittgenstein

Περίληψη

ΣΤΟ *Tractatus* του Wittgenstein, η γλώσσα και ο κόσμος συνδέονται στο επίπεδο των λογικά απλών ονομάτων και των αντίστοιχων απεικονιζόμενων αντικειμένων. Το πρόβλημα είναι, ότι δεν μπορούμε να έχουμε εμπειρία των αντικειμένων και για αυτόν το λόγο έχουν προταθεί διαφορετικές ερμηνείες ούτως ώστε να εξηγηθεί η φύση αυτών των οντοτήτων. Τα λογικά απλά αντικείμενα δεν είναι όπως οι οντότητες που συναντούμε στον εμπειρικό κόσμο. Δεν έχουν ουσιαστικές υλικές ιδιότητες. Μόνη τους ουσιαστική ιδιότητα είναι η δυνατότητά τους να συνδέονται με άλλα λογικά απλά αντικείμενα. Τίποτε άλλο δε θα μπορούσε να είναι ουσιαστικό για αυτά, σύμφωνα με το κείμενο του *Tractatus*. Εφόσον οι στοιχειώδεις προτάσεις πρέπει να είναι λογικά ανεξάρτητες και οι αντίστοιχες καταστάσεις πραγμάτων δεν πρέπει να αλληλοαποκλείονται, έτσι και τα λογικά απλά αντικείμενα θα πρέπει να μπορούν να εμφανίζονται σε όλες τις δυνατές καταστάσεις πραγμάτων. Θα πρέπει να είναι ομοειδή με την έννοια ότι έχουν την ίδια λογική μορφή. Η δυνατότητα σύνδεσής τους με τα άλλα απλά αντικείμενα δεν πρέπει να περιορίζεται, αντίθετα από ότι συμβαίνει στα μακροσκοπικά αντικείμενα της καθημερινής μας εμπειρικής ζωής που έχουν περιορισμένη γκάμα σύνδεσης με τα άλλα πράγματα. Τα λογικά απλά αντικείμενα μπορούν να διακριθούν μεταξύ τους μόνο με την έννοια ότι δεν ταυτίζονται και συμμετέχουν σε διαφορετικές καταστάσεις πραγμάτων. Θα ήταν καλύτερα να μην αποδίδουμε στα αντικείμενα κάποια θετική εμπειρική ιδιότητα, καθώς μια τέτοια ιδιότητα θα περιόριζε τις δυνατές εμφανίσεις τους σε δυνατές καταστάσεις πραγμάτων και τη δυνατότητά τους να συνδέονται μεταξύ τους. Έτσι θα πρέπει να καταλήξουμε στην άποψη, ότι τα αντικείμενα είναι κάποιες εμπειρικά άγνωστες γυμνές οντότητες.