

10 *Simples: stronger arguments*

In this chapter we shall develop and assess two further arguments for the existence of *Simples*. Each, with considerable plausibility, could be attributed to Wittgenstein.

(A) Russell's argument

As we noted briefly in Chapter 1, Wittgenstein appears to commit himself to a form of description-theory for ordinary proper names, proposing to analyse them into descriptions of the manner in which their referents are constructed out of component parts (3.24). In Chapter 7 we saw that this may have been partly motivated by his programme of analysis, which was to show how ordinary propositions reach right up to particular states of affairs. However, there is also more than a suggestion that the issue is somehow connected with his reasons for believing in *Simples*, since the passage in which he endorses a form of description-theory comes immediately after 3.23, which says that the requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn*. But the exact nature of the connection remains obscure.

We may reasonably expect light to be thrown on the matter by comparing Wittgenstein's position with that of Russell. As is well known, Russell not only has a theory of definite descriptions (emphatically endorsed by Wittgenstein at 4.0031) but proposes to analyse ordinary proper names by means of such descriptions, as well as believing that such analyses must terminate in names for simple objects. So it is possible that an examination of Russell's argument will help us to understand Wittgenstein's.

Russell saw a problem concerning sentences containing bearerless proper names and uninstantiated definite descriptions, and proposed to solve it by means of his celebrated theory of definite descriptions. On this

account, a sentence of the form 'Fb', where 'b' is an ordinary (possibly bearerless) proper name, in reality has the form 'The G is F.' And this, in turn, is analysed as saying that there is one and only one thing which is G, and that thing is F. In symbols: $\exists x(Gx \ \& \ \forall y(Gy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Fx)$. So if there is no G (if the name is bearerless) the sentence is straightforwardly false.

Now, what exactly is the problem that the theory is designed to overcome? A number of things are being assumed. Firstly, Russell is taking for granted that if a sentence 'Fb' is genuinely singular, then its truth-condition will have the following form: 'Fb' is true if the object b possesses the property F, false if the object b does not possess the property F. So if the object b did not exist, then 'Fb' would be neither true nor false. (Compare 3.24.) Indeed, stronger than this, he believed that any genuinely singular thought would involve, as one of its constituents, the object thought about itself. So if the object b did not exist, then there could be no singular thought having the form 'Fb'. Now, Russell is a Cartesian about acts of thinking: it is unintelligible to him that he might seem to be thinking a particular thought while there is, in reality, no such thought occurring. This then gives him a powerful motive for insisting that any putatively singular thought or sentence should be analysed in the manner of the theory of definite descriptions if we cannot be completely certain of the object referred to, thus revealing that it is not genuinely singular after all. For then the existence of the thought (or the meaning of the sentence) can be guaranteed in the face of the possible non-existence of the object.

But why do there have to be any genuinely singular thoughts or sentences at all? This brings us to another assumption: that the understanding of general sentences presupposes an understanding of singular ones, and that grasp of general thoughts presupposes a grasp of singular ones. In outline, the argument goes as follows. Any sentence analysed by means of the theory of definite descriptions turns out to have the truth-conditions of an existentially quantified sentence, in reality having the form ' $\exists x\phi x$ '. But an understanding of sentences of this form palpably depends upon a prior grasp of sentences having the form ' ϕb '. No one could know what it is for something in general to have a certain property who did not know what it would be for some particular thing to possess that property. And no one could know this who was not yet capable of understanding sentences involving singular reference to particular things. But now if these sentences, themselves, are to be analysed in terms of the theory of definite descriptions, then they too will be general in form. And then any attempt to explain the truth-conditions of general sentences will turn out to be viciously circular.¹ So if it is to remain intelligible how some-

one can come to understand general sentences (or to think general thoughts), then there must be a class of genuinely singular sentences which do not presuppose a prior understanding of the existential quantifier.

Putting these points together we can see that Russell is endorsing the following argument:

- (1) General thoughts presuppose singular ones.
- (2) Singular thoughts cannot themselves have general thoughts amongst the expression of their truth-conditions, on pain of vicious circularity.
- (C1) So there exists a class of genuinely singular thoughts.
- (3) Singular thoughts occur only if their objects of reference exist, since those objects are themselves part of the thought.
- (4) We have Cartesian certainty about our own thoughts.
- (C2) So there must be a class of objects of reference about whose existence we can be completely certain.

Famously, Russell drew from this argument the conclusion that the only genuine proper names are the indexicals 'this' and 'that', used to refer to the thinker's own sense-data. Our immediate task, however, is to see to what extent Wittgenstein could have endorsed such an argument; and if he could not, whether he could have employed some variation upon it.

(B) A variant of the Russellian argument

It is clear that Wittgenstein would have agreed with Russell's argument as far as the subsidiary conclusion (C1). For *TLP* explains the content of general propositions in terms of operations upon elementary ones (5.5, 5.501, 5.52). Indeed, all propositions whatever are said to be (to be equivalent to) truth-functions of elementary propositions (4.4, 5, 5.3). Clearly, then, elementary propositions cannot themselves be general in form, nor can they presuppose a prior understanding of general propositions. Indeed, at 4.411 Wittgenstein explicitly states that the understanding of general propositions depends upon a prior grasp of elementary ones.² The upshot is that there must be a class of genuinely singular elementary propositions, whose understanding neither involves nor presupposes a grasp of generality.

However, there can be no question of Wittgenstein accepting premiss (3), since this is in effect Russell's theory that judgement involves a direct relation between the subject and the objects thought about – so no object, no judgement. And this theory is explicitly rejected by Wittgenstein at

5.541–5.5422. His own view is that all thinking must involve some structured array of symbols, as we saw briefly in Chapter 1. And since he holds that proper names have senses (even logically proper names, as we also saw in Chapter 1), there can be no objection in principle to the idea of singular thought without an object (sense without reference). Or at least if there is such an objection, it will have to derive from quite a different quarter.³

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein would endorse a slightly weaker version of premiss (3), namely that a singular thought without an object would lack a truth-condition – it would have sense but no *Sinn*. For recall that his view is that the semantic content (contribution to truth-conditions) of a name is its referent. So no referent, no truth-conditions. In which case we may replace premiss (3) of Russell's argument by (3*): genuinely singular propositions only have truth-conditions if their objects of reference exist. And notice that this is already beginning to echo Wittgenstein's explicit argument for *Simples* at 2.0211, which we could read as saying that if the objects of reference of singular propositions existed only contingently, then whether such a proposition had *Sinn* would depend upon the truth of another, which asserts the existence of the objects referred to.

Whether or not Wittgenstein would have endorsed premiss (4) of the Russellian argument, it would certainly have been insufficient for his purposes, for it could only enable him to show that the objects of reference do certainly exist in the actual world, not that they have necessary existence. Yet precisely what he wants is to prove that there is a class of objects of reference which exist in all possible worlds. Is there then any variant of (4) which would be adequate to the task? What additional premiss would enable Wittgenstein to get from (C1) and (3*) to his conclusion? Clearly this: whether a proposition can have a given truth-condition must be independent of any contingent fact about the world. For if the objects of genuine singular reference were to exist only contingently, then it would follow, by (3*), that the possibility of a singular proposition having a truth-condition would depend upon a contingency.

Summarising, then, and conflating together the first three steps of Russell's argument into a single premiss, we have the following:

- (1*) There must be a class of genuinely singular propositions, which do not presuppose a prior grasp of generality.
- (3*) Genuinely singular propositions only have truth-conditions if their objects of reference exist.
- (4*) Whether a proposition has truth-conditions must be independent of any contingent fact about the world.

(C) So there must be a class of objects of reference whose existence is not contingent but necessary.

This argument is valid.⁴ Premises (1*) and (3*) were almost certainly endorsed by Wittgenstein, and are in any case extremely plausible in their own right. So the questions before us are these: is there textual evidence of Wittgenstein's acceptance of (4*)? And can any convincing defence of it be given (Charity again)?

(C) Can having truth-conditions be contingent?

One point in favour of (4*) is that it enables us to make some kind of sense of 3.23, where Wittgenstein equates the requirement that there be Simples with the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn*. For recall that the best interpretation we were able to offer of the latter requirement amounted to this: the truth-conditions of a proposition must be fixed in advance in all their particularity. We took the phrase 'in advance' to be an expression of logical objectivism, the requirement insisting that the truth-conditions must be fixed by the sense of the proposition alone, independently of any such contingencies as speakers' intuitions, capacities or responses to linguistic training. But it seems only a small step from this to the claim that the possession of a truth-condition by a proposition must be independent of any contingent facts whatever, which is premiss (4*). Construed broadly, then, the requirement of determinacy is none other than premiss (4*) – which would explain why 3.23 picks it out as the fundamental ground for believing in the existence of Simples.

This interpretation would also enable us to make fairly ready sense of 2.0211, which could be paraphrased as follows:

If there were no Simples, then whether a singular proposition had truth-conditions would depend upon the contingent truth of a proposition asserting the existence of the object referred to.

Then since such a situation would supposedly involve a breach of the requirement of determinacy (premiss (4*)), and since there have to be singular propositions if there are to be any propositions at all (premiss (1*)), we could readily understand why Wittgenstein should go on to claim that if there were no Simples we could not form any representation of the world at all (2.0212). For we saw in Chapters 3 and 4 that he thinks, with some reason, that logical objectivism (and hence determinacy-in-advance) is essential to all representation.

In fact, however, the requirement of determinacy-in-advance is not the same as premiss (4*); nor is it easy to see how one could get validly from the one to the other. For what that requirement really says is that propositions must fix their truth-conditions in a manner which is independent of any contingent fact. It is the *manner* of reaching out (the mode of projection) which has to be independent of contingencies, not whatever is reached out to. Indeed, it seems perfectly consistent with the requirement of determinacy that a proposition might sometimes 'reach out' in the normal way, but fail to determine any truth-condition. So it is one thing to say that a proposition must determine its truth-condition in a way which is independent of any contingent fact. And it is quite another, stronger, thing to say that whether a proposition succeeds in having a truth-condition must be independent of any contingent fact. Yet it is the stronger thesis which we need if our Russellian argument to Simples is to go through.

The only argument which I know of for the stronger thesis is based upon a version of the principle of Bivalence which we know Wittgenstein to have endorsed: that a proposition must yield a determinate yes-or-no answer in the face of any possibility whatever (4.023). For notice that the effect of this is to insist that a proposition must have its truth-value fixed with respect to every possible world. And it might be felt that this is sufficient to entail premiss (4*). For if (4*) were false, because there were possible worlds in which some proposition would fail to have a truth-condition, then would it not follow that there are possible worlds with respect to which it would fail to have a determinate truth-value? For how can a proposition without a truth-condition have a truth-value?

But in fact this argument is invalid, depending upon an illegitimate conflation of truth *about* a possible world with truth *in* a possible world.⁵ Bivalence only requires that every proposition for which we have fixed truth-conditions should have a determinate truth-value with respect to (that is, about) every possible world. It does not require that it be possible for someone within such a world to express a proposition with those truth-conditions. On the contrary, it is entirely consistent with Bivalence that we may have to rely upon contingent facts about our world (such as the existence of an object of reference) in determining the truth-conditions of our propositions across all possible worlds.

For example, suppose we took the proposition 'Moses is wise' to be genuinely singular. And suppose we agreed with Wittgenstein that the truth-condition of such a proposition involves the man Moses himself, in such a way that without the existence of Moses there would be no truth-

condition. Now as things are – relying upon the truth-condition which the proposition does in fact have – we may truly say ‘If Moses had never existed, then it would not have been true that Moses is wise.’ That is: the proposition that Moses is wise gets assigned the value False with respect to a world in which there is no such person as Moses. But we may also truly say ‘Inhabitants of a world in which there is no such person as Moses could not have made the false statement that Moses is wise, since no proposition with that truth-condition would have been available to them.’ That is: the proposition that Moses is wise, within a world in which there is no Moses, would fail to have a truth-condition. There is no breach of the principle of Bivalence, since all actually existing propositions with truth-conditions get assigned truth-values relative to each and every possible world.

Given that the argument from Bivalence to premiss (4*) is invalid, might Wittgenstein nevertheless have endorsed it? One powerful line of reasoning against this suggestion is that a simple extension of the argument would establish the necessary existence of propositions. The extension is so simple that it would be extraordinary that Wittgenstein should have overlooked it; yet the conclusion is Frege’s thesis of the necessary existence of thoughts (*Gedanken*), which he rejects.⁶ The argument is this: suppose that propositions exist contingently, a proposition ‘P’ failing to exist in some possible world *w*. Since ‘P’ does not exist in *w* it would follow – by a move identical to that made in the argument for (4*) – that it cannot be either true or false with respect to *w*, and the principle of Bivalence would fail. So holding Bivalence firm, we could deduce by *reductio* that propositions have necessary existence. Here exactly the same distinction is being overlooked, between truth *about* a world and truth *in* a world.

There is a natural response to our rebuttal of the argument for premiss (4*). It is that if ‘Moses is wise’ gets assigned the value False relative to a world in which there is no such person as Moses, then the truth of that proposition, conversely, must imply that there is such a person as Moses. And this seems to conflict with the thesis that ‘Moses is wise’ is genuinely singular. In fact this can be turned into yet another argument for Simples, not requiring an assumption as strong as Bivalence.

(D) An argument from Excluded Third

Our quasi-Russellian assumptions are not the only way of getting validly from the thesis that there must exist a class of genuinely singular propositions to the thesis that Simples exist. The Principle of Excluded Third

(‘No proposition can be neither true nor false’) can be deployed to the same end, as follows.

Supposing that all the objects of reference have only contingent existence, consider the singular proposition ‘Fb’. Since *b* exists only contingently, there is a possible world *w* in which *b* does not exist. Now what is to be said about the truth-value of ‘Fb’ with respect to (note, not ‘in’) world *w*? Clearly it is not true with respect to world *w*. There can be no question of a proposition of the form ‘Fb’ being true in a case where there is no such object as *b*.⁷ But then nor can the proposition be neither true nor false, in virtue of Excluded Third. So the only remaining possibility is that it is false. But if the non-existence of *b* entails the falsity of ‘Fb’, then by contraposition the truth of ‘Fb’ must entail that *b* exists. But then of course if ‘Fb’ entails some proposition of the form $\exists x\phi x$, it has an existential quantifier within the expression of its truth-condition, which contradicts the hypothesis of its genuine singularity.⁸ So, by *reductio*, there must exist a class of objects of reference which exist in all possible worlds. That is to say: there must be Simples.

This same argument may also be approached in a slightly different way. As Wittgenstein himself notices at 5.47, the proposition ‘Fb’ is logically equivalent to $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ x = b)$. For clearly these two propositions must at least always be true together. The only possible doubt about their equivalence would be whether the falsity of $\exists x(x = b)$ entails the falsity of ‘Fb’. But since ‘Fb’ obviously cannot be true if nothing is *b*, this is forced on us if we accept Excluded Third. Now the above equivalence might seem, on the face of it, to raise a problem for the thesis that there must be a class of genuinely singular propositions, since it looks as if all propositions will be quantified. But in fact it does not, and in seeing how it does not, we shall see how it can be transformed into an argument for the existence of Simples.

If *b* is a Simple, then of course $\exists x(x = b)$ will be a necessary truth.⁹ In which case recognition of the entailment from ‘Fb’ from $\exists x(x = b)$ will not be required for a grasp of the former’s truth-condition. For since there is no possibility of $\exists x(x = b)$ being false, there is no conceivable circumstance in which the speaker’s failure to recognise the inference from ‘Fb’ to $\exists x(x = b)$ could manifest itself; there are no circumstances in which they could be led to accord the wrong truth-value to ‘Fb’. It will then be possible for someone who does not yet understand the existential quantifier to have a complete grasp of the truth-condition of ‘Fb’. So long as they know which object is *b*, and so long as they know the conditions

under which an object possesses the property F , they will never go wrong. If, on the other hand, b is not a Simple, then $\exists x(x = b)$ will be contingent. There will then be possible circumstances which would not be recognised as entailing the falsity of 'Fb' by someone who has no grasp of the existential quantifier, and this would be sufficient to show that they do not understand it properly. On the contrary, proper understanding of 'Fb' would require a prior grasp of the existential quantifier. Thus the fact that 'Fb' is equivalent to $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ x = b)$ raises no problem for the introduction of the quantifiers if, but only if, some propositions of this form involve reference to Simples.

The argument we have been considering may be set out as follows:

- (1) There must be a class of genuinely singular propositions, which do not presuppose a prior grasp of generality.
- (2) There is no possible world, or time within a world, with respect to which a proposition is neither true nor false.
- (3) If all the objects of reference are contingent, then there are possible worlds in which those objects do not exist.
- (4) With respect to such worlds the propositions in (1) are not true.
- (C1) So, by (2), they are false with respect to such worlds.
- (C2) So, by contraposition on (C1), the propositions in (1) entail the existence of their objects of reference.
- (5) This conflicts with the hypothesis of their genuine singularity.
- (C3) So there must exist a class of non-contingent objects of reference (Simples).

This argument looks powerful. Premises (1) and (2) seem very plausible; premisses (3) and (4) are truisms; and the argument itself is valid. The only immediate worry might appear to concern premiss (5). For after all, not every case where one proposition implies another can be taken to show that an understanding of the latter is presupposed to an understanding of the former. For example, 'Fb' implies 'Fb \vee Q', but no one would say that this shows the former to be molecular rather than genuinely atomic.

In fact this worry is misplaced. The difference between 'Fb' implying $\exists x(x = b)$ and 'Fb' implying 'Fb \vee Q' is that the existence of b must be counted amongst the truth-conditions of 'Fb', whereas no one would say that 'Fb \vee Q' describes a truth-condition of 'Fb'. That b exists can be stated without presupposing a prior understanding of the proposition 'Fb', and in terms of it the truth-condition of the latter may be partly specified. But obviously no one could have a grasp of the possible circumstance

described by 'Fb \vee Q' who did not already know the truth-condition of 'Fb', in which case one could not use it in specifying the latter's content.

Despite its intrinsic plausibility, there seems to be little textual warrant for attributing the argument above to Wittgenstein. Certainly it would not mesh particularly well with 3.23, since there is apparently no way in which it could be connected with either version of determinacy of *Simm*. And although it can provide an interpretation of 2.0211, the fit is by no means exact. We should have to take this to be saying:

If there were no Simples, then whether a singular proposition was true-or-false would depend upon the contingent fact of the existence of the object referred to.

Thus if this other proposition – asserting the existence of the object – were false, then the singular proposition would be neither true nor false, since otherwise it could not be genuinely singular. But in fact 2.0211 says that if there were no Simples, and the 'other proposition' were false, then the singular proposition would *have no Simm* (truth-condition). And to say that in certain circumstances a singular proposition would be neither true nor false is surely not the same as saying that, were those circumstances to obtain, then there would be no condition in which it would have been true and no condition in which it would have been false. So interpreted in this way, we should have to regard 2.0211 as singularly ill expressed.

Moreover, even if we could bring ourselves to accept this sloppiness of expression on Wittgenstein's part, we might find it hard to make sense of the remark which follows (2.0212), which claims that if there were no Simples then it would be impossible to represent reality at all. For it is not at all clear why the failure of Excluded Third should have such radical consequences. In fact we should have to see Wittgenstein as managing to convince himself that Excluded Third is so closely bound up with the notion of a proposition, and the notion of a symbolic representation of reality, that there could be no such thing as a system of symbols which failed to obey it.

This last thought can also be arrived at from another direction. For the existence of Simples is supposed to be a presupposition of all language and thought. In which case an argument which takes Excluded Third (or indeed Bivalence) as a premiss can only conceivably be successful if that principle, too, is a presupposition of all symbolic representation. So Wittgenstein would need to show that nothing could count as a language, or a system of representation, which allowed Excluded Third to be violated.

Now it might be replied that Wittgenstein does in fact seem to regard Excluded Third in this light. For as we noted in Chapter 6, he regards the principles of logic as providing the structure (the 'inner scaffolding') of all language and thought. This then brings us to considerations of Charity. In the next chapter we shall assess the strength of the reasoning underlying Wittgenstein's attitude. Since the principles of logic will turn out not to have the sort of inviolable status he attributes to them, the present argument to *Simples* will be unsound. And then we shall (out of Charity, as well as Textual Fidelity) have reason to continue our search for a better one. For Charity requires us to do the best that we can on behalf of our subject, hoping that he may, besides weak arguments, have had in mind something stronger.

Summary

We have considered two further arguments for the existence of *Simples*. The first (Russellian) argument can be made to fit the text quite well, but commits an obvious fallacy. The second argument is a great deal more plausible; but it fits the text less well, leaving us puzzling about why Wittgenstein should have thought a belief in *Simples* to be imposed upon him by the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn* (3.23).

11 *The principles of logic*

Our task in this chapter is to understand the basis of *TLP*'s commitment to two-valued logic. But we should discuss separately two principles that neither Frege nor Wittgenstein distinguishes very carefully from one another: firstly Bivalence, which says that every proposition must be determinately (objectively, mind-independently) true or false; then secondly Excluded Third, which says that no proposition can be neither true nor false.

(A) Bivalence

On any account of the matter, Bivalence must entail Excluded Third. If all propositions must be determinately true or false, then there is no room for them to be neither the one nor the other. If they must always have one or other of the two truth-values, then clearly they cannot have neither. A commitment to Excluded Third, on the other hand, does not by itself entail a commitment to Bivalence. If one thought that the truth or falsity of a proposition had to be in some way epistemologically accessible to us in order for it to possess a determinate truth-value (crudely, 'no truth except verifiable truth'), then one would hesitate to assert that every proposition must be determinately true or false; for some might fall beyond our epistemological reach. Yet one could continue to insist that no proposition can be neither true nor false, denying that anyone could ever be in a position to assert positively of a proposition that it is determinately not true as well as being determinately not false – claiming that to be able to assert of a proposition that it is not true is tantamount to the discovery that it is false.

It is clear that *TLP* is committed to Bivalence (and hence also Excluded Third). For 4.023 tells us that a proposition must restrict reality to just the two alternatives, true and false, following this up with the claim that it