

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

must describe reality completely – having a force which reaches through the whole of logical space. This suggests very strongly that the truth or falsity of a proposition is to be settled just by its sense (by the manner in which it reaches out through logical space) together with the state of reality itself, requiring no help from us, and unconstrained by whether or not we have epistemic access to that aspect of the world. Indeed, there is no suggestion in *TLP* that semantics might be in any way constrained by epistemology. On the contrary, the theory of knowledge is said to be merely the philosophy of one natural science amongst others (4.1121), whereas philosophy of language is accorded a foundational role (4.0031). Indeed, it seems that the only limits on semantics are those which result from the essential nature of representation itself (4.113–4.1213).

One can also reach *TLP*'s commitment to Bivalence by another route, premised upon Wittgenstein's dual commitments to Excluded Third and to logical objectivism. Given that it is impossible for a proposition to be neither true nor false (since there is no third truth-value, and since it is impossible for a proposition to lack a truth-value); and given that the manner in which a proposition reaches out to reality to determine its truth-value is wholly objective (being unconstrained by any limitation in our capacities); then each proposition must possess, determinately, either the truth-value True, or the truth-value False. If the sense of a proposition is able to match up against the world in a wholly objective mind-independent manner (as logical objectivism affirms), then the state of the world must either fall within the truth-condition of the proposition or not; for as Excluded Third affirms, there is no third possibility.

As we saw in Chapter 4, Wittgenstein has some reason for thinking that logical objectivism is essential to all thought and representation. He may have felt that if (*per impossibile*) it were false, then there would be no possibility of thinking or saying anything at all. So the question whether it was reasonable of him to regard the principles of logic (and in particular Bivalence) as constitutive of all language reduces to the question whether it was reasonable of him so to regard Excluded Third. Since Bivalence can be thought of as a conjunction of two distinct theses, logical objectivism and Excluded Third, and since it is not unreasonable to think that the former belongs to the very essence of representation, all attention must devolve upon the latter thesis.

### (B) Excluded Third

It might seem that the existence of vague propositions would provide a good test-case for Excluded Third. But as we saw in Chapter 6, this would

be a mistake. Where something falls within the fuzzy borderline of a concept we ought not to say that a proposition ascribing that concept to the thing is both not true and not false. A better test-case is provided by propositions containing uninstantiated (or multiply instantiated) definite descriptions. As is well known, Frege took the view that such propositions are neither true nor false. His reasoning was based upon an analogy with definite descriptions themselves: just as 'The father of Mary' must lack a reference if the name 'Mary' fails to refer, so too much 'The father of Mary is bald' lack reference (that is to say, be neither true nor false) if 'The father of Mary' does not refer. But in fact many others have shared Frege's view of the matter without endorsing his reasoning.<sup>1</sup> So Wittgenstein cannot mount an adequate defence of Excluded Third merely by virtue of rejecting Frege's doctrine that sentences, as well as names and definite descriptions, have reference (3.1–3.144).

Nor can Wittgenstein's rejection of the Fregean doctrines concerning uninstantiated definite descriptions and bearer/less proper names (adopting Russell's theories in their place) provide any basis for his commitment to Excluded Third. For in the first place, even if Russell's analyses of sentences containing such expressions could be established as correct, this still would not give us the full generality of Excluded Third, which is supposed to apply to all propositions whatever. And in the second place (and more importantly), since the idea is to establish that Excluded Third is constitutive of all thought, this cannot be shown merely by analysing the forms of thought which we happen to employ. So it would not be enough to establish that sentences containing uninstantiated definite descriptions are false rather than neither true nor false. It must also be shown that there could not be a form of expression rather like our definite description, but differing from it in that sentences which contain it would lack a truth-value in cases where there is nothing, or more than one thing, satisfying it.

Any argument for Excluded Third, then, is somehow going to have to be quite general in form, even if it focusses upon sentences containing uninstantiated definite descriptions as a test-case. Moreover, we clearly need to be provided with an argument of some sort here. We cannot simply rely (or allow Wittgenstein to rely) upon an appeal to intuition, since on this issue, manifestly, intuitions can differ.

### (C) Formal arguments

One argument for Excluded Third is that it is entailed by the Equivalence Principle – the principle that 'P' and 'It is true that P' are logically equivalent.<sup>2</sup> For if we were to allow that a proposition could be neither true nor

false, then this principle would have to be given up. For in a case where 'P' was neither true nor false, 'It is true that P' would be, not neither true nor false, but false. Admittedly, this is not quite the same as saying that 'P' and 'It is true that P' can have different truth-values, since on one view of the matter to be neither true nor false is to lack a truth-value altogether, rather than to possess some third one. But at least it implies that they do not necessarily have the same truth-value, and this does seem sufficient to conflict with the Equivalence Principle.

It is clear that Wittgenstein is committed to the Equivalence Principle, and it is also clear why. For his view is that the content of a proposition is a representation of the condition under which it is true (4.022). Hence to understand a proposition is to know the condition of its truth (4.024), and fixing the content of a proposition is a matter of laying down under what condition it may be said to be true (4.063). Then since content and truth-conditions coincide, to say explicitly that a proposition is true (to assert 'It is true that P') cannot amount to anything different from the assertion of that proposition itself (to assert 'P'); which is just what the Equivalence Principle tells us. Yet this still does not amount to much of an argument. For where is it shown that fixing the content of a proposition must always be simply a matter of laying down the condition for its truth? Where is the argument that fixing the condition for the falsehood of a proposition must always be merely a matter of saying (having laid down the condition for truth) 'and false on any other condition'? For if Frege is right, and Excluded Third and the Equivalence Principle do not always hold good, then sometimes, at least, one will need to specify the conditions for falsehood separately, since there will be some situations falling in between, giving neither truth nor falsehood. No reason has been presented for saying that this cannot (or indeed does not) happen.

Another argument for Excluded Third is provided by the conception which we very naturally form of propositional negation. For on the one hand we are inclined to endorse a principle governing negation which is the analogue of the Equivalence Principle for propositional assertion: that a proposition 'P' is false if and only if '¬P' is true (5.512). This connects falsehood with negation in just the same way that the Equivalence Principle connects truth with non-negated content. But then, on the other hand, we are inclined to picture negation as reversing the truth-condition of a proposition, in such a way that '¬P' says something like 'Anything else, only not any of the conditions for the truth of "P"' (5.2341). These two ideas together entail Excluded Third. For suppose that a proposition could be neither true nor false. In that case '¬P', in reversing the truth-condition of

'P', must be true if 'P' itself is neither true nor false. But then clearly the truth of '¬P' can no longer be equivalent to the falsehood of 'P'. For '¬P' can be true while 'P' is not false.

Once again the trouble with this argument is to establish the principles underlying it. How are we to show, for example, that any concept of negation would have to involve reversal of truth-conditions? And can this be shown without at some point appealing to Excluded Third? Indeed, there is at least some reason for thinking that we do not in fact employ such a concept of negation. For it might be held that the negation of 'The father of Mary is bald' is the sentence 'The father of Mary is not bald.' And it would seem that the latter, just as much as the former, must be counted as not true in a case where the name 'Mary' lacks reference. In which case negation cannot here be reversing the truth-condition of the original, or else the negated proposition would have to be true in such circumstances. Now, of course this case by itself is inconclusive, since it might be denied that the negation-sign in 'The father of Mary is not bald' really governs the whole proposition, serving rather to negate the predicate in some way.<sup>3</sup> But the point is that Wittgenstein cannot simply assume that negation reverses truth-conditions without begging the question against his opponent. For anyone who thinks that a proposition can be neither true nor false will be inclined to deny this, retaining merely the connection between negation and falsehood.

#### (D) Aiming at truth

It seems unlikely that any argument premised upon principles supposedly governing the concepts of propositional content and propositional negation can establish our commitment to Excluded Third; for these principles are themselves a crucial part of what is in question. It is even less likely that such an argument could show Excluded Third to be essential to the very notion of symbolic representation. However, Wittgenstein gestures towards quite a different sort of argument when he speaks of the danger of thinking that true and false are relations of equal status and justification between signs and what they signify (4.061, NB 95). For if it were possible for a proposition to be neither true nor false, then it would indeed have to be the case that the notions of truth and falsity stand on the same level — that they are, so to speak, coordinate with one another.

In order to see this point, consider Dummett's famous analogy between propositions and bets.<sup>4</sup> In connection with a bet we have three possible outcomes: it can be won, it can be lost, and it can be declared void. There

is room for a middle position here because (and only because) it is possible to describe the consequences of winning and losing separately: if I win then someone has to pay me money; if I lose then I have to pay someone else money. So it is possible for there to be a case in which no money changes hands at all. Similarly then in connection with propositions: if there is to be room for a third possibility here (neither true nor false), then the significance of saying something false must be describable separately from that of saying something true. Saying something false cannot simply be a matter of saying what fails to be true, just as losing a bet is not simply a matter of failing to win it.

Wittgenstein clearly wishes to insist that the notion of truth is primary, and that truth and falsity are not in fact coordinate with one another. This is how we should read 4.022, which says that propositions show how things stand if they are *true* (my italics). It is also partly what is involved in the idea that propositions have *Sinn* (direction): a proposition directs us primarily towards the circumstances of its truth, and the circumstances of its falsity are simply those to which it does not direct us (that is, they are all other circumstances). It also seems to be part of what Wittgenstein has in mind in giving the general propositional form as: this is how things stand (4.5). The idea is that a proposition represents the world as being in a certain sort of condition (the condition of its truth), without containing a separate representation of the condition of its falsehood; rather, it is false if the condition of its truth does not obtain. But we look in vain in Wittgenstein's writing for any explicit argument for the view that truth is primary; it just seems to have struck him as intuitively obvious.

In fact what is at issue here is the significance or point of the true/false classification.<sup>5</sup> We need to investigate the purpose of classifying propositions into 'true' and 'false', in order to see whether there is any point in our having two separate classifications under the general heading 'not true', namely 'false' and 'neither true nor false'. What really needs to be elucidated is the kind of interest which we take in truth and falsehood: the kind of importance which they have. We must see whether or not that interest is a dual one (as it is in the case of a bet), or whether our interest in falsity is merely parasitic upon – the obverse of – our interest in truth.

Dummett in his seminal discussion of this topic suggests that the point of the true/false classification should be elucidated in terms of the significance of conventions governing the linguistic activity of assertion.<sup>6</sup> But this will be of no help as an exposition of Wittgenstein, who holds that assertion is merely psychological, and not a conventional matter at all (NB 96, 4.442). It is also unfortunate in that beliefs as well as statements can be

classified as 'true' and 'false'; for since most of a person's beliefs will remain unexpressed in public assertion, it is implausible to connect the point of that classification in any very direct way with the conventions which govern statement-making. We shall do better to return afresh to Dummett's original project, taking care to consider the classification of beliefs on an equal footing with that of public assertions.

Taking our start from some remarks Dummett makes in a discussion of the concept of assertion,<sup>7</sup> we might suggest that the point of classifying beliefs and statements into 'true' and 'false' lies in the concept of *action*, specifically in the idea of an action's being dependent upon a belief. So perhaps the importance of the classification consists in this: that you may safely act upon a belief or statement if and only if it may be correctly classified as 'true'. Of course 'safe to act' here cannot mean that you are guaranteed to achieve the ends of your action. For you may make errors in trying to carry it out, or some event may intervene to prevent you completing it, or it may fail because of the falsity of one of your other beliefs. But it does mean this: that any failure cannot be attributable to the belief or statement in question. Moreover, if all of the beliefs on which you act are true, then the most that is needed to achieve your aims is successful execution of the action. Equally, of course, an act based upon a false belief, although 'unsafe', is not bound to fail. But any success will be purely adventitious.

From the point of view of our interest in action there is no relevant distinction to be drawn between the different ways in which a belief or statement can fail to be true. For action on a belief is safe if and only if that belief is true. If it is not true – no matter in what manner it is not true – then an action based upon it will only succeed by accident. For example, suppose that I am hungry one Sunday evening and ask you where I can get something to eat. You reply 'The restaurant in the next street is open.' Is there any relevant distinction here between the case in which there is no restaurant and the case in which there is one but it is closed? Surely not: either way, my hunger will continue unabated. (And if it does not – if I meet a hot-dog seller on the way who is only there because there is no restaurant in that street, or if there is a sign in the restaurant window directing me to another nearby which is open – then this will be an unplanned-for success.)

Of course our interest in truth and falsity is not wholly practical in orientation. Many of us also take an interest in the matter for its own sake. However, there is some reason to think that the practical is the more fundamental of our two sources of concern. For it may be possible to

explain why, as practical agents, we have reason to develop an interest in truth for its own sake: because there is no telling when a true belief might not come in handy. Since we cannot predict in advance which beliefs we shall one day need to act upon, we do well to interest ourselves in trying to ensure the truth of our beliefs almost indiscriminately, without looking, in general, to possible future applications. But even if the two sources of interest were to turn out to be wholly independent, there would still be no relevant distinction between the different ways in which a belief can fail to be true. For the for-its-own-sake interest is surely an interest in *truth*: what we aim at is to build up our stock of correct representations of reality, and to avoid placing into that collection any which are not correct. A statement involving an uninstantiated definite description is just as much to be avoided, in this respect, as one which succeeds in referring but misattributes a property. We do not have any separate interest in collecting false representations which might leave room for a set of statements belonging to neither collection.

Since the practical and for-its-own-sake interests are the only direct sources of significance of the true/false classification, it follows that Wittgenstein is correct: there is no room for a proposition to be neither true nor false.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, since both sources of interest are directed at truth, it is this notion which is primary, falsehood being characterisable as merely the absence of truth. However, this argument for Excluded Third makes essential appeal to human interests and purposes. In which case, despite its success in establishing that we do in fact operate with a notion of truth which is primary, it cannot show that Excluded Third must govern any system of representation whatever.

#### (E) A biographical language-game

I can see no way of validating Excluded Third except as we have done, by reference to the purposes underlying the true/false distinction. Nor can I see how one could characterise those purposes in such a way that they would not turn out to depend upon contingent human interests. This then undermines the supposed unavoidability of Excluded Third.<sup>9</sup> We may have shown that no proposition as used by us can be neither true nor false. But how is this to show what Wittgenstein clearly believes, that no proposition in any conceivable system of representations could be neither true nor false? Not only has this not yet been established, but we can surely conceive of at least a limited system of representation, of the sort which

Wittgenstein was later to characterise as 'a language-game', for which Excluded Third would fail.

Imagine a community of people who have a distinctive style of definite article which is only ever employed in constructions like 'The first-born of John and Mary', 'The second-born of Peter and Susan' and so on – and then only when the person involved is believed to be dead. During their life-time people are referred to by name or by means of ordinary descriptions, the special description-operator being employed for the first time on the occasion of their funeral. These descriptions then form part of a language-game of biography-telling, which we can imagine to hold a central place in the social life of the community. The game consists in the telling of facts about the dead, points being scored (either literally, or in terms of social esteem) for facts which the others did not previously know. We can imagine that much of the leisure-time of these people is taken up with researching obscure and interesting facts about their dead fellows. Perhaps they see it as a kind of honouring, a kind of remembrance. But we may suppose heavy penalties (either loss of game-points, or lowering of social esteem) attach to the making of assertions which can be shown to be false of the individual described. This is partly as an inducement to careful research, and partly as a deterrent against fabrication.

Here we have a language-game in which separate consequences attach to truth and to falsehood. Interesting truths receive rewards, whereas falsehoods attract penalties. Note also that it has no connections with action. We may suppose that the community in question never have occasion to act on their biographical beliefs, except in the making of assertions and in researching further biographical facts. Their interest in truth and falsehood, with respect to sentences involving the special descriptions, is wholly non-practical. Then it is easy to imagine that within this language-game propositions may be allowed to be neither true nor false. In particular, if it is found that one of the descriptions current in the community is in fact uninstantiated (either because one of the names involved lacks a bearer, or because the named couple did not have the appropriate number of children), then the whole game of assertions and denials which has taken place with the use of that description is regarded as aborted, all rewards and penalties being rescinded. For the whole interest of the game for them lies in the discovery of truth or falsehood about historical individuals. Falsehood, in this context, has to involve the misattribution of a property to an actual person. A sentence containing an uninstantiated description is not treated as false (which would entail a penalty), but rather as not properly belonging to the game: as neither true nor false.

Thus, so far from necessarily governing all language and thought, Excluded Third is in fact dependent upon contingent features of the system of representation which we happen to employ. Its validity derives from our two main sources of interest in the true/false classification – both practical and for-its-own-sake – being directed exclusively at truth. But we can imagine different sources of possible interest which would motivate other ways of drawing the true/false distinction, leaving room for the idea of a proposition being neither the one nor the other. I therefore conclude that Wittgenstein may be right, as against Frege, that Excluded Third is in fact a valid and exceptionless principle of our language. But Frege is correct at least in this, that Excluded Third would not necessarily have to govern any conceivable system of representation whatever.

### Summary

We have seen how Bivalence may depend upon a conjunction of logical objectivism and Excluded Third. The former of these has some claim to be essential to the very notion of representation. But the latter principle can only be validated by reference to the kind of interest which we happen to take in the true/false classification.

## 12 *Simples and logical objectivism*

In this chapter I shall present the argument for Simples which constitutes my preferred interpretation. It both fits the text of *TLP* very well and is powerful in its own right.

### (A) The argument

In Chapter 10 we saw how a valid argument for Simples could be premised upon Excluded Third. But then in Chapter 11 it emerged that this principle is incapable of bearing such weight. Now in fact a similar argument can be constructed which has no need to rely upon Excluded Third. As before, it begins by insisting that an understanding of general propositions presupposes an understanding of singular ones.

There must be a class of genuinely singular propositions – that is to say, a class of propositions of the form 'Fb', whose understanding does not in any way presuppose a grasp of the concept of generality. Now suppose that the object referred to by 'b' has only contingent existence, so that there is a possible world *w* in which *b* does not exist. What is to become of the truth-value of 'Fb' with respect to world *w*? Obviously it does not express a truth about that world. There are then only two remaining possibilities: either it is false, or it is neither true nor false. But either way we cannot, if we are logical objectivists, allow this to be settled at a later stage (that is, in world *w*). If the non-existence of *b* would render the proposition false, then this must have been determined from the start; it must somehow have been implicit in the sense of 'Fb' that it would be false on that condition. But equally if the non-existence of *b* would render 'Fb' neither true nor false, then this too must have been determined in advance. It could not, as it were, be a matter of accident – of contingent fact – that the proposition would be neither true nor false in such circumstances.<sup>1</sup> So either way the sense of 'Fb' must somehow contain within itself a representation of the