

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.¹ So either way the sense of 'Fb' must somehow contain within itself a representation of the

possible non-existence of *b*, in order that it may determine that it should be false, or neither true nor false, on that condition. From this point on, the argument proceeds as before: it follows that 'F*b*' is not genuinely singular, and that to be such it would have to contain a name of a Simple.

Essentially this same argument may also be presented as follows. If all the objects of reference exist contingently, then what relationship obtains between the singular proposition 'F*b*' and the existentially quantified proposition ' $\exists x(x = b)$ '? Obviously they cannot be logically independent, since if anything is clear it is that the falsity of ' $\exists x(x = b)$ ' would render 'F*b*' not true. There can be no question of a singular proposition being true in face of the non-existence of the object referred to. So by contraposition, the truth of 'F*b*' must imply the truth of ' $\exists x(x = b)$ '. But then given the thesis that the truth-conditions of a proposition must be determined by its sense in advance of anything empirical (the requirement of determinacy-in-advance), it follows that it must already have been contained in the sense of 'F*b*' that its truth would require the truth of ' $\exists x(x = b)$ '. In which case grasp of the sense of any singular proposition would involve an implicit understanding of the concept of existence. But this is impossible: if it were really the case, then it would be impossible that the sense of any general proposition (or indeed of any proposition, since all singular propositions would themselves presuppose a grasp of generality) should ever be intelligibly explained. It therefore follows that some objects of reference must be non-contingent: Simples exist.

It will aid clarity to set out the argument in the form of numbered premisses, thus:

- (1) There must be a class of genuinely singular propositions, which do not presuppose a prior grasp of generality.
- (2) The truth-conditions of a proposition must be completely determined, in advance of anything empirical, by the sense of that proposition alone.
- (3) Suppose that all the objects referred to by the propositions in (1) are contingent.
- (C1) Then there are possible worlds in which those things do not exist.
- (4) With respect to such worlds the propositions in (1) would fail to be true.
- (C2) So, from (4), the existence of the objects referred to would be a condition for the truth of each singular proposition.
- (C3) So, from (2) and (C2), the senses of those propositions must contain a representation of existence.
- (5) This conflicts with the hypothesis of genuine singularity.

- (C4) So there must exist a class of objects of reference whose existence is not contingent.

Here at last is an extremely powerful argument for the existence of Simples.² Each of the premisses can easily seem undeniable (certainly (4) and (5) are mere truisms) and the argument itself is clearly valid. We shall return to considerations of Charity in Section (C), asking if the argument is really as strong as it looks. But we must first discuss whether there is any textual basis for believing Wittgenstein to have endorsed it.

(B) The argument and the text

Let us begin by considering the evidence that Wittgenstein accepted the main premisses of the argument. We have already noted in Chapter 10 that there is considerable evidence for his acceptance of premiss (1), deriving both from the foundational role given to elementary propositions within the semantic system of *TLP*, and from his explicit statement at 4.411 that the understanding of general propositions depends upon the understanding of singular ones. There are, however, a number of passages where he suggests that all the logical constants including the quantifiers are already contained in the elementary propositions. (See for example 5.47.) This seems to pull in the opposite direction. But in fact the best interpretation of these passages is consistent with the hierarchical approach to language expressed in premiss (1). What he is getting at is expressed elsewhere in the claim that the logical connectives do not 'go proxy' (4.0312, 5.4), which is to say that they do not describe elements of reality over and above what is mentioned in the elementary propositions. It is expressed also in the claim that a complete assignment of truth-values to the elementary propositions is a complete description of a possible world (4.26). And it is entirely consistent with these claims that the senses of the sentential connectives and quantifiers should only be explicable on the basis of a prior understanding of the elementary propositions, as premiss (1) of our argument states.

Premiss (2) of our argument is of course accepted by Wittgenstein; for it is none other than the main strand in the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn*, and is an aspect of his logical objectivism. There is no direct textual evidence of Wittgenstein's endorsement of our other premisses. But then they hardly make any new substantive claims, beyond the obvious one that 'F*b*' cannot be true with respect to circumstances in which the object *b* does not exist. They really just summarise the main moves in the derivation of the conclusion from premisses (1) and (2).

The fact that Wittgenstein equates the requirement that simple signs be possible with the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn* (3.23) is readily intelligible if we see him as endorsing the argument above. For as we saw in Chapter 5 from our study of the relevant passages in *NB*, there is a strong case for interpreting the requirement of determinacy of *Sinn* to be the requirement that the truth-conditions of a proposition must be fixed in advance of anything empirical by the sense of the proposition alone; and this is precisely premiss (2) of our argument, which carries the main burden of the proof, as we shall see in Section C below.³ Indeed, it is a powerful reason for attributing the argument above to Wittgenstein that it explains why he should see such a close connection between the argument to Simples and the requirement of determinacy, without our having to construe the latter requirement implausibly widely (as did the Russellian argument of Chapter 10), or implausibly weakly (as did the argument from sharpness in Chapter 9).

TLP 2.0211 can also be seen to make ready sense. Let the phrase 'whether a proposition has *Sinn*' be speaking quite generally about any proposition whatever. And let the 'other proposition' be one which describes the way in which human beings respond to their linguistic training (or whatever proposition describes how propositions determine their truth-conditions if logical objectivism is false). Then 2.0211 can be understood to say this:

If there were no Simples, then whether any proposition had truth-conditions would depend upon the truth of a further proposition describing the manner in which speakers respond to their linguistic training.⁴ (Hence the requirement of determinacy-in-advance would be breached.)

This meshes exactly with the argument from logical objectivism above, if we suppose that Wittgenstein regarded the other premisses as truistic. And given the strength of the case which can be built up in support of logical objectivism, it is entirely intelligible that he should go on to say, as he does at 2.0212, that it would follow that we could not sketch any picture of the world, true or false. For there is a case for saying that logical objectivism is essential to any representation whatever, without which there could be no truth or falsity.

(C) Can the argument be avoided?

Notice, to begin with, that we cannot reject premiss (1) by denying that it is necessary to explain our concepts at all, embracing some form of

innatism instead. For that premiss does not relate primarily to the teaching of concepts, but rather to the logical orderings which exist between them. The claim is that the truth-condition of a quantified proposition depends upon the truth-conditions of atomic propositions, but not vice versa. So it would be impossible to understand general propositions if one did not already understand some non-general ones; and it would be impossible to explain the quantifiers to someone who did not already understand some atomic propositions. But it is not implied that concepts do actually need to be taught.

Notice also that we cannot hope to avoid the argument by according demonstratives pride of place over proper names. It is indeed plausible that the most fundamental forms of atomic proposition, logically prior to those involving proper names, are those in which a predicate is applied to an object picked out ostensively.⁵ So it is also plausible that one might be able to explain quantification to someone who did not yet understand any proper names, if they were nevertheless capable of understanding such propositions as 'This butterfly is valuable.' But none of this helps us to block the argument to Simples. For what of the possibility that the object picked out by ostension (this butterfly) had never existed? Our understanding of the ostensive proposition somehow determines what is to be said in the face of such a possibility. And it is obvious at least that the proposition would fail to be true with respect to such a possibility. So we have no option, if we are logical objectivists, but to say that the sense of the ostensive proposition must somehow contain a representation of the existence of the object, since this is a condition for its truth. In which case it too will fail to be genuinely singular. Anyone understanding it will require at least an implicit grasp of the concept of generality.

It is also worth noting here that one cannot hope to avoid the argument to Simples through the sort of quasi-Russellian hybrid which has recently become fashionable.⁶ On this view, propositions like 'This butterfly is valuable' are genuinely Fregean: they represent their objects (the butterfly) in a particular way, containing a mode of thinking about (rather than direct reference to) their objects. But they are also Russellian, in that if the butterfly in question were to fail to exist, the proposition could not exist either. Those who take such a view might hope to deny that the sense of 'This butterfly is valuable' need contain a representation of the possible non-existence of the butterfly, on the grounds that were such a possibility to be realised then the proposition would not be false, or neither true nor false, but would fail to exist altogether. Yet once again this would be to ignore the distinction between the status of a proposition *within* a given

possible world (in this case, non-existent), and the status of a proposition *with respect to* a given possible world (in this case, at least not true). If we were to ask, concerning the proposition-in-this-world 'This butterfly is valuable', what its truth-value would be with respect to a world in which the butterfly in question had never existed, then the unavoidable answer is: 'Not true'. In which case the argument proceeds as before: it looks as if the proposition must somehow contain a representation of the existence of its object, and thus be debarred from genuine singularity.

One way of blocking the argument would be to reject premiss (1), by giving up the assumption of semantic hierarchy (or semantic foundation-alism) which it contains. We could embrace instead some version of semantic holism, arguing that atomic and general propositions each presuppose grasp of the other. On such a view the idea of a step-by-step explanation of the various forms of proposition is not only not obligatory, but actually impossible. The only way of coming to grasp the various concepts involved would be by total immersion in a linguistic practice, with light dawning gradually over the whole.

Some degree of semantic holism must be acceptable on any view. No one could understand a predicate without understanding some referring expression, and no one could understand just a single proposition without also understanding some similar, related, propositions.⁷ But the above thesis goes well beyond this in claiming that the senses of whole classes of proposition are mutually interdependent. Indeed, the strongest version of semantic holism holds that language is a seamless web, no part of which can be grasped in isolation from the others.⁸ Now, this strong thesis is in fact inconsistent with logical objectivism, since it leaves no room for propositions to have determinate content, or to stand in determinate logical relations with one another. But there remains the possibility of a weaker thesis, restricting itself to the claim that one cannot fully understand either atomic or general propositions without understanding the other.

The thesis of Semantic Hierarchy is an intuitively attractive one, especially for anyone who takes as their guide (as Russell and Wittgenstein no doubt did) the standard modes of introducing the various logical operators. For in logic one takes for granted an understanding of a class of atomic propositions, and explains on that basis the sentential connectives and quantifiers. But once Semantic Hierarchy is challenged, it is by no means easy to find arguments in its support. Certainly one cannot in this context appeal to the actual modes of teaching natural languages, claiming that pupils in fact grasp the idea of reference to individuals (including parents, siblings and the family dog) before acquiring the concept of gener-

ality. For the argument to Simples is designed precisely to show that such apparently singular propositions are not genuinely so. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's view must be that reference to the family dog presupposes generality after all, since the object referred to is contingent.

Consider the following argument, however. Suppose that Wittgenstein were correct that there is a class of necessarily existing individuals. This is at least epistemically possible. Then someone could surely learn to refer to such individuals, and to make atomic statements concerning them, prior to acquiring the concept of existence. Provided they were capable of identifying the appropriate individuals, and knew how to use the various predicating and rational expressions, then we would have no motive for denying them complete understanding of their atomic propositions, despite their inability to frame any sort of existence-statement. In contrast, it is obvious that no one could understand an existence-statement who was incapable of effecting singular reference. What this then shows is that the concepts of singularity and of generality are asymmetric. Since it is epistemically possible that someone should possess the notion of singular reference prior to acquiring the concept of generality but not vice versa, the concept of singular reference itself must be prior to the concept of generality; which is the thesis of Semantic Hierarchy.

If premiss (1) of the argument can be regarded as sufficiently established, and the other premisses are truisms, then the whole weight of the argument comes to fall upon premiss (2), which is the requirement of determinacy-in-advance. It is then worth considering how the argument to Simples might be blocked by its denial.

To reject logical objectivism is to allow that the relationship between a proposition and its truth-condition is not wholly independent of everything empirical.⁹ It is to say that no matter how much may have been done to fix the sense of the proposition, there will always be a further (contingent) contribution required from us before the truth-condition is determined. On this view, no explanation of the sense of a sentence can alone fix its truth-condition, since that will also depend upon the way in which we respond to the explanation. And this is, of course, a contingent matter. Equally, a logical relationship between propositions will not consist in a wholly objective connection between their senses. It will rather depend upon the fact that speakers who have been given the usual linguistic training can be brought to accept that they must not believe the one proposition without also believing the other.

Looked at from this perspective, there will be no problem in fixing the truth-conditions of quantified sentences by means of propositions involv-

ing references to entities which have only contingent existence. We can begin by explaining the use of sentences having the form 'Fb'. The pupil will be able to manifest at least partial understanding, by successfully identifying the object b in a range of different circumstances, and by making successful applications of the predicate 'Fx'. But at this stage it will be indeterminate whether they have fully understood. For since they lack the conceptual equipment to represent the possibility that the object b might not have existed, we cannot test what they would say about the truth-value of 'Fb' in face of such a possibility. Now, on the basis of their understanding of the atomics we explain the quantifiers to them, and they can manifest that they understand by making the right sorts of deductive moves between general propositions and singular ones. Then, finally, we put to them the possible truth of the proposition 'Not $\exists x(x = b)$ ', and we may suppose that they regard themselves (without further training) as bound to say that in that case 'Fb' would fail to be true. We can then say that they had understood the proposition 'Fb' correctly all along.

None of the explanations given here would be circular, and there is no reason to think that they could not be successful. The crucial point is that by giving up logical objectivism we could allow that the singular proposition 'Fb' implies the truth of ' $\exists x(x = b)$ ', and thus contains an existence-claim within its truth-condition, without having to think that a representation of the latter condition must somehow be presupposed in a grasp of the former. Rather, the connection between the two will consist in the fact that speakers who have had the senses of both forms of proposition explained to them regard themselves as bound to believe the latter if they believe the former.

(D) Is the argument a *reductio*?

The argument for Simple which we outlined in Section A seems to depend, ultimately, upon Wittgenstein's logical objectivism. Yet the conclusion is an extraordinary one. Not only are we asked to believe in a class of necessarily existing individuals, but we are also required to accept that they are (somehow or other) what our ordinary statements are really about, reference to them forming the foundation of all language and thought. Now, is this merely very surprising, or is it actually incoherent? That is to say, are we obliged to turn the argument to Simple into a *reductio*, using the absurdity of the conclusion to derive the falsehood of logical objectivism? Is the argument by itself sufficient to reveal a basic flaw in the system of thought of *TLP*?

If reference to Simple forms the basis of all language and thought, then how is it that none of us is aware of referring to them? How is it that we cannot even provide an example of a Simple? There are in fact two closely related problems here, each threatening *TLP* with incoherence. Firstly, how is it possible to refer to a thing without being aware that one is doing so, in such a way that one would, literally, not know what one was talking about? Secondly, how can it be a logical constraint upon the adequacy of explanations of the quantifiers that they be given on the basis of propositions involving reference to Simple, and yet no such explanations are ever given? The first sentences which a child learns will involve reference to such manifestly contingent entities as its parents and the family dog, and general propositions are seemingly explained on that basis. So are we to suppose that the child has already, without prior training, been referring to Simple in its thoughts?

The first difficulty is rather easily dealt with, since there will only be a problem here if 'Mary is talking about x' implies 'Mary knows that she is talking about x.' For only if this implication holds will the fact that we are none of us aware of referring to Simple entail that we are not in fact doing so, thus conflicting with the theory of *TLP*. But the implication fails, because the context created by the phrase 'talk about ...' is transparent, whereas that created by the phrase 'knows that ...' is opaque. Thus if Mary says, while watching a broadcast of a speech by Ronald Reagan, 'That old man looks as if he was once an actor', then it is true that she is talking about Reagan. And since Reagan was once President of the United States, it is also true that she is talking about an ex-President. But Mary need not know that she is talking about Ronald Reagan, or that he was once President. So from the fact that we none of us know that we are talking about Simple, it does not follow that we are not in fact doing so.

In order to deal with the second difficulty, we need only distinguish between the constraint that a certain mode of explanation be possible, and the constraint that it be actual. Wittgenstein would presumably say that the question how people actually acquire a grasp of their language is an empirical matter, and no business of the philosopher.¹⁰ It may be that linguistic understanding is innate, or that it is acquired by some sort of miracle (that is to say, inexplicably). What is of legitimate philosophical concern is the manner in which our concepts are logically embedded in one another to form an hierarchy, with complex concepts logically embedded in one ones within their conditions of application. Whether any speaker ever actually acquires their grasp of complex concepts by first having the simpler ones explained to them and then having the complex ones

explained to them on that basis may be an irrelevant empirical question. But it is an *a priori* constraint that it should at least be *possible* for someone to acquire their concepts in this way. For if this were not possible, it could only be because no one could understand the 'simpler' concepts who did not already understand the 'complex' ones, which would contradict the initial thesis about the manner in which they are embedded in one another.

Thus it may in fact be the case that people acquire their grasp of quantification – somewhat mysteriously – as a result of total immersion in a linguistic practice, rather than step by step on the basis of a prior grasp of singular propositions. Indeed, this is perhaps not implausible as a description of what actually happens. For one does not, in general, give children definitions, of any sort. One simply talks to them. (Compare 3.263.) All that Wittgenstein's argument requires is that it must be *possible* to acquire a grasp of the quantifiers on the basis of a prior understanding of propositions referring to Simples. And this will only be possible (given logical objectivism) if Simples do indeed exist.¹¹

Note also that to say, as Wittgenstein does, that all our propositions are actually truth-functions of elementary ones involving reference to Simples is not to say anything about what is going on in our thoughts, or about the manner in which the truth-conditions of our propositions are actually determined (that is to say, their senses). As we saw in Chapter 7, it is merely to claim that all propositions are logically equivalent to some possible truth-function of elementary ones. For recall from Chapter 1 that the *TLP* view is that the criterion of identity for semantic content is logical equivalence.

Summary

There is no obvious incoherence in the *TLP* doctrine of the existence of Simples. Yet there is a powerful argument in its support, premised upon the requirement of determinacy-in-advance (more generally, logical objectivism), which also provides us with the best available interpretation of the crucial passages in the text. It is therefore not unreasonable to regard Wittgenstein as having discovered a proof of the existence of Simples, in the absence of a direct refutation of logical objectivism.¹²

13 Independent elementary propositions

Our task in this chapter is to see why Wittgenstein should have insisted that the elementary propositions which constitute the end-point of analysis must be logically independent of one another.

(A) Preliminaries

The independence requirement is mentioned at four different points in *TLP*. Twice it occurs in the material mode, stated in terms of the independence of the states of affairs which elementary propositions describe (1.21, 2.061). Then at 4.211 it is said to be a mark of a proposition's being elementary that there can be no elementary proposition which contradicts it. Finally, 6.3751 makes essentially the same point in the context of a discussion of colour-exclusion. However, in none of these cases does a study of the surrounding remarks throw any light on Wittgenstein's motives. Nor can we look to *NB* for any explicit guidance, since the independence requirement receives no mention there. Yet he must surely have had some powerful reason for insisting upon it, since he is prepared to do so in advance of being able to give any examples of elementary propositions. Indeed, it is far from obvious that the requirement can possibly be complied with.

There is just one other remark in *TLP* which suggests a possible interpretation. This is 5.152, which tells us that any two elementary propositions will give one another a probability of $\frac{1}{2}$. When taken in the context of the theory of objective probability developed in the 5.15s, this implies that elementary propositions must be logically independent of one another.¹ Now, as Wittgenstein himself says, his theory of probability is founded on an identification of the trio 'necessary', 'possible' and 'impossible' with 'truth-functional tautology', 'truth-functional contingency' and 'truth-functional contradiction' respectively (4.464, 5.1), which itself pre-