

4 Logical objectivism

The best way I know of fleshing-out the argument is as follows: the functions of language are to serve as a vehicle for communication and to provide the means for us to formulate our own thoughts; but if the relationship between our symbols and reality were contingent (dependent upon some 'third thing'), then we could not know in advance of experience what those symbols represented, and communication and thought would become impossible; so the relationship between our symbols and reality cannot be dependent upon any third thing (that is, logical objectivism is true).

It is easy to see what Wittgenstein might have in mind. For suppose that the relationship between a proposition and its truth-condition were dependent upon some third thing, such as the way in which a speaker (or perhaps most speakers) of the language were inclined to react in using that proposition in the light of the linguistic training which they have received. Then how could anyone tell you anything in advance of your seeing the facts for yourself? If they say to you 'My car is green', must you not wait to discover how they (or most people) react in the use of the term 'green' before you can know what they mean? In fact must you not wait to see the precise shade of colour of their car for yourself (by which time, of course, their information can be of no use to you)? How, indeed, could you even think of anything in advance? If you make the prediction 'Her new car will be green', how can you know in advance what shade of colour you are expecting? Must you not wait upon events, observing how you are inclined to respond in the use of the term 'green' before you can know which shades of colour your thought concerns? In which case — if you do not know what you are thinking of — you might just as well be incapable of thinking at all.

Although superficially plausible, this argument turns out merely to beg the question, taking for granted that in order to know what someone is talking of, or what your own thoughts concern, symbols would have to be related intrinsically (that is, in the manner of logical objectivism) to their objects. But in order to see this we need to outline briefly the most plausible form of anti-logical-objectivist position, which holds that a speaker's understanding of a symbol is to be equated with a practical capacity or set of such capacities (contrasting with the logical objectivist view that a speaker's capacity to use a sign is to be *explained in terms of* their understanding, which may perhaps outreach any capacity they may have). On this account the connection between symbol and world is not intrinsic, but is mediated by the speaker's disposition to employ that symbol in judgments. These dispositions will also include a normative element, the speaker being disposed to correct their mistakes and to accept correction

We shall consider a number of arguments supporting logical objectivism, all of which probably influenced Wittgenstein to one degree or another. Some of them can be stated quite explicitly, but turn out to fail. Those which remain are more intuitive, though seemingly very plausible. It will be left as an open question whether or not they succeed.

(A) Describing in advance

At *PR* 20–6, written soon after his return to philosophy in 1929, Wittgenstein is to be found arguing for what is apparently logical objectivism, attempting to reduce its opposite to absurdity. In fact the immediate targets of attack are the causal theories of meaning developed by Russell and Ogden and Richards.¹ But as Wittgenstein himself says, the details of these theories are inessential: what he really wants to undermine is the idea that the relation between thought and reality (or between expectation and expected event) might depend upon 'some third thing' (*PR* 21). Then since the defining characteristic of logical objectivism is that internal relations should depend upon sense alone, independently of anything contingent, it seems clear that he is wanting to undermine any kind of denial of logical objectivism.

One recurring theme in these passages is that language must be able to set up internal relations to the world in advance of experience, since otherwise the whole function of language would collapse (*PR* 20, 22, 26). At the very least this argument seems to echo the *NB* and *TLP* insistence on what I shall call 'the requirement of determinacy-in-advance', which we shall see in Chapter 5 is a form of logical objectivism. So it may be that in these passages Wittgenstein is exploring once again arguments which had underlain an aspect of his earlier views. At any rate the hypothesis is not an unreasonable one.

from others, perhaps also being inclined to accept the judgement of the majority of their speech-community as binding in cases where their own dispositions are out of line. (If most other speakers of English describe as 'red' an object which I am disposed to call 'pink', then I shall give way.)

Now, consider how such a view might be placed to reply to the argument from describing in advance. Take the case of communication first: in denying logical objectivism we should be saying that to know in advance what someone is talking of is a matter of your possessing, yourself, various dispositions for the use of the signs in question, against a background assumption that you have both been given the same sort of linguistic training. So when someone says to you 'My car is green', you can know in advance what they mean because you yourself have dispositions for the use of 'green' – you could immediately point to a whole range of samples to which you would be inclined to apply the word – and because of reasonable assumptions about shared linguistic capacities. In fact you would not have to wait to see how your informant reacts, even though the connection between their symbols and the world is effected by their dispositions, because it would be reasonable for you to assume that you yourself share the same dispositions.

Consider, then, the case of symbols employed in thought: here we can say that knowing in advance what your thought concerns is simply a matter of being disposed to make use of its constituent signs in such a way that they would apply to the object in question. Wittgenstein seems to assume that if logical objectivism were false then we should be forced to wait to discover the connection between symbol and world, the phrase 'waiting to discover' suggesting that we should be incapable of rational action until the connection in question emerged. But of course if we suppose that the connection is constituted by the manner in which I am inclined to act, then it need not be like this at all. If the connection between my symbol 'green' and a certain range of shades of colour is constituted by my dispositions for the use of that symbol itself, then I do not have to wait to observe my own usage before I can act. (This would be like saying that I have to act before I can act!) Having entertained the thought 'Her new car will be green', I can immediately begin to act – for example selecting a tin of paint to match the colour which I am expecting – thus *exercising* the disposition in question.

(B) Frege's Regress

The other main argument which Wittgenstein employs at PR 20–6 is a regress, attempting to reduce the denial of logical objectivism to absurdity.

(See especially PR 22, 26.) It immediately puts one in mind of Frege's famous regress argument against correspondence theories of truth.² Indeed, it is possible that Frege's argument had been known to the Wittgenstein of *TLP*, perhaps influencing the development of the Picture Theory. For the regress certainly appears at its strongest when deployed against theories of truth (theories of the relation between symbols and reality) which see the connection in terms of some 'third thing'.³ And one way of expressing at least part of the point of the mature Picture Theory is that it is to bring out how the relationship between a proposition and its truth-condition is intrinsic, any new arrangement of elements in a picture showing you what configuration of things in the world would make it true *without more ado*.

Frege first published his regress argument in the essay 'Thoughts', which appeared in 1918 – too late to influence the author of *TLP*. But in fact he had used it as early as 1897, in an unpublished paper entitled 'Logic', primarily against the imagist theory of meaning.⁴ Now, we know that Wittgenstein visited Frege early in 1914, and that they corresponded for some time afterwards.⁵ So it seems likely that Wittgenstein made the discovery of his Picture Theory in the Autumn of that year, he would have communicated it to Frege. It seems equally likely that Frege would have responded with the argument he had deployed some years earlier against a rather different version of correspondence theory. (Unfortunately we can only speculate, since their letters were destroyed in the bombing of the Second World War.) This would then explain why the 1918 version of the argument is not just directed against the imagist theory, but also against the idea that truth might consist in a correspondence between *pictures* and reality. But in any case, whatever the historical facts, it is worth considering whether anyone who rejects logical objectivism must be committed to a theory of truth which will generate a vicious regress.

The argument can best be developed as follows. Suppose we held that the relationship between our symbols and reality were not intrinsic, but rather resided in some third thing – for example the way in which most speakers of the language would respond to their training in their use of those symbols. Then the truth of a proposition 'P' would depend, not just upon its sense and the state of the world, but also upon the way in which most speakers of the language would respond in their use of 'P' when faced with that aspect of the world. So in order to establish the truth of 'P', should we not first have to discover how most speakers would react? For example, if 'P' is the proposition that Mary has a red car, then in order to establish its truth it seems we should have to discover whether most speakers of English would concur in describing the car as 'red'. But now we

have another proposition to establish ('Most speakers of English . . .'), whose truth-condition, in turn, will depend upon the way in which most speakers would respond. So in order to establish the truth of this other proposition we must first enquire how most speakers of English would respond in the use of *it*: would most people agree that most speakers of English would concur in describing Mary's car as 'red'? And so on – the regress is vicious, since no truth can ever be established.

In fact the argument fails. It only appears to succeed by conflating the idea of a criterion, or test, of truth with substantive philosophical theories of what truth consists in. Sure enough, if the reactions of most speakers of English were being proposed as a criterion of truth – as the basis of our explicit normative practice in establishing truths – then the attempt to discover any truth would generate a regress. For in order to apply the criterion we should have to discover a truth which is distinct from our target truth; but then applying the criterion to this in turn would require us to establish a truth which is distinct from that, and so on. Frege's Regress therefore rules out any possibility of a general criterion of truth. But there is no reason to suppose that the denial of logical objectivism must commit us to any such thing. We could accept that the only norms in operation are those which result from the explanations and training which speakers are given in the use of the signs of their language. And yet we can, consistently with this, bring in the reactions of most speakers as part of a substantive philosophical thesis about the nature of the relation between symbols and reality.

As we saw above, the most plausible version of the anti-logical-objectivist position would hold that the result of the explanations and training purporting to fix the content of the symbols of our language would be to set up a complex of dispositions in us: dispositions to use those signs in assertions, dispositions to justify and accept correction of that usage in various characteristic ways, dispositions to hold one's use responsive to that of the majority of other people in cases of conflict, and so on. To say this is not at all to say that in order to establish a truth we would first have to discover what most speakers of the language would be disposed to say. Rather, a speaker will employ the signs in a proposition in the way they have been trained to do, thus exercising (as opposed to describing or investigating) the dispositions which they have in common with other speakers. For we may suppose that it belongs amongst their meaning-conferring dispositions, as a legitimate part of their practice, that they are only inclined to consult the dispositions of others in cases of conflict. So no regress is generated. Yet a philosopher reflecting on this practice, and

wishing to give the most general account of what the truth of a sentence will consist in within such a community, may correctly say that it will be true in whatever circumstances most members of the community would regard as verifying it.

It might be said that either a vicious regress or a vicious circle must be generated, at least in the case of an attempt to establish the theory itself, which is our alternative to logical objectivism.⁶ For suppose I were trying to establish that for a proposition to be true is for there to exist circumstances which most speakers of the language would (if suitably placed, etc.) regard as conclusively warranting its assertion. Can I simply take what steps seem to me appropriate in the light of my training in the use of the terms involved? However, this would apparently presuppose both that there is such a thing as agreement in reactions to training, and that I react with the majority. Yet this would be part of the very thesis whose truth I was trying to establish. But then if I set out to consider explicitly whether there is agreement in reactions, without relying upon my own linguistic dispositions, I should be launched on a regress.

The correct reply to this argument, however, is that merely exercising my linguistic dispositions in attempting to establish a theory of the relationship between language and reality is no more taking for granted what I am trying to establish than is a physicist who walks across a room in the course of investigating the laws of gravity. I should be employing my terms in the way that I have been trained to do, thus exercising the very dispositions which as a matter of fact confer meaning on them. And as we said, it may be a legitimate part of the practice that I can in general rely upon my own dispositions, only appealing to others in cases of conflict. So it is the practice itself which embodies an assumption that there is general agreement in reactions, which is not the same thing as saying that such an assumption enters into my investigation as a premiss. In which case there would be nothing untoward or question-begging about my procedure.

I can see no prospect of deriving a *reductio* from the denial of logical objectivism, by attempting to show that it would result either in a vicious regress or a vicious circle. So whether or not the Wittgenstein of *TLP* was actually influenced by Frege's Regress, we are still without any real support for logical objectivism.

(C) Objective necessity

When we reflect upon simple patterns of argument, or simple necessary truths, they tend to strike us as being wholly objective. We tend to think of

the validity of valid arguments, and the necessity of analytic truths, as obtaining in a manner which is independent of us and our capacities, purely in virtue of the concepts – the senses of the signs – involved. For if logical objectivism were false, and thus if the relations between the concepts determining the analyticity of an analytic truth depended upon some contingent fact about us or the world, then what would become of the necessity?

The point here needs stating with some care. For if the question 'What would become of the necessity?' means 'What would become of truth in all possible worlds?', then the argument hinted at in the question would be unconvincing, for reasons similar to those which in fact undermine Frege's argument for the necessary existence of thoughts.⁷ In effect it would mean that the argument in support of logical objectivism would be this:

- (1) If the internal relations in a tautology depended upon something contingent – such as people's reactions to their linguistic training – then it would fail to be true in all possible worlds (in particular, it would fail to be true in worlds where people's reactions differed).
- (2) But a tautology is a necessary truth: it is true in all possible worlds.
- (C) So the internal relations in a tautology must depend only upon the senses of the terms involved. That is to say: logical objectivism is true.

The correct response to this argument is to distinguish between truth *in* a world and truth *about* a world. And it must be the latter notion which is involved in the idea of conceptual necessity, else we shall be committed to the necessary existence of concepts (and perhaps also signs).⁸ Then it need not in any way compromise the idea that a tautology is a truth *about* all possible worlds, if it were true that relationships between concepts depended upon contingent facts about human reactions. For these concepts get *used* by us, now, in a world where our reactions are as they are. They can constrain our talk about all possible worlds, despite the fact that in some of these worlds our reactions would have been different.

Thus to take up our example from the last chapter: if the mutual exclusiveness of the predicates 'red' and 'green' consists in the fact that speakers of English refuse to countenance their conjunction, we can still say (exercising this very disposition) that it would have been impossible for a surface to be red and green all over, even had all speakers been favourably disposed towards such a description. For we may take such an imagined disposition as showing that they must either mean something different by the words 'red' and 'green' or be mad.

On the other hand, the question 'What would become of the necessity?' may mean 'What would become of the objectivity – the mind-independent existence – of necessity?' Although many would maintain the mind-independent existence of senses themselves,⁹ there remains a strong inclination to believe that conceptually necessary truths must be wholly objective. Think, for example, of some arbitrarily long formula of the predicate calculus: are we not inclined to insist that it either is – determinately – a necessary truth or it is not? And this despite the fact that we may be incapable – certainly in practice, perhaps even in principle – of discovering its status. In which case, the way in which the senses of our signs interact to determine whether a sentence is necessary or contingent must surely be independent of any capacity of ours. For the relations which constitute a sentence as a necessary truth are being thought to obtain in cases which outreach our capacities.

This argument appears extremely powerful, although the main premiss – the objectivity of necessary truth – has been left merely intuitive, without the backing of any further argument. However, the intuitions involved are almost unavoidable for anyone who is actually engaged in doing logic (or, for that matter, anyone who is doing mathematics, if it is appropriate to think of the truths of mathematics as being conceptual, or sense-based). Someone attempting to construct a proof will naturally tend to think of the result as being there, already determinate, waiting to be discovered. They tend to think of themselves as tracing out connections between concepts which already exist, determined in a manner which in no way depends upon them or their capacities.

This way of thinking may itself be a product of something more general, namely the idea that the senses of new sentences are determined by the senses of their component parts in a mind-independent way. When we come across a new sentence we tend to think of its sense as already fixed, independently of our capacities and dispositions. Certainly we do not feel as if we have any *choice* in how to understand it. We think of the senses of the component words of the language as combining to determine the sense of any new sentence (thereby determining the status, as such, of tautologies and contradictions); determining even the sense of sentences which it would far outstrip our mental powers to comprehend.

Thus one strong argument in support of logical objectivism is founded on our intuitive belief in the objectivity of necessity – which may itself be founded on our intuitions concerning the objectivity of relations between senses generally. Quite what the source of these intuitions may be, and

classical logic might be unwarranted if truth were not objective. (Although whether this is really the direction of support or whether, on the contrary, it is our belief in the objectivity of truth which supports our reliance upon classical logic is perhaps not obvious.) For in relying upon the law of Excluded Middle (the unrestricted validity of ' $P \vee \neg P$ ') we appear to be taking for granted the principle of Bivalence ('every proposition is determinately either true or false'). And this seems to presuppose in turn that the truth-values of propositions depend only on their sense and the state of the world (thus committing us to the objectivity of truth and to logical objectivism). At any rate, if we think that logical laws have to be validated by general semantical considerations, then it is hard to see how Excluded Middle could be retained if our belief in the objectivity of truth were given up.¹⁰

Summary

We have considered a number of arguments in support of logical objectivism. Three of these – from the possibility of describing 'in advance', from a vicious regress, and from necessity as truth in all possible worlds – have turned out to be less than convincing. But we are left with two arguments – from the objectivity of conceptually necessary truth, and from the objectivity of contingent truth – which although intuitive appear extremely powerful.

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whether what is of value in them could be consistent with the denial of logical objectivism, are questions which we must leave to one side until the penultimate chapter.

(D) Objective truth

We tend to think of truth as being objective, at least within a fairly wide domain such as truths about physical objects and their states, the mental states of other people, and past and future times. We believe that within one of these domains, whether or not a proposition is true is wholly independent of facts about the person who entertains it. Rather the truth-value of such a proposition depends only on the way things are (or were, or will be) in the real world, as well as, of course, upon its content (sense). We think of these domains as consisting in judge-independent ranges of states of affairs: the facts being as they are no matter what we believe, and no matter whether or not we are capable of coming to know them. And we think of ourselves as having attached senses to our signs such that they and the states of affairs in the world can settle between them the truth-values of our propositions in advance of investigation by us. Indeed, we think of those senses and the states of the world as being able to settle truth-values even in cases which outstrip our capacities, such as propositions about the remote past, or generalisations about all future times.

It appears that the above conception of the objectivity of truth must commit us to logical objectivism, requiring us to picture the senses of our signs as reaching out to reality in a manner which does not in any way depend upon us and our capacities. For suppose that logical objectivism were false. That is, suppose that the relationship between propositions and their truth-conditions were dependent upon some fact, or facts, about those who use those propositions. In that case, how could truth be objective? For what does it mean to say that a truth is *subjective*, except that its truth is a function, not just of states of the world and the content of the proposition, but also of states of the judging subject? Moreover, if logical objectivism were false, then how could there be truths about states of the world which transcended our capacities for discovery? For if the very manner in which a proposition gets projected on to reality depends upon our capacities and dispositions, then propositions could apparently reach no further than our capacities do.

If asked to justify our belief in the objectivity of truth there is perhaps not a great deal that we can do, any more than we can justify our belief in the objectivity of necessity. But we can at least point out that our reliance upon