

manifested by the fact that 'the world is my world' beyond this? In particular, is the 'myness' of the point of view from which I represent the world a real but incommunicable feature of it? I believe not. Although the position is by no means a foolish one (indeed, it can seem quite plausible, as I hope I have managed to bring out),¹⁶ it is nevertheless incorrect. For the 'myness' of an experience is just the difference between knowing in the abstract that a certain experience is taking place, and being directly aware of it. It is not a further (but incommunicable) feature of that experience, but a distinctive mode of knowledge of it. Quite how this point should be expressed will depend upon one's favoured theory of self-knowledge. But one plausible account would have it that awareness of an experience is a belief caused by the presence of that experience, which is then apt to enter into the causation of the behaviour of the subject whose experience that is (where 'subject' here means 'human being').¹⁷

Similarly, the 'myness' of my perspective on the world is not a peculiar sort of ineffable fact, but rather consists in the way my modes of presentation of the world (my thoughts and perceptions) facilitate bodily action. Put differently, what I should lack when I have not yet worked out from the complete objective description of the world which of the described perspectives is my own is an ability to employ that knowledge in action. It is only when I know where *I* am, and which are the things which *I* am seeing, that my knowledge of the world can become practical. But this is not to say that there is some further fact which I have to learn. It is rather that I have to connect the facts which I have been told with my current perceptions in such a way as to generate action.¹⁸

Summary

A phenomenalist reading of *TLP* has much to be said against it. Nor does Wittgenstein's endorsement of 'solipsism' provide any real evidence for it. For part of what he means is that there is no distinction between what can be represented in my thoughts and what is possible in reality. And the rest of what he wishes to say – that the 'myness' of the point of view from which I describe the world is an unsayable aspect of it (a 'limit') – is equally consistent with realism.

9 *Simples: weak arguments*

In this chapter we begin our consideration of the various possible arguments for the existence of *Simples*, concentrating on those which seem particularly weak.

(A) Preliminaries

As is well known, the early sections of *TLP* advance a number of metaphysical theses about the nature of the objects (*Gegenständen*, *Dingen*) which make up the world. They are said to be simple, as opposed to complex (2.02), and all complex entities are said to consist, ultimately, of some combination of *Simples* (2.0201). They are the referents of the 'simple signs' (names) with which the analysis of ordinary propositions must terminate (3.2–3.25). They are unalterable and changeless (2.0271). And most importantly, they make up the substance of the world, being common to all logically possible worlds (2.021, 2.022–2.023, 2.024). The *Simples* of *TLP* are thus simple and changeless, and exist in all possible worlds.

Besides these explicit claims in the text, we may also add the interpretation defended briefly in Chapter 1, that *Simples* are individuals, not including properties and relations. We also have our argument from the last chapter that they do not merely exist in all possible worlds, but at all times within those worlds: that they exist necessarily. We shall carry these two additional claims forward into the discussions which follow, subject to reassessment if required. (Hence we shall need to ask ourselves whether the arguments we consider would be more convincing if one or other of these features of our interpretation were dropped. But given the strength of the case in their support, the answer would have to be a very powerful affirmative to force a change on us at this stage.)

Clearly the thesis of simplicity is entailed by the thesis of necessity (and

indeed also by the weaker thesis of existence in all possible worlds). For 'simple' in this context means 'non-complex', which in turn means 'not consisting of parts'. And any object which does in fact consist of parts can exist only contingently, even if those parts are fused together by causal necessity. For then it will be logically possible that those parts might never have been joined together, in which case the object in question would not have existed. So any entity which is necessary, or which exists at some time in every possible world, must also be simple.

The converse entailment does not hold, however. From the fact that an object is simple it does not even follow that it exists at all times in the actual world, let alone that it exists in all worlds, or at all times in all worlds. For it is not a necessary truth that the only way for an object to begin its existence is to be created out of parts; nor is decomposition into parts the only possible way for an object to cease to exist. The ideas of creation *ex nihilo* and destruction *ad nihilum* are surely not self-contradictory.¹ One can conceive of there being an 'existence-hole' somewhere in the universe, on reaching which an object will simply disappear out of existence into nothing, and out of which new objects will sometimes spring into existence from nothing.² In which case the simplicity of an object certainly does not entail that it exists for all time.

Moreover, even if it were a necessary truth that a simple object would have to exist at all times in the actual world, it would not follow that it must exist in all possible worlds. Even if it were self-contradictory to claim that a simple object could ever come into existence or cease to exist, it would not follow that it is false that it might never have existed. For there might be one possible world consisting of one set of simple objects, which exist – of necessity, we may suppose – at all times within that world; and yet there might be other possible worlds which are made up of quite different sets of simple objects.

The upshot of these considerations is that no argument for the existence of Simples can be regarded as wholly satisfactory which only yields their simplicity. Whereas, on the contrary, an argument leading to the conclusion of their necessary existence, or of their existence in all possible worlds, will automatically yield their simplicity. So one constraint (a constraint of Charity) on the plausibility of attributing to Wittgenstein any given argument for the existence of Simples is that its conclusion should go beyond a claim of simplicity, the argument at least purporting to establish that Simples exist in all possible worlds.

The thesis of changelessness, on the other hand, is two-way independent of the claims both of simplicity and necessity. There could be simple

entities, and necessary entities, which are subject to change. (Perhaps God might be an example of such a thing, if he were to think different thoughts at different times, but were not to consist of parts, and were to exist in all possible worlds.) And there could be changeless entities which are neither simple nor necessarily existing. (Perhaps propositions – senses of sentences – might be candidates here.)³ So any argument for the changelessness of Simples will have to be separate from the argument for their necessary existence. In fact such an argument is provided by the claim that Simples are 'colourless', which I interpret to mean that their only properties are relational ones (2.0231–2.0232).⁴ The idea is that all change is change in the relations between Simples, because Simples themselves lack any containing non-relational properties. And as for why Wittgenstein should believe this, I suggest that he had at the back of his mind, at least, the outline of a programme of analysis which would have such a consequence. We shall return to the issue in Chapter 14, sketching just such a programme. For the moment we shall concentrate on arguments for necessity.

Although the thesis that there are such things as Simples forms the corner-stone of the metaphysics of *TLP*, explicit argumentation for it is extremely sparse in the text. At 2.0211 we are told that there must be Simples since otherwise whether a proposition had *Simm* would depend upon the truth of another. This is by no means easy to interpret. We shall consider some suggestions in the next chapter, and another in Chapter 12. Then at 2.026 it is argued that there must be Simples since otherwise the world would not have an unalterable form. This will be considered in Section D below. Finally, 3.23 implies (when taken together with 3.2–3.221) that there must be Simples since otherwise the requirement of determinacy of *Simm* would be breached. One possible reading of this argument will be considered in the next section. Another will be considered in Chapter 12. In addition to these three there have been various other arguments suggested in elucidation of Wittgenstein's position which we shall need to consider, some taking their inspiration from his own later writings.

(B) The argument from sharpness of *Simm*

This is the argument we sketched briefly in Chapter 6. There is no unequivocal evidence that Wittgenstein ever actually deployed it. What there is comes from 3.23, which equates the requirement that simple signs be possible with the requirement of determinacy of *Simm*. But as we also saw in Chapter 6, the requirement of sharpness is only one strand in this,

the other being logical objectivism (the requirement of determinacy-in-advance).⁵

The argument would proceed as follows. Suppose we were convinced that every proposition must, as a matter of logic, have sharply defined truth-conditions. Then such a thing will only be possible if reality itself is discrete. If the colour spectrum were a continuum, for example, then however precisely one tried to define the boundary between two colours, there would always remain indefinitely many shades of colour which were not determinately placed on one side of the boundary or the other. Only if there are atoms of colour – so that there exist shades x and y which are distinct, and which are such that there is no other shade z which falls between them – will it be possible to define a completely precise boundary.

This argument might conceivably be thought sufficient to establish the existence of non-complex objects. But it obviously cannot show the atoms of reality to be constituents of all possible worlds. They might be genuinely simple, thus facilitating the drawing of sharp boundaries, and yet exist only contingently. At this point it might be felt that the argument would fare better if we dropped the requirement that Simple be necessary, and returned to the phenomenalist interpretation which we discussed in the last chapter. But still it would only establish, at best, that all thought must be built on references to simple sense-data. It would not follow that these sense-data are constituents of all possible worlds.

It might be suggested that the immediate acquaintance that we have with our own sense-data is sufficient to fill the gap. For if all thought reduces, ultimately, to thoughts involving direct reference to sense-data, then how would one be able to entertain the thought that a particular existing sense-datum might not exist? How can one represent, by means of direct reference to an individual, the possible non-existence of that very thing? But in fact there is no real problem about this. One could entertain a thought of the form ' $\Diamond \exists x(x = b)$ '. Nor can our certainty with respect to our own sense-data make any difference. The fact that it would be self-refuting to assert 'This sense-datum does not exist' does not imply that there is any difficulty in thinking 'This sense-datum might not have existed.' Nor does the self-verifying nature of 'This sense-datum exists' make it the case that it entails 'This sense-datum necessarily exists'.⁶

What is somewhat less obvious, but none the less true, is that the argument from sharpness is incapable even of establishing that reality must consist of non-complex individuals. For the sense of 'atomic', as it figures in the argument, relates entirely to concepts. The claim is that all those predicates and relational expressions whose conditions of application we

take to involve continua in fact have conditions of application which are discrete and sharply defined. But it does not follow that the individual things to which these concepts apply must themselves be non-complex. We can easily imagine worlds in which all individual things are complex (consisting of parts which in turn consist of parts and so on) and yet in which their construction out of those parts does not admit of degrees. So it would be an all-or-nothing matter whether or not a given complex entity exists, in addition to the properties of and relations between individuals being similarly discrete.

It is clear, moreover, that the argument would fare no better if we widened our reading of 'object' to include universals. For even so the objects of *TLP* would have to include individuals as well (there could not be a world of contingent facts consisting only of universals) and we should still be left without any argument for their simplicity, let alone their necessity. Indeed, this point generalises: any argument for the existence of simple objects must purport to establish that there is a class of necessarily existing individuals, whatever it may say about universals.

(C) The argument from complexity

The simple objects of *TLP* are contrasted with complexes: it is claimed that all statements about complexes can be analysed into statements describing the relations between their simple constituents (2.021, 3.24, 3.3442). If we take this together with the later Wittgenstein's discussion of the simple/complex contrast at *PI* 39–64, then we might be tempted to read back into *TLP* the following argument:

- (1) There are complex objects in the world.
- (2) Any complex object must consist of simpler parts.
- (C) So there must exist a class of non-complex objects.⁷

Wittgenstein's main criticism of this argument in *PI* turns on the idea that there are no such notions as absolute simplicity or absolute complexity (*PI* 47–8). On the contrary, 'complex' means different things in different sorts of context, and in different language-games. This is, of course, not the sort of criticism that the Wittgenstein of *TLP* could have been expected to foresee, since it depends upon a recognition of the multiplicity of different uses of language which is distinctive of the later philosophy. So if there were nothing else wrong with the above argument it might be reasonable, in the absence of textual evidence to the contrary, to see *TLP* as endorsing

it. The metaphysics of *TLP* would then derive ultimately from a certain conception of the uniformity of language.

However, there is, in fact, a great deal more wrong with the argument. To begin with, the move from the premisses to the conclusion is unsound. From the undoubted fact that there exist complex objects in the world, and the analytic truth that any complex object consists of simpler parts, it does not follow that there is any object which does not consist of simpler parts. It may be that each complex object is made up of simpler parts, which in turn themselves consist of simpler parts, and so on *ad infinitum*. To think otherwise is to commit a fallacy, involving a quantifier shift from 'Every complex object consists of some simpler parts' to 'There are some simple parts out of which all complex objects are made.'

The above error is so obvious that we surely cannot, in charity to the early Wittgenstein, suppose him to have overlooked it. Moreover, there is textual evidence to show that he was aware of the possibility of analysis *ad infinitum*. At 4.2211 he remarks that even if the world were infinitely complex, with every fact consisting of infinitely many states of affairs (*Sachverhalten*, atomic facts), and every state of affairs consisting of infinitely many objects, there would still have to be objects and states of affairs. While this is not quite the same as acknowledging that there need be no definite terminus to the hierarchy of complex objects and their simpler constituents, it does at least show an awareness that it may prove impossible ever to complete the analysis of any given proposition of ordinary language.

In any case, even if these scruples could be overcome, the argument from complexity fails to establish what it is supposed to: the existence of Simple. For as we have already had occasion to see, from the fact that there exists a class of absolutely simple (non-complex) individuals, it does not follow that these individuals must exist in all possible worlds, let alone that they exist at all times in those worlds. So in this respect too, Charity requires that we find an alternative source for Wittgenstein's position if we can possibly do so.

(D) The argument from unalterable form

As we noted at the conclusion of Section A above, Wittgenstein argues at 2.026 that if the world has an unalterable form, then there must be simple objects. And at 2.022 he claims it to be obvious that the world does indeed have an unalterable form. So the existence of Simple is entailed, by a step of *modus ponens*.

The first thing we have to ask is what Wittgenstein means by the form of the world. At 2.0231 it is contrasted with the material properties of the world, which is presumably the set of actual truths about the world: the set of facts. So it seems reasonable to assume that the form of the world is the set of logically possible truths about the world. That is to say: the form of world *w* is given by the set of propositions of the kind $\Diamond A$ which are true about *w*. We then need to ask what it means to say that the form of the world is unalterable. In the light of the above, it presumably means that the set of possible truths about our actual world would remain the same with respect to any other possible world. That is to say: if any proposition of the kind $\Diamond A$ expresses a truth about our actual world, then $\Diamond A$ expresses a truth about all possible worlds. This is in effect the characteristic *S5* axiom: $\Diamond A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond A$.⁸ I propose to grant Wittgenstein its obviousness. The real question is whether the *S5* axiom entails the existence of Simple, as Wittgenstein seems to claim at 2.026.

We can begin to see the connection which he may have had in mind if we notice that he speaks, not only of the form of the world, but also of the form of an object. At 2.0141 we are told that the form of an object is given by the set of possible states of affairs in which it can occur. And 2.012 tells us that the possibility of occurring in a state of affairs must be 'written into the object itself' – that is to say, be an essential attribute of it. So the set of possible situations in which an object can occur is an essential attribute of it. This too is apparently entailed by the *S5* axiom. For if it is possible for an object to occur in a state of affairs (if, say, $\Diamond aRb$ is a truth about our world), then it is a truth about all possible worlds that it is possible for that object to occur in that state of affairs ($\Box \Diamond aRb$ is also true).

We also know Wittgenstein to have believed that all possibilities reduce, ultimately, to the possibility of objects occurring in states of affairs (2.0272, 4.3, 4.4, 5). Indeed, such a belief is independently plausible. It is in any case quite natural to maintain that all possibility must in the end be a matter of which atomic sentences are possibly true – that is, of which individuals could possibly possess what properties, and of which individuals could possibly stand in what relations to one another. There is then a sense in which the form of all the objects in the world gives us the form of the world itself (see 2.0231). For together with the objects we are given all possible properties of, and relations between, objects (remember their forms are essential to them), and all possibilities whatever (the form of the world) are said to reduce ultimately to these.

We are now apparently in a position to argue, by *reductio*, that the same set of objects must exist in all possible worlds. Suppose that this is not the

case: suppose that there are two possible worlds, w and v , which consist of different objects. Now, the set of objects in w determines the set of propositions of the form $\Diamond A$ which are true about w ('the form of world w '). And similarly the set of objects in v determines which propositions are possibly true about v ('the form of world v '). Then since the two sets of objects are different, so must be the two sets of possible truths. But this conflicts with the S5 axiom: what is possible in one world is possible in all (the form of $w =$ the form of v). Our initial supposition must therefore be false. On the contrary, the same set of objects must exist in all possible worlds: objects constitute the fixed form of the world.⁹

The mistake in this argument lies in the claim that if the objects in w and v differ, then so too must the possible truths about w and v . To see this, suppose that world w contains only the objects a , b and c , while world v contains only the objects f , g and h . Amongst the possible truths about a , there will be propositions relating it to b and to c . But — and this is the crucial point — there will also be possible truths relating it to f , g and h . For there will be another possible world u in which all six objects exist. (I assume that the existence of one individual thing cannot logically exclude the existence of another.) The same, of course, goes for the objects in world v : the possible truths about them will include ones relating them to the objects in world w . So the set of possible truths about w and v will be identical after all.

Take a more concrete example. I exist in this world, and amongst the possible truths about me are ones relating me differently to other things which also exist in this world. There are possible worlds in which I am friends with Margaret Thatcher, and worlds in which I am friends with Ronald Reagan. But there are other possible truths about me, relating me to objects which do not in fact exist in this world, but which exist in other possible worlds. There are possible worlds in which I am friends with Zeus, and worlds in which I go riding on Pegasus. So there is no reason why the set of possible truths about the actual world, in which I exist, should not be the very same as the set of possible truths about the world in which Zeus exists and I do not: both will include the possible truth that we are friends.

We can thus grant Wittgenstein the truth of the S5 axiom, allowing him that the world has a fixed form; and we can grant him that the form of the world reduces ultimately to the form of individuals: it is a matter of the possible properties of, and possible relations between, individual things. For it is entirely consistent with these concessions to deny that the world is made up of objects which exist in all possible worlds. Nor does it follow

that the individuals which give the form of the world have necessary existence.

Although Wittgenstein does seem to have endorsed the argument for the existence of Simples which we have been discussing, it is surely reasonable to hope that he may also have had a better one. It is not unusual for a philosopher to have in mind a number of distinct arguments for the same conclusion. Nor is it unusual for them to find some of these arguments more convincing than they should, precisely because they yield a conclusion of whose truth they have already become convinced. Charity requires us to hope that something of this sort may be true in Wittgenstein's case.

(E) An argument from the semantics of names

Recall from Chapter 1 that for Wittgenstein the semantic content of a name is its bearer. So a name which lacks a bearer will lack semantic content, and sentences containing it will accordingly be without truth-conditions. How, then, am I to use a name for a contingently existing entity to describe the possibility of that thing never having existed? For this possibility is at the same time one with respect to which sentences containing that name will lack truth-conditions.

The argument here seems to be the same as that put in quotation marks by Wittgenstein at *PI* 55, apparently in exposition of his earlier self. He writes:

'What the names in language signify must be indestructible; for it must be possible to describe the states of affairs in which everything destructible is destroyed. And this description will contain words; and what corresponds to these cannot be destroyed, for otherwise the words would have no meaning.'

Yet the reply to the argument is simple and obvious. It is that one may coherently use a name which does in fact have meaning in this world to describe situations in which its bearer would fail to exist. The fact that such a situation would be one in which that name, if it were then to exist, would be without semantic content need not deprive our description now of its truth-condition. The simplest such description would take the form $\Diamond \neg \exists x(x = b)$, as we saw in Section B above.

There is, however, a further possible premiss of the argument which would rule out the acceptability of this reply. This is the *LLP* thesis that all possible worlds may be described by means of assignments of truth-values to the set of elementary propositions (4.26, 5).¹⁰ For since ' $\neg \exists x(x = b)$ ' is

clearly not elementary it cannot, according to this thesis, be essentially involved in the description of another possible world. Yet how else are we to describe the possibility that a contingent object *b* might never have existed?¹¹

In fact, however, there is no difficulty in meeting the constraint introduced by the extra premiss of the argument. Using only elementary propositions we can describe a situation in which a contingent object of reference fails to exist, by negating all of them in which the name of that thing figures. Since the elementary propositions of *TLP* are to be logically independent of one another, such a description will not be self-contradictory. But since it is surely impossible for a contingent object to exist without there being anything contingently true of it, it must follow from the description that the object in question does not exist, and we shall have our desired specification of a possible world.

Of course there would remain a problem in using elementary propositions to describe, not worlds where things which do exist would not exist, but rather worlds where there would exist objects which do not exist in the actual world. For since they do not exist in this world, any names for them which we might introduce will lack semantic content, and any elementary propositions employing those names will lack truth-conditions. We might try to circumvent this problem by appealing to the distinction between the sense and semantic content of names. For example, if names for non-existent things employed descriptive senses, then although sentences containing them would lack semantic content, they would still be capable of expressing determinately true or false thoughts in the idiolect of any given speaker. But as we shall see in the next chapter, Wittgenstein has a strong argument for saying that at least not all the names in elementary propositions can have descriptive senses.

It would seem, then, that by combining together the thesis that the semantic content of a name is its bearer with the claim that all possible worlds must be describable by means of assignments of truth-values to a set of elementary propositions, we can at most derive the conclusion that the objects of actual reference which exist in our world are the only possible objects that there are. But this does not entail that they exist necessarily. It is one thing to say that all possible worlds must contain some selection from amongst the objects which exist in the actual world, and quite another to say that all or any of those objects must exist in all possible worlds. So this argument, like the others so far considered, fails to establish the desired conclusion.

Summary

We have considered four possible arguments for the existence of Simples: from the requirement of sharpness of *Sinn*, from complexity, from the S5 axiom, and from the semantics of names. Each has failed lamentably.