H A N S S L U G A

S U B J E C T I V I T Y IN T H E T R A C T A T U S

.

"In the enquiry that follows, I have kept to three fundamental prin-

ciples", Gottlob Frege wrote in his Foundations of Arithmetic. The first of

which is "always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical,

the subjective from the objective" (F., p. x; see references for ab-

breviations).

In stating this principle, Frege was taking sides in one of the most

sustained and, I am sorry to say, one of the more confused philosophical

controversies of the nineteenth century. I am talking about the conflict

between psychologism and antipsychologism. As a first approximation

we might say that the dispute was over the question whether logic needs

to be grounded in psychology. Antipsychologists, like Frege, denied this.

But that does not explain much. In order to understand the dispute

better, we would have to know what the word "psychology" meant in the

mouths of nineteenth-century philosophers. If one pursued that question,

one would discover at least half a dozen different meanings for the word

"psychology" and, in consequence, half a dozen different battles fought

in the psychologism debate. 1

I want to draw attention here to just one aspect of Frege's principle,

namely, how he ties the distinction between the psychological and the

logical to that between the subjective and the objective. One might well

ask, What exactly is the nature of the tie? Are the two distinctions meant

to be equivalent? At times he seems to hold that psychology deals

exclusively with ideas in the subjective sense (F.,.p. 37) and thaflogic

deals with what is objective. But he also says that psychology can deal

with such objective phenomena as the chemical composition or the

anatomical construction of the brain (N.S., p. 160).

More problems surface when we turn to Frege's use of the term

"subjective". He says of its opposite, "the objective", that it is "what is

subject to laws, what can be conceived and judged, what is expressible in

words" (F., p. 35). That would make the subjective that which is not

subject to laws, cannot be conceived and judged, and cannot be

Synthese 56 (1983) 123-139. 0039-7857/83/0562-0123 $01.70

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expressed in words. There are many places where Frege says as much.

Treating sensations and appearances as subjective (F., p. 36) he writes,

for instance:

Space, according to Kant, belongs to appearance. For other rational beings it might take

some form quite different from that in which we know it. Indeed, we cannot even know

whether it appears the same to one man as to another; for we cannot, in order to compare

them, lay one man's intuition of space beside another's. (F., p. 35)

The reason is that for Frege, as he says elsewhere, sensations, ap-

pearances, and intuitions, or ideas for short, always need a bearer. So the

question whether the color-blind person sees red as green or green as red

is "unanswerable, indeed really nonsensical" (T., p. 27). "For when the

word ' r e d ' . . . is supposed to characterize sense-impressions belonging

to my consciousness, it is only applicable within the sphere of my

consciousness. For it is impossible to compare my sense-impression with

that of someone else" (Ibid.).

But if the subjective is inexpressible in words and if psychology deals

(or tries to deal) with the subjective, then psychology is an impossible

science, or at least that part of psychology that tries to deal with the

subjective. Physiological psychology might still be a possibility. While

this seems to be the clear implication of Frege's words, he is not

altogether consistent when he says that "an idea in the subjective sense is

what is governed by the psychological laws of association" (F., p. 37).

That is in conflict with his other claim that only the objective is subject to

laws and, hence, expressible in words. We can, perhaps, conclude that

Frege's overwhelming inclination was to ban the subjective from

language, but that the obvious difficulties in doing so forced him at times

to backtrack on this claim.

We can observe the same kind of wavering in another place. On the

one hand Frege maintains in one of his later writings that the world is

describable by completely objective and impersonal thoughts: "Ap-

parent exceptions are to be explained by the fact that.., the words need

to be supplemented in order to give a complete sense" (N.S., p. 146).

Such supplementation demands, in particular, the elimination of words

like "I", and "here" and "now", and their replacement by proper names

and descriptions indicating time and place. In a language in which

thoughts are completely expressed, the apparently subjective element in

them has dropped away as inessential and the thoughts describing the

world stand there in their full objectivity. But further reflection on this S U B J E C T I V I T Y I N T H E T R A C T A T U S 125

topic convinced Frege that no proper name has the sense which the word

"I" has, and this, he thought, must be due to the fact that "everyone is

presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is

presented to no-one else" (T., p. 25f). The idea that we can attain a

completely objective conception of the world has, thereby, been

modified and restricted. 2

I have sketched some of Frege's reflections on the subjective-

objective distinction here as a prelude to a discussion of some related

issues in Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In the preface to that work Wittgen-

stein acknowledges the influence of "the magnificant works of Frege",

and that influence is clearly perceptible in Wittgenstein's under-

standing of the distinction between the objective and the subjective.

.

We must look at the Tractatus first of all as part of that great project that

has animated so much of modern science and philosophy: the attempt to

characterize the world in entirely objective terms. That project has

drawn much of its strength from the success of the natural sciences, and

these, in turn, have been seen as deriving their strength from the

rejection of the old Aristotelian conception of the world which, it is said,

interpreted things in human and, hence, subjective terms.

While modern philosophy has again and again aimed at obtaining the

objectivity of the sciences, its attitude towards that objectivity has,

however, always been ambiguous. For it seems clear on reflection that

even the most objective account of the world is only a picture con-

structed by human subjects, tested and confirmed by human subjects, a

picture that is objective for us rather than objective in itself. As soon as

we begin to think about the origin and status of any objective description

of the world we seem to be thrown back to reflections about the knowing

subject. It is this which has led philosophy repeatedly back to the

positions of idealism, radical empiricism, subjectivism, and scepticism.

I perceive in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first

decades of the twentieth century yet another attempt to mediate between

the opposing pulls of objectivism and subjectivism. That attempt is

delineated in the works of Frege, Husserl, and the early Wittgenstein. It is

the attempt, expressed so very clearly in Frege's principle quoted at the

beginning, to separate as sharply as possible the sphere of the objective

from that of the subjective. But is such a separation possible? 1 2 6 H A N S S L U G A

I see in Frege's waverings on this matter an expression of the difficulty

of trying to adjudicate the conflict between the attractions of the

objective and those of the subjective by assigning to each its own

domain. The trouble is that the boundaries can only be maintained

artificially: the realm of the objective and that of the subjective tend to

intermingle in the most alarming way.

I will try to illustrate this point in more detail by looking closely at the

views of the earlyWittgenstein. He begins his philosophical reflections

with the idea of a completely objective world: a world consisting of

simple objects and their arrangement into complex facts, an arrange-

ment fully describable by the propositions of natural science. But as he

proceeds he begins to realize that this objective world is specifiable only

as a subject's world describable in the subject's language. Subjectivity

has begun to invade the picture. But that subjectivity has no place in the

world for Wittgenstein; it hovers on the boundary of the world and

remains thus, in the literal sense, a marginal subjectivity. This attempt to

isolate subjectivity outside the world and outside language leads, as we

shall see, to intolerable strains within Wittgenstein's thought: strains that

eventually make a reconstruction of his whole philosophy necessary.

In August 1914, at the beginning of the Notebooks, we find Witt-

genstein preoccupied with the question how a sentence can represent

reality. He is certain that there must be a "logical identity" between the

sign and the signified, and he strives to explicate that identity. He

concludes that in completely analyzed propositions there must be just as

many names as there are things contained in the depicted state of affairs.

These considerations lead him, in April 1915, to the notion of a simple

object. The term had been used by him only once before in passing (N.B.,

p. 3). Now, on April 25, 1915, he writes:

It always seems as if there were something that one can regard as a thing, and on the other

hand real simple things. (p. 43)

That remark initiates a lengthy series of deliberations on the nature of

simple objects, which continues (with only one major disruption) to the

end of the seond notebook.

Simple objects, he assumes, are whatever corresponds to the simple

constituents of completely analyzed propositions. But there seem to be

two difficulties with the notion of a completely analyzed proposition.

None of the sentences of ordinary language can be considered com-

pletely analyzed. How can we then know that there are such pro- S U B J E C T I V I T Y I N T H E T R A C T A T U S 127

positions? And how can we recognize the fact that a proposition is

completely analyzed? Those questions, in turn, reflect on the nature of

our knowledge of simple objects. How do we know that there are such

things and could we recognize them as such?

Wittgenstein had begun with the assumption that we should be able to

say what simple objects are. At one point he suggests that they might be

simple parts of our visual field, minima sensibilia (e.g., p. 65), then he

entertains the possibility that they could be simple "material points" (p.

67). He finally concludes:

Our difficulty was that we kept speaking of simple objects and were unable to mention a

single one. (p. 68)

That conclusion has further important consequences for him. Our

certainty about the existence of simple objects, he argues, is not derived

from an actual knowledge of those objects, but from the fact that our

sentences would have no definite meaning without them:

A n d it keeps on forcing itself upon us that there is some simple indivisible, an element of

being, in brief a thing . . . . A n d it appears as if that were identical with the proposition that

the world must be what it is, it must be definite. (p. 62)

Simple objects, thus, become a logical requirement, not something that

can be discovered and investigated empirically.

W h e n the sense of the proposition is completely expressed in the proposition itself, the

proposition is always divided into its simple c o m p o n e n t s - no further division is possible and

an apparent one is superfluous - and these are objects in the original sense. (p. 63)

It is at this point that subjectivity enters the picture. For as Wittgenstein

writes in the Notebooks: "We can only foresee what we have con-

structed" (p. 71). This holds true, in particular, of the simple objects:

If I can imagine a " k i n d of object" without knowing whether there are such objects, then I

must have constructed their archetype (Urbild) for myself. (p. 74)

Every particular language, moreover, contains names that are not

further analyzed in it. Those names may or may not be simple names in

the strict logical sense. The notions of simple name and simple object

must therefore be relativized toparticular languages, and this introduces

a further element of subjectivity.

T h e simple thing for us IS: the simplest thing that we are acquainted with. T h e

simplest thing which our analysis can attain - it need appear only as a , . . variable in our 128 H A N S S L U G A

propositions - that is the simplest thing that we mean and look for. (p. 47)

For this reason Wittgenstein now feels compelled to speak of "my

language" rather than "the language", and "my world" rather than "the

world". The notions of language and world have thus been subjectivized.

There is in them an essential reference to something subjective. And this

conclusion is intimately connected with the idea that "this object is

simple for me!" (p. 70).

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The idea that our understanding of the world has an inevitably subjective

aspect led Wittgenstein to make a number of strongly metaphysical

claims which surface for the first time in the middle of a discussion of

simple objects in the Notebooks. He writes on May 23, 1915:

The limits of my language constitute the limits of my world. There really is only one world

soul, which I for preference call my soul and as which alone I conceive what I call the souls

of others. (p. 49)

On the same day he notes further that in the book "The world I found"

there would be no talk about the subject and that this shows that "in an

important sense there is no such thing as the subject" (p. 50). And he

adds that, by considering such a book, we would have a method of

isolating the subject. Two days later, on May 25, he writes:

The urge toward the mystical comes of the nonsatisfaction of our wishes by science. We feel

that even if all possible scientific questions are answered ourproblem is still not touched atall.

Of course in that case there are no questions any more; and that is the answer. (p. 51)

And again two days later, on May 27, he adds:

"But might there not be something which cannot be expressed by a proposition (and which

is also not an object)?" In that case this could not be expressed by means of language; and it

is also impossible to ask about it. (Ibid.)

The doctrines that there is only one world soul, that this soul or subject is

not part of the world, that science cannot touch the problem of the nature

of the subject, that this limitation of science is the source of the urge

toward the mystical, and that, finally, the mystical deals with that which

cannot be expressed in language are here all treated as arising naturally

out of the discussion of simple objects. That tact is generally insuffi-

ciently appreciated by interpreters of the Tractatus. S U B J E C T I V I T Y I N T H E T R A C T A T U S 129

The general tendency has been to treat the Tractatus doctrines of the

self as somehow detached from the discussion of the logical structure of

the world and the doctrine of simple objects. But, as the Notebooks

reveal, they were closely connected in Wittgenstein's own mind.

It is not, however, easy to see how they were connected - at least not

from the text of the Notebooks. We must turn to the Tractatus to un-

derstand why the subjectivity of language which Wittgenstein thought to

have discovered in his reflections on simple objects could not be

explained through the assumption of a subject in the world, a subject that

constructs language for itself and, thus, accounts for its subjectivity. If

the subject is in the world, it must be either a simple object or a complex,

for the world is the totality of simple objects and the complexes formed

from then. But Wittgenstein denies that the subject could be either. He

writes in the Tractatus that "a composite soul would not be a soul any

longer" (Tr., 5.5421). And he makes that claim without further

argument, assuming it, presumably, to be self-evident. 3

Whatever the reasons for the claim, it seems to leave us with the

conclusion that the soul or self - if there is such a thing - must be simple.

But that, too, is rejected by Wittgenstein. He writes that, on Russell's

account of judgment, propositions of the form " A thinks that p is the

case" must be treated "as if the proposition p stood to the object A in a

kind of relation" (Tr., 5.541). In other words, object A, a mind or

subject, is taken to represent for itself in thought the fact that p. That

analysis Wittgenstein feels justified to reject, for it assumes that an object

can represent a fact. But the picture theory says that a fact can be

represented only by something that is just as complex as itself. Re-

presentation, in other words, can only be a relation between complexes,

never a relation between a simple and a complex (Tr., 5.542).

We do not have to decide whether Wittgenstein has given an accurate

account of Russell's views and whether his refutation of them is cogent.

The real significance of Wittgenstein's considerations lies elsewhere. For

he raises a crucial difficulty for all those who argue that only a simple

substance can have mental attributes. If among those attributes is the

ability to have representations and if representations of complexes are,

by nature; themselves complex, we must ask how a simple substance is

capable of having complex representations.

But that suggestion, combined with the claim that a composite soul is

not a soul any longer, seems to lead to the discovery that the notion of the

soul or subject is altogether incoherent and that, consequently, there 1 3 0 H A N S S L U G A

cannot be any such thing. That conclusion seems, in fact, endorsed by

Wittgenstein when he writes:

This shows that there is no such thing as the soul--the subject etc.--as it is conceived in

contemporary superficial psychology. (Tr., 5.5421)

And again later in the Tractatus:

There is no such thing as the thinking, representing subject. (Tr., 5.631)

But what sounds, at first, like a straightforward denial of the existence of

the subject is turned in an unexpectedly different direction in the

sentences that immediately follow the last one quoted. Repeating what

he had written in the Notebooks in May 1915 Wittgenstein says:

If I wrote a book "The world as I found it", I would have to report in it on my body and I

would have to say which limbs obey my will and which do not, etc. This then would be a

method of isolating the subject or rather of showing than in an important sense there is no

subject; that is, it alone could not be mentioned in this book. (Ibid.)

We are then justified in saying that there is no subject, but justified only in

an important sense. In the sense, namely, that in the book of the world

there would be no mention of the self. In another sense, that fact helps us

to isolate the self. It helps us to do so by showing that the self cannot be

part of the world. The world is the totality of facts, and those, in turn, are

eventually made up of concatenations of simple objects. All there is to

the world are simples and complexes, but the subject is neither, and can,

thus, not be part of the world.

The philosophical I is not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which

psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit--not a part of the world. (Tr.,

5.641)

The question, at this point, is then what that metaphysical subject is and

what it means to say that it is the limit of the world.

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It is often said that Wittgenstein's fully developed Tractatus philosophy

has a strongly Kantian flavor. But there is no reason to think that

Wittgenstein knew much of Kant's philosophy when he wrote the

Tractatus. Kantian ideas seem rather to have come to him through the

writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and Otto Weininger. But what he took

from those writings was often not very specifically Kantian. S U B J E C T I V I T Y I N T H E T R A C T A T U S 131

In The World as Will and Idea, Schopenhauer set out to describe the

nature of the relation between mind and body in terms which he claimed

to be Kantian, but to which he had given his own peculiar twist. Science

has for him as its ultimate aim "a materialism wholly carried into effect"

(WWI. 1, p. 28). In science we describe the law-governed relations of

objects. "Science can never get beyond the representation; on the con-

trary, it really tells us nothing more than the relation of one represen-

tation to another" (Ibid.; cf. Tr., 6.371f). When we look at ourselves

scientifically we must conceive ourselves as objects in the world. "For

the pure knowing subject as such, this body is a representation like any

other, an object among objects" (p. 99). But we can also see ourselves

in a different way, not accessible to the scientific viewpoint; we can see

ourselves as pure subject to which the body is given as a manifestation

of the will. Reality is ultimately will, which becomes individuated

at the level of representation into a multiplicity of separate objects.

I want to focus here on just one aspect of Schopenhauer's thought,

namely, the idea that science presents us with one view of the world: the

view in which we see the world as an arrangement of objects whose

relations are describable by means of language; but that there is, at the

same time, a different viewpoint, the metaphysical or transcendental

view: the view I hold when I conceive of myself as a subject and of the

world as my world. We may, if we want to, call the one an objective and

the other a subjective view of things. The latter, the subjective view,

does not issue in a theory, but ultimately in silence. Schopenhauer's

attempts to formulate it drive him from metaphysics to art and finally to

mysticism. He concludes his book with the claim that philosophy

ultimately reaches a point "'beyond all knowledge', in other words, the

point where subject and object no longer exist" (p. 412).

There is no reason to doubt that Wittgenstein knew Schopenhauer's

main work when he wrote the Tractatus and that significant ideas from

that book are reflected in Wittgenstein'~ thought. 4 The evidence linking

the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus period with Otto Weininger's Sex and

Character is less strong. Wittgenstein certainly knew and admired the

book in later years. But did he know it already before 1918? Careful

consideration of the relevant sections of Weininger's book make that

assumption plausible. There is, moreover, reason to think that he was

reading or referring back to Weininger's posthumously published book

{~er die letzten Dinge, when he was writing the third of the remaining

notebooks, s 1 3 2 H A N S S L 1 J G A

Otto Weininger's Sex and Character is a book of much wider scope

than its title suggests. In a chapter entitled "Logic, Ethics, and the Self",

Weininger develops a philosophy of the subject that is indebted to both

Kant and Schopenhauer. He argues that there is a deep connection

between logic and ethics. Both deal with truth, both are transcendental,

and both demand a self. Hume, Lichtenberg, and Mach had denied the

existence of an intelligible self, Weininger recounts. They had treated the

self as a bundle of perceptions, as a grammatical fiction, or as a mere

practical unity. But logic and ethics justify the conclusion that there must

be a noumenal, transcendental self.

In order for us to understand the world at all, there must be a system of

coordinates which allows us to say that something is the same as

something else. We can speak of fixed objects only in so far as there is a

set of coordinates that allows us to locate, to identify and reidentify

objects in the space defined by them. The set of coordinates that

constitutes for us a coherent world cannot be the work of something in

the world. It is the product of a subject that is transcendental and defines

for us the extent and the limits of the empirical world.

It is obvious.., that in order to consider concepts normatively as unchangeable and in

order to maintain their unchangeability in the face of the constantly changing objects of

experience, there must be something unchangeable and that can only be the subject . . . . (p.

204)

In ethics, too, Weininger argues, we must postulate an intelligible self as

the bearer of the ethical. Kant, he holds, has seen this point correctly.

"The deepest, the intelligible essence of human beings is just that which

is not subject to causality and which chooses freely between good and

evil" (p. 206).

Given this rather abstract conception of the subject, there remains the

question what that subject is and how it is to be characterized by us. At

, this point Weininger takes recourse to formulations that are, at least

in part, influenced by Schopenhauer and which, in turn, influenced

Wittgenstein's formulations in the Notebooks and the Tractatus.

Weininger characterizes the intelligible self as that which

raises a human being above himself (as part of the world of sense), what ties him to an order

of things which only the understanding can think and which has at the same time the whole

world of sense.., subjected to it. (p. 195)

The intelligible self views the world as a whole (p. 217). There is a self or S U B J E C T I V I T Y IN T H E T R A C T A T U S 133

soul "which is alone in the world and which stands outside and opposed to

the world and views the world as a whole" (Ibid.). Artists, no less than

philosophers understand this. "There exists for them as for the great

philosophers a certain feeling of a limit" (p. 219).

Man is the world and therefore he is not as a mere part dependent on

other parts, not locked into the necessity of nature at a particular place,

but he is himself the totality of all laws, and therefore free just as the

world as a whole (p. 224). This freedom is most fully realized in the genius

who is the whole human being.

The self of the genius must therefore itself be universal apperception, the point must

already include infinite space: the important person has the whole world within him; the

genius is the living microcosm. (p. 219f)

Schopenhauer and Weininger seemed to Wittgenstein to show how an

objective world and the assumption of a subject whose world the world is

can be reconciled. But that reconciliation produces problems which

Wittgenstein did not resolve in the Tractatus. I will, in the following,

discuss four of them.

°

The first is that the Tractatus account of the subject has no place for the

individuality we normally ascribe to human subjectivity. We generally

believe that human subjects are in the world, that they are distinguished

by having different bodies, that there is a multiplicity of embodied

subjects which together form a human community. But when we speak of

subjectivity in the way in which Schopenhauer, Weininger, and Witt-

genstein do such individuality seems to be inexplicable. Schopenhauer

who takes the will to be the ultimate reality of the subject frequently calls

the will "undifferentiated" and stresses that individuation is a feature of

the phenomenal, not the noumenal, sphere. Weinger calls the self of the

genius, which is the most fully realized form of subjectivity, "universal

apperception". 6 And Wittgenstein, in a similar sense, writes in the

Notebooks in May 1915:

There really is only one world soul, which I for preference call my soul and as which alone I

conceive what I call the souls of others. (p. 49)

That this is no fleeting idea for Wittgenstein becomes clear from the fact

that eighteen months later similar thoughts recur: 134 H A N S S L U G A

Now is it t r u e . . , that my character is expressed only in the build o~ my body or brain and

not equally in the build of the whole rest of the world? This parallelism, then, really exists

between my spirit, i.e., spirit, and the world. Remember that the spirit of the snake, of the

lion is your spirit . . . . Is this the solution of the puzzle why men have always believed that

there was one spirit common to the whole world? And in that case it would, of course, also

be common to lifeless things too. (p. 85)

Having located the subject at the limit of the world, Wittgenstein has no

way of accounting for the multiplicity of subjects. His view thus naturally

issues in the transcendental solipsism characteristic of the Tractatus.

What solipsism means is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but must

show itself (5.62). Such a solipsism is compatible with a completely

objective account of the world. Solipsism strictly carried out coincides

with pure realism (5.64).

These considerations lead me to a second critical point. In Leibniz's

philosophy, the assumption of a multiplicity of selves is closely tied to the

idea that there is a multiplicity of subjective viewpoints or perspectives.

Wittgenstein was certainly not unaware of the perspectival character of

human cognition. In the Notebooks he writes:

I know that this world exists. That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field. (p. 72f)

But given his conception of the subject as outside the world and as

unindividuated, there is really no room in his thought to accommodate

that theme (cf. Tr., 5.6331).

It was only at a later date that he began to recognize the significance of

the phenomenon of different subjective perspectives. The first step

towards that recognition lay in the acceptance of the idea that there

could be phenomenological languages (describing subjective exper-

ience) as well as the physical language of the Tractatus. There could

then be different languages centered around the experiences of dif-

ferent individuals. (He found at that point that such languages do not

contain an essential reference to a self as a thing to which experimental

states belong. And he argued, in particular, that the perspectival

structure of the experienced visual space does not provide one with

reasons for postulating a subject as its owner. "The essential thing is that

the representation of visual space is the representation of an object and

contains no suggestion of a subject", he wrote in the Philosophical

Remarks, §71. Thus, the recognition of the subjectivity of different

viewpoints did not push him in the direction of postulating, like Leibniz, S U B J E C T I V I T Y IN T H E T R A C T A T U S 135

different perceiving subjects understood as mental substances.)

The third critical point to be made about the Tractatus conception of

the subject is that it stops Wittgenstein from giving a coherent account of

human action. The will, like all other aspects of human subjectivity, lacks

for him individuality and it can, therefore, be no more concerned with

one part of the world than with any other:

And in this sense I can also speak of a will that is common to the whole world. But this will is

in a higher sense my will. As my idea is the world, in the same way my will is the world-will.

(N.B., p. 85)

The idea that my will fastens onto the world in one place (these actions of

this body) but not in another place now appears impossible and

intolerable:

For the consideration of willing makes it look as if one part of the world were closer to me

than another (which would be intolerable). But, of course, it is undeniable that in a popular

sense there are things that I do, and other things not done by me. In this way then the will

would not confront the world as its equivalent, which must be impossible. (Ibid., p. 88)

The resolution of this dilemma is seen in the conclusion:

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless . . . . The

world is independent of my will. (Ibid., p. 75)

Good and evil willing can affect only the boundaries of the world, not any

specific part of it.

And this brings me immediately to my fourth and final critical point.

Because there are for Wittgenstein no individual subjects there can also

be no such thing as a community of subjects. There is no recognition in

the Tractatus of the social nature of human understanding and of human

language. Revealingly, he writes in the Notebooks:

What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world! (p. 82)

Language in the Tractatus is a medium for representing the world, not

for communicating in it. Language is my language, not our language, the

language of a human community. The world is my world, not a world in

which human beings struggle together, in which they strive together to

understand and subdue it. Subjectivity is not something shared, but only

a question of the I. In the Notebooks Wittgenstein writes:

The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious! (p. 80) 136 HANS SLUGA

.

Let us think for a moment of the man whose ideas we have been

discussing. He is for us an embodied human subject, located in a

particular place and time, influenced by the thought of others, in turn

influencing our thought. He is a subject among others, part of a human

community, sharing a common language, embedded in a causal stream,

able to affect that stream at this or that point, but not at others. This

human subject is and cannot be outside the world, but is essentially part

of it.

But this subject also wants to conceive of the world as entirely

objective, wants to extrude subjectivity from the world and from lan-

guage, retain subjectivity only as a limit of the world, separating as

sharply as possible the logical from the psychological, the objective from

the subjective. We can, perhaps, see more clearly than Wittgenstein

himself in 1918 that this picture of the world is a picture drawn by a

historically located thinker and not by a pure, metaphysical subject. The

idea of a purely objective world is itself no objective idea, but the product

of a particular historical moment in philosophy and, perhaps, the

expression of deep aesthetic preferences and psychological attitudes.

There is little gained for our thinking about human subjectivity, if we

separate that subjectivity from the world. Human subjectivity is in the

world, and not a limit of that world. And it is not the case that we have or

know how to gain a fully objective account of the world. The project of

such an objective description is as yet only a project - and, perhaps, an

incoherent one. We know how to speak more or less objectively about

this or that aspect of the world, but when it comes to speaking about

matters sufficiently close to our own lives or sufficiently remote in space

and time, sufficiently small or sufficiently large-scale, our attempts at

objectivity give way necessarily to subjective human convictions.

Human subjectivity is embedded in the world and our objective

understanding of the world is embedded in the larger body oflsubjective

conviction. The objective and the subjective interpenetrate and cannot

be assigned their own separate spheres. The task of understanding

human subjectivity must be~in with the recoznition of this fact.

That ooes not mean mat everything said on this matter in the Tractatus

must be considered a loss, that every sentence in that work is "an expres-

sion of a disease", as Wittgenstein himself came to think. When we locate

human subjectivity in the world there is always the danger that we S U B J E C T I V I T Y IN T H E T R A C T A T U S 137

end up thinking of human subjects as things in the world just like other

things, as objects among other objects. That way of thinking can have

devastating moral consequences. It is also likely to obscure the very

nature of human subjectivity. Wittgenstein's reflections in the Notebooks

and the Tractatus are carried by the real insight that "the I is not an

object" (N.B., p. 80). That insight is retained by him in the Blue Book and

the Philosophical Investigations. But in the Tractatus period he thought

that this idea was incompatible with the assumption that subjects are

located in the world. The resulting conception is full of difficulties, as we

have seen.

The important task is to show how human subjects can be in the world

and yet be no objects. This is not the place to pursue that task or to say

what the later Wittgenstein contributed to its execution. 7

N O T E S

1 Roughly we can say the following: Antipsychologists characteristically opposed (1) the

general philosophical claim that there exist only sense-data (subjective idealism). They also

opposed (2) the more specific view that logical (and mathematical) laws describe inner

mental phenomena (a view that is fully compatible with a belief in physical reality). They

equally opposed (3) the doctrine that such laws could be accounted for in terms of

physiological processes in the brain. They also opposed (4) evolutionary and (5) historical

explanations of such laws. They were, more generally speaking, opposed to (6) all

naturalistic accounts of human thinking. They were also typically (7) antiassociationists, (8)

believers in a priori truth, and (9) identified themselves with philosophers in the rationalist

tradition.

2 One of the characteristic moves of antipsychologistie thinkers like Frege was to insist on

there being a real difference between mental acts and their objective contents. The

distinction was first made clearly by Kant and then elaborated by Frege, Husserl, and the

early Wittgenstein. It continues to play a significant role in contemporary thought, as

Alastair Hannay has recently pointed out. Nonetheless, it is a distinction which, in spite of

its initial appeal, is fraught with difficulties (Cf. A. Hannay). The distinction was first

effectively criticized by Wilhelm Jerusalemin 1905 who argued against Husserl that the

drawing of the distinction does not, as antipsychologists seem to think, guarantee the

existence of the supposedly distinct components.

a In the "Monadology" Leibniz argues, like Wittgeustein, that the world is constituted out

of simples and composites. He also holds that every simple must be conceived on the model

of the serf. His argument for this thesis is (characteristically for much metaphysical

reasoning) by reductio ad absurdum. Mental predicates cannot belong to the composites,

for then they could be explicated in mechanical terms. Hence, they must belong to simples.

In a justly famous passage Leibniz writes: "It must be cor~essed, moreover, that perception

and that which depends on it are inexplicable by mechanical causes, that is, by figures and

motions. And supposing that there were a machine so constructed as to think, feel, and have 1 3 8 H A N S S L U G A

perception, we could conceive of it as enlarged and yet preserving the same proportions,

so that we might enter it as into a mill. And this granted we should only find on visiting it,

pieces which push one against another, but never anything by which to explain perception.

This must be sought for, therefore, in the simple substance" (Monadology, 17). Leibniz's

argument relies here on the assumption that the self must be one or the other, either simple

or composite. In so far as it establishes anything, it establishes only that (to put it in

Tractatus terms) "a composite would not be a soul any longer". Leibniz's positive conclu-

sion that mental predicates can belong only to simple substances, on the other hand, is rash,

since it overlooks the third possibility that the self (or soul) might not be an object at all.

4 In particular, Wittgenstein's views on aesthetics and ethics in the Notebooks and the

Tractatus clearly reveal Schopenhauer's influence. Nevertheless, there are significant

differences between Schopenhauer's views and Wittgenstein's. The most important is,

perhaps, that Schopenhauer thinks that his considerations show that science is ultimately

built on illusion, that the transcendental viewpoint reveals the nature of the thing-in-itself,

and that idealism is true. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, seems Committed to none of these

views. It remains a matter for investigation to determine to what extent Wittgenstein's early

views on the will are dependent on Schopenhauer's. The Notebooks' remarks on this topic

seem to me to reveal greater affinity to Schopenhauer than the few elusive propositions in

the Tractatus, and there is, of course, no reason to think that Wittgenstein's views remained

constant in the period from 1916 to 1918.

5 Weininger's curious book of essays and aphorisms deals with a number of topics

discussed in the third notebook and the final sections of the Tractatus, as, e.g., the direction

of time, the nature of the will, and eternal life as life in the present. The most striking link

between Weininger's work and the Notebooks can be found in Wittgenstein's remarks on

animal physiognomy. Wittgenstein writes: "Only remember that the spirit of the snake, of

the lion, is your spirit . . . . Now of course the question is why I have given a snake just this

spirit. And the answer to this can only lie in the psycho-physical parallelism: if I were to look

like the snake and to do what it does then I should be such-and-such" (N.B., p. 85).

Weininger discusses the same idea under the heading of "animal psychology" and connects

it with the thought that man is the microcosm ( Uber die letzten Dinge, pp. 113 and 123). Not

surprisingly, Wittgenstein also mentions the idea of man as the microcosm in the same

context (N.B., p. 84).

6 Weininger in ~oer die letzten Dinge: "Transcendentalism is identical with the thought

that there is only one soul and that individuation is an illusion . . . . The question whether

there is one soul or several must not be asked, because the nature of the noumena is above

quantitative expression" (p. 72).

7 Earlier versions of this paper were read at Harvard and New York University. I am

grateful to Stewart Candlish, Rolf Horstmann, and David Stern for critical comments on an

earlier draft.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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lisher, Oxford.

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