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Realism Behind the Reduction in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*[1]

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of the interpretation of Wittgenstein's early work one finds the claim that the ontological position postulated in the opening sections of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* is justified only by the logical-linguistic framework of the text[2]. That this is true can be seen by considering the text's argumentative structure and the genesis and the logic of the ideas contained therein. The following paragraphs confirm this conclusion:

> "Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite" (T 2.021).
> "If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true" (T 2.0211).
> "In that case we could not sketch out any picture of the world (true or false)" (T 2.0212).

The initial sections of the *Tractatus*, which contain the explicit treatment of the notions of the world, fact, state of affairs and object, can only be properly understood in light of the three paragraphs quoted above. These paragraphs in fact form the skeletal frame of a *reductio ad absurdum* that Wittgenstein uses to justify not only his postulation of objects as the ultimate constituents of reality — and of course his overall ontology — but also the properties inherent in them, primarily simplicity. If in the text's expositive composition the purely ontological passages precede their justification, in its argumentative framework the text traces the content of these passages back to their linguistic foundation.

[1] We are indebted to Joseph C. Milburn for the help in the translation of this article. We also thank anonymous referees for critical notes and constructive suggestions that allowed us to improve some points. Of course, we are responsible for any lacunae or mistakes.

[2] Wittgenstein's early works are cited using the following conventions: T = *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921), in *Werkausgabe*, Bd. 1, Hrsg. J. Schulte, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1984; translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1963. TB = *Tagebücher 1914-1916*, in *Werkausgabe*, Bd. 1, Hrsg. J. Schulte, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1984; edited by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Blackwell, Oxford 1961.

The problem we propose to investigate is thus placed in the foreground. From now on in the *Tractatus*, to talk about the world is to talk about language, and to talk about language is to talk about the world. Thus, it has recently been claimed (reviving an old debate) that in Wittgenstein's early work "there is no conception of objects, and of situations, hence of the world, independently of language". "These notions are given only via operating in language". Assuming this dependence, it has also been claimed — in spite of realist readings of the text — that what Wittgenstein is doing in the *Tractatus* is simply engaging in "a logical investigation of the order that is essential to any system of representation" to represent reality, *and* that we "are not directed to draw any metaphysical conclusions [about a transcendent world] from this order"[3]. Therefore, along with Norman Malcolm, one could ask whether for the early Wittgenstein there is anything independent of language[4].

Here we argue that it is true that the author of the *Tractatus* is engaged in a logical investigation, conducted a priori and internal to language, on the conditions that are (or have to be) satisfied by any significant linguistic representation. Yet, given one of such representation, what the investigation reveals is the necessity to presuppose a world made in a certain way — i.e., such as the one presented in the opening of the text — and, at the same time, one that transcends the language that pretends to describe it. It will be clear that the world always emerges in a language, since it is in a significant language that its constituents can be identified. However, since there are questions that cannot be decided in the language, the world ultimately reveals its transcendence.

Our discourse will be so constructed. In § 2 we consider the argument contained in T 2.021-2.0212 and some objections that appear to weaken the realism of the *Tractatus*. Here we will show that the ontology presented in the opening of the text, and supported by the argument, has, starting from the assumption of the necessary existence of simple objects, a linguistic foundation established a priori. It is the ontology required by any language that pretends to have a well-defined meaning. Such a foundation aligns with Wittgenstein's reticence to deal with empirical issues, such as that of

[3] See respectively, W. GOLDFARB, *Das Überwinden. Anti-Metaphysical Readings of the* Tractatus, in R. READ / M.A. LAVERY (eds.), *Beyond the* Tractatus *Wars. The New Wittgenstein Debate*, Routledge, New York 2011, pp. 6-21, in part. pp. 10-11 and M. MCGINN, *Elucidating the* Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language*, Clarendon, New York 2006, pp. 134-161, in part. pp. 143-144. Another article is needed to reconstruct the debate that over past decades has seen prominent scholars struggle with the possibility of a realistic reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This debate has recently been revived by the "New Wittgenstein" (cf. here footnote 19). For a concise sketch of the debate and a brief review of today's readings of the text, cf. MCGINN, *Elucidating the* Tractatus cit., pp. 1-27 and C. TEJEDOR, *The Early Wittgenstein on Metaphysics, Natural Science, Language and Value*, Routledge, London-New York 2015, pp. 1-14.

[4] Cf. N. MALCOLM, *Nothing is Hidden: Wittgenstein's Criticisms of His Early Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 20.

finding examples of simple objects. Together, these facts suggest an interpretative schema for the *Tractatus* that we will develop and apply in § 3. This schema helps to clarify some controversial issues. In addition to specifying in transcendental terms the kind of logical investigation conducted in the *Tractatus* and explaining Wittgenstein's distinction between pure and applied logical issues, the schema supports a functionalist hypothesis on the nature of simple objects and, through the notion of truth, illuminates the sense of the realism of Wittgenstein's early work. With this interpretative schema in the background, in § 4 we will briefly revisit the two issues that clarify the realism of the *Tractatus*, i.e., that of the existence of simple objects and that of the truth of propositions. Here we will also explain why Wittgenstein does not explore the latter issue in any detail.

2. The a priori argument

It is generally taken for granted that the theses on the world that precede those on language in the *Tractatus* expositive composition follow from them in the text's argumentative framework. The point that illuminates this difference while marking a decisive break in the ontological exposition presented by Wittgenstein is T 2.0201. This paragraph, which serves as a prelude to the sections T 2.021-2.0212, introduces the philosopher's account of language.

The argument introduced in the three sections (quoted at the beginning of this article) can be developed in two directions, one of which clarifies and deepens the other[5]. We will explain the argument supporting the atomistic framework by referring to the substance of the world in terms of necessary existence, whilst being aware that to speak of the necessary existence of ultimate entities is something that is not to be assumed uncritically. In any case, we will return to this assumption to clarify the sense in which we understand the necessary existence of simple objects.

1) If objects were not the substance of the world, if they did not necessarily exist (whatever the world configurations that are de facto realized), the sense of any given proposition *A* would depend on the truth of another *B*, which in turn would affirm the existence of entities whose names are constituents of the given proposition. For, if a proposition to have sense depends on the truth of another proposition, this also holds true for the proposition whose truth-value confers sense to the given proposition. This creates a potentially infinite foundational chain such that the sense of proposition *A* would depend on the truth of proposition *B*, the sense of proposition *B* would depend on the truth of proposition *C*, the sense of *C* on the truth of *D*, and so on, without ever arriving at an

[5] Cf. D.G. STERN, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, Oxford University Press, New York 1995, pp. 53-60 and P. FRASCOLLA, *Understanding Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, Routledge, New York 2007, pp. 46-60.

endpoint of the generative chain. Due to the impossibility of reaching an endpoint of the foundational chain, if some objects (in a generic sense) did not necessarily exist, the sense of any proposition would remain indeterminate since its point of ultimate dependence would remain indeterminable. However, something has to be added.

2) For a proposition to have a determinate sense, it is also necessary for it to be completely analyzed, such that its analysis ends with objects that cannot be further decomposed. By way of explanation, if we had a proposition of the form *aRb*, where the meta-linguistic variables *a* and *b* stand for two composite objects, two cases could be possible: either in the analytical procedure we should be able to determine their ultimate constitutive elements, simple and no longer decomposable, or we should not be able to do so. Now, the sense of the proposition would be determinate only if such ultimate and simple elements were determinable: only then would we be able to say that we know what we are talking about. That is to say, we know the objects with which we are asserting a relation. If, on the other hand, we are not able to determine the ultimate constitutive elements, then in order to be able to affirm the determinateness of the sense of a proposition we need to know the truth of another proposition that states the existence of the complexes in question. This generates the same potentially infinite chain we described above that ultimately leads to the impossibility of a proposition having a determinate sense.

There can be no doubt that the argument presented in the three sections is a kind of a priori argument (*reductio ad absurdum*). Its fundamental assumption is the possibility of a significant language that says something well defined: "the requirement that sense be determinate", according to T 3.23, which is clearly a linguistic requirement. Thanks to the argument, here the ontological and the linguistic issues intertwine in such a way that one is no longer independent of the other: hence, talking about the world is nothing other than talking about language, and talking about language is *tout court* talking about the world. Further, this is decided by taking language — i.e., the possibility of a significant language — as the starting point.

If this is the case, what the *Tractatus* establishes (a priori) are the conditions to which any significant language has to be subordinated. Consequently, the cited paragraphs are the paradigm of the linguistic foundation of the ontology that is presented in its opening and that is precisely required by any significant language[6].

[6] Different analyses may be advanced for the argument; however, very few would now question this conclusion. See, for example, one that also considers other relevant reconstructions: M. MORRIS, *Wittgenstein and the* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Routledge, London-New York 2008, pp. 21-58, 355-363; or the reading of R.M. WHITE, *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. A Reader's Guide*, Continuum, London-NewYork 2006, pp. 36-50, in part. p. 38. Cf. also C. TEJEDOR, *Sense and Simplicity: Wittgenstein's Arguments for Simple Objects*, in *Ratio*, 16 (2003), pp. 272-289. Strictly speaking, this conclusion would not be questioned, and even those who can be brought

In the first of these paragraphs, Wittgenstein presents two crucial issues that are linked to one another: on one hand, *what* objects are and, on the other hand, *how* they are, making explicit that simplicity is their fundamental property. It is clear from the sections following T 2.0201 that the question about what objects are cannot be separated from the question of how they are: objects are how they are (simple, subsistent, unalterable, stable, etc.) because they are what they are, namely the substance of the world, that is, necessarily existent, and vice versa. It may be queried, why is it that the world has to have a substance? Wittgenstein would reply: "If the world had no substance, then we could not sketch out any picture of the world" (T 2.0212), that is, there could be no significant language.

From this perspective, the argument appears to be the foundational point for the entire a priori investigation on the language-world link that Wittgenstein puts in motion. In summary, the argument guarantees the existence of simple objects as ontological correlates of the simple signs that appear in propositions — strictly speaking, in completely analyzed propositions. All this starts from the requirement of the determinateness of sense, from the possibility of a significant language, and from the realization that so is (at least part of) our ordinary language (cf. T 5.5563).

Yet, the idea that the world has a substance so defined has been paradigmatically challenged by the well-known conclusion of Brian McGuinness:

> "[W]hat they [our propositions] are about is not *in* the world any more than it is *in* thought or *in* language. Objects are the form of all these realms, and our acquaintance with objects […] is not an experience or knowledge of something over against which we stand. […]. Objects are *eti epekeina tēs ousias* (beyond being), and it is therefore misleading to regard Wittgenstein as a realist in respect of them. His position is one, as indeed he tells us, from which realism, idealism and solipsism can all be seen as one"[7].

From the argument we have developed one can clearly understand what is being claimed here: our knowledge of objects is neither an experience nor a knowledge of something we find before us. So far, it is in fact a knowledge that we acquire a priori.

Along the lines of his non-realist reading, McGuinness goes on to later emphasize that it is the realm of references, i.e., the overall domain of simple objects, which is missing from Wittgenstein's

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within the "New Wittgenstein" would not do so. See, for example, D. MCMANUS, *The Enchantment of Words. Wittgenstein's* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Oxford University Press, New York 2006, in part. pp. 119-128. Rather, they would question that such a foundation was proposed by Wittgenstein in order to embrace this ontology as the "true one". Discussing the "New Wittgenstein" reading will distract us; however, it should be clear later (in part. in § 4) just how far we are from it.

[7] B.F. MCGUINNESS, *The So-called Realism of Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, in I. BLOCK (ed.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, pp. 60-73, in part. pp. 72-73.

early work. Of course, his reading would be in contradiction with the explanation of the substance of the world given above. In fact it is clear that if the realm of references is missing, and it is acceptable to speak of simple objects as something situated beyond being, then it makes no sense to attribute them with necessary existence. And we might conclude either that objects do not necessarily exist, and as a consequence they are not the substance of the world, or that the terms "substance of the world" and "necessary existence" are to be understood in a sense that needs to be specified.

Moreover, the interpretation of the "substance of the world" as "the necessary existence of simple objects" is controversial for two reasons. First, we need to justify the relationship between the necessary existence of objects and the contingency of states of affairs in which objects occur as their ultimate constituents. Talking about necessary existence as the stable, the subsistent, against the contingency of states of affairs as the alterable, the unstable (cf. T 2.0271), would mean talking about existence in every possible world, in every conceivable configuration of facts, because the world is, above all, "the totality of facts, not of [isolated] things" (T 1.1). At the same time, even if we cannot think of an object in isolation, but only in combination with other objects, that is to say in a space of possible states of affairs (according to T 2.013), nothing prohibits us from thinking of this space as empty. Nothing prohibits us from thinking of these possible states of affairs as not subsistent in the world. Thus, to be able to talk about the necessary existence of a single object in terms of existence in every possible world, the following condition must be satisfied: "An object *o* necessarily exists if and only if for every possible world *m* at least one state of affairs *S* of which *o* is a constituent is a fact in *m*". But such a condition is in open contradiction with section T 2.013, which ultimately affirms the absolute contingency of each state of affairs: "Each thing is, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs. This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space"[8].

Second, the concept of object is a pseudo-concept expressed in an appropriate ideography with the variable name *x*. Among pseudo-concepts we can enumerate terms such as "complex", "fact", "function" and "number":

> "Thus, the variable name 'x' is the proper sign for the pseudo-concept *object*.
> Wherever the word 'object' ('thing', etc.) is correctly used, it is expressed in conceptual notation by a variable name.
> For example, in the proposition, 'There are 2 objects which…', it is expressed by '($\exists$ x, y) …'.
> Wherever it is used in a different way, that is as a proper concept-word, nonsensical pseudo-proposition are the result.

[8] For further details see FRASCOLLA, *Understanding Wittgenstein's* Tractatus cit., pp. 73-78.

So one cannot say, for example, 'There are objects', as one might say, 'There are books'. And it is just as impossible to say, 'There are 100 objects', or, 'There are $\aleph_0$ objects'.

And it is nonsensical to speak of the *total number of objects*.

The same applies to the words 'complex', 'fact', 'function', 'number', etc.

They all signify formal concepts, and are represented in conceptual notation by variables, not by functions or classes (as Frege and Russell believed.)" (T 4.1272).

These terms are all formal concepts, and by defining them as pseudo-concepts Wittgenstein intends to distinguish them from proper concepts: the former represented in a formal language by variables, the latter by functions. With reference to a formal concept, such as the concept of object, if something falls under such a concept this could not be expressed by a proposition, "[i]nstead it is shown in the very sign for this object" (T 4.126). Thus, if one violates the principle of symbolic representation, for example by saying that "*a* is an object" or "There are objects", pseudo-propositions will be generated. Because the concept of object cannot be expressed by a functional sign, a statement such as "*a* is an object" will not have sense. It will be equally nonsensical to formulate assertions of the kind, "There are objects", because what one wants to say is shown through the presence of names in language. These restrictions on what can be said deny the possibility of saying what should be considered as an object and whether or not objects truly exist[9]. Incidentally, note that "There are objects" (of a certain kind) is the conclusion to which the a priori argument leads — something for which reasons need to be given.

To summarize, the interpretation of the substance of the world in terms of necessary existence faces both the impossibility of attributing necessary existence to objects — at least as existence in every possible world — and the impossibility of considering propositions such as "There are objects" as having sense. Given this, one should then conclude that the notion of necessary existence is unsuited to simple objects, and we thus face two alternatives: either it will be proper to talk about objects as something that take place beyond being, and because of this they are not the substance of the world, or the sense (not affected by these objections) in which to understand the term "necessary existence" has to be specified.

We will now show the plausibility of the second alternative. In fact, the first alternative does not take into account the importance of the a priori argument in Wittgenstein's overall discourse and consequently misunderstands its sense.

Let us return briefly to the argument. As we have explained, the argument that maintains the substantiality of the world guarantees the existence of simple objects that are the reference for equally simple terms. This claim is made in order to avoid a *regressus in indefinitum* that would

[9] Cf. FRASCOLLA, *Understanding Wittgenstein's* Tractatus cit., pp. 155-171.

ultimately leave the sense of a proposition indeterminate. Thus, in order for a proposition to have a determinate sense there must be simple objects that are the reference of simple signs present in elementary propositions and accessible through an analytical procedure (cf. T 2.0201, 4.221, 4.2211). As we have recalled, Wittgenstein's discourse is an a priori one: it is based on the representative nature of language, i.e., on the possibility of a language that can sketch out a picture of the world.

Before continuing the discussion it is crucial to underline that even if the names are identifiable with the ultimate terms of analysis, the analytical procedure presented in the *Tractatus* is still radically abstract. This abstract conception of analysis is inevitably reflected in the ontological neutrality present in the text. The text does not in fact present any effective analytical procedure, any proposition completely analyzed, or any examples of simple objects. This is a historical fact[10]. As a consequence, Wittgenstein tells us that there are simple objects (but not what counts as one of them) not as a result of an effective analytical procedure, but in virtue of an a priori argument that guarantees the access to these objects (and to their identity) through effective analytical procedures.

Given this high level of abstraction and the ontological neutrality of the text, the fact that we need to assume the necessary existence of simple objects in light of the a priori argument cannot be in contradiction with the impossibility of attributing existence to them in a sensical proposition. Incidentally, note that according to the rigid model of signification expressed in the *Tractatus*, if it were possible to make a sensical proposition affirming the existence of simple objects, then this existence would no longer be necessary. Therefore, we claim that the a priori argument is not stating in a meaningful manner the simple objects' necessary existence, rather it is showing — paradoxically by saying with logical necessity — *the necessity* for every significant language to presuppose the existence of certain simple objects: that is to say, the necessity of presupposing an ontology of a certain kind (such as the one presented in the opening of the *Tractatus*). For, given a

[10] For this reason we will not enter into the debate on the nature of *Tractatus* objects; rather we will assume Wittgenstein's ontological neutrality to be his definite position. The attempt to water down this neutrality is one of the most disputed issues in Wittgenstein's studies. For a concise reconstruction of the debate see D. MARCONI, *L'eredità di Wittgenstein*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1987, pp. 19-44 and STERN, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* cit., pp. 60-65. Cf. also C. TEJEDOR, *The Metaphysical Status of Tractarian Objects*, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 24 (2001), pp. 285-303. Of course, these accounts do not include further developments, such as P. FRASCOLLA, *On the Nature of* Tractatus *Objects*, in *Dialectica*, 58 (2004), pp. 369-382. A brief sketch of the discussion of whether, besides particulars (individuals), among objects one should also consider universals (properties and relations), is to be found in C. JOHNSTON, *Tractarian Objects and Logical Categories*, in *Synthese*, 167 (2009), pp. 145-161, in part. pp. 146-149.

certain significant language there must be certain simple objects about which that language ultimately has to speak. It is just this necessity that it is shown in the a priori argument.

This is the well-known paradox in which the *Tractatus* lives, since it often tries to say what can only be shown. According to the theory of sense it supports, that there are simple objects cannot be said, because it is shown through the presence of names in language; however, to restrict the bounds of significance in this way one needs to presuppose the existence of simple objects. Thus, within the limits of the theory of sense, the restriction of the bounds of significance attributes insignificance to the foundation of this very restriction. It is to overcome this paradox — actually in vain according to the closing of the text — that Wittgenstein tries to see as an activity the reaching of this restriction[11].

However a question arises here. Why, in sketching the a priori argument does the author of the *Tractatus* not refuse to say that simple objects have to exist in order to have a significant language, whereas he clearly refused to say what has to count as one of them, thus maintaining de facto ontological neutrality? In fact in both cases we go beyond the bounds of significance. It is not difficult to find an answer to the question. Although for Wittgenstein the empirical question of finding examples of simple objects falls within the realm of applied logic, to state that in order to have a significant language there must be simple objects is clearly part of a logical investigation that can be conducted a priori and that plainly falls within the realm of pure logic. It is to this realm that the author of the *Tractatus* wished to restrict his research.

As we shall now see, the distinction between pure logical issues and applied logical ones suggests an interpretative schema according to which three linguistic levels that are link to one another need to be distinguished in the *Tractatus*. The schema helps to clarify some controversial issues: 1) it specifies in transcendental terms the kind of logical investigation conducted in the text; 2) explaining the distinction between pure and applied logical issues, it also justifies the abstraction of Wittgenstein's discourse and the ontological neutrality present in the *Tractatus*; 3) it supports an hypothesis on the nature of simple objects and illuminates the sense of the realism of the work.

3. An interpretative schema for the *Tractatus*

The generality of Wittgenstein's discourse is clear. Nevertheless, being the aim of the *Tractatus* to clarify the conditions that are (or have to be) satisfied by any significant language, it is not a hasty conclusion to maintain that one of the languages to which the text refers is (at least part of) our

[11] Here we are referring to the idea that "[p]hilosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (cf. T 4.112).

ordinary language. Indeed, if we start from the fact that the only propositions having sense are those presenting possible situations, and those whose sense is identifiable in a functional manner that begins with them, then the ordinary language is one of those languages for which the *Tractatus* intends to elucidate the conditions of significance as it is in perfect logical order (cf. T 5.5563). Yet, it is problematic to identify the objects and the propositions that come from our common experience of the world with the objects and propositions about which the *Tractatus* speaks. The simplest descriptive propositions, such as those we use every day, represent possible situations; nevertheless, we cannot identify them with elementary propositions, just as we cannot identify objects corresponding to the names appearing in them with simple objects. Something similar should be said if we pick up a language that is different from our ordinary one. As it has been said, for Wittgenstein this sort of (identification) issue belongs not to the sphere of pure logic but to its application:

> "The *application* of logic decides what elementary propositions there are.
> What belongs to its application, logic cannot anticipate.
> It is clear that logic must not clash with its application.
> But logic has to be in contact with its application.
> Therefore logic and its application must not overlap" (T 5.557).

Logic must not be confused with its application, but at the same it has to be in contact with it. However, it is the place of contact that Wittgenstein leaves at a purely intuitive level. The fact that he did not identify any example of elementary propositions or simple objects manifests the gap between his a priori investigation of the conditions for any significant representation and his work on actual representative modalities[12].

[12] In the Cambridge Lectures from 1932-1933 Wittgenstein affirmed that he and Bertrand Russell "were at fault for giving no examples of atomic propositions or of individuals. We both in different ways pushed the question of examples aside. We should not have said 'We can't give them because analysis has not gone far enough, but we'll get there in time'. Atomic propositions are not the result of an analysis which has yet to be made": *Wittgenstein's Lectures. Cambridge, 1932-1935*, edited by A. Ambrose, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1979, p. 11. There is also Malcolm's famous anecdote from which can be inferred the radical difference Wittgenstein thought to exist between purely logical issues and empirical applied ones. "I asked Wittgenstein whether, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, he had ever decided upon anything as an *example* of a 'simple object'. His reply was that at that time his thought had been that he was a *logician*; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely *empirical* matter!": N. MALCOLM, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir*, Clarendon, Oxford 2001, p. 70.

As already anticipated, distinguishing logic from its applications suggests the possibility to talk of three different but interconnected linguistic levels present in the *Tractatus* (L_T, L_R, L_N). Let us first state the difference among these levels and then show how it clarifies some controversial issues. We will call L_T the level in which the *Tractatus* is written: in this level the conditions of any significant representation are logically investigated. In the L_R-level the conditions of every significant language are established and each of these languages can be seen in its logical order. L_N is the level of all possible languages for which the text investigates, establishes and elucidates the conditions of representation. Here we refer to a multiplicity of languages, L_1, L_2, L_3, …, L_n, that can be used to present possible situations in the world: for example, our ordinary language could be L_1. To further clarify, the investigation of the conditions of significant representations is conducted in L_T, and languages belonging to the L_N-level in L_R can be considered in their logical structure. Therefore, L_R is the level in which every significant language appears logically ordered: in which every specific and particular relation can be seen to be simply a relation between objects. To provide an example, let there be in our ordinary language (L_1) a relation between two objects (e.g., "The book is on the desk"); in L_R it will be expressed as a relation of two objects according to the form *aRb*. Every relation expressed through a particular form of representation in any given L_N-language can be shown in its logical form in L_R. If the investigations of the conditions of every significant representation are made in L_T, those conditions are established in L_R and here every significant L_N-language can be seen as logically structured.

Having described our interpretative schema in general terms, we will now consider some controversial issues that it helps to clarify. Indeed, not only does the schema illuminate the difference between the purely logical a priori investigations (that fall within L_T) and the empirical ones of applied logic (that fall within L_N), but it specifies in transcendental terms the purely logical investigation conducted a priori in the *Tractatus* and, at the same time, supports an hypothesis on the nature of simple objects and clarifies how the realism of Wittgenstein's masterpiece has to be understood. Note that the difference between purely and applied logical investigations and the specification of that conducted a priori in the *Tractatus* as a transcendental one, plainly justify the generality of Wittgenstein's discourse; consequently these also explain his refusal to overcome an abstract conception of analysis and to put aside the ontological neutrality of the text. Let us consider the controversial issues.

The only hypothesis on the nature of simple objects that is capable of safeguarding the generality of Wittgenstein's discourse in the *Tractatus*, so that the text can really be seen to be talking of a multiplicity of representative linguistic modalities, is the functionalist (or relativistic) one, formulated in most clearly by Diego Marconi:

> "[O]bjects are the unalterable, the subsistent, the form, the substance of the world (of a language), and *any* description of the world must refer to unalterable objects, etc. Every possible world shares objects with the real one (2.022-2.023) in the sense that, given a language and then the choice of a form of representation, counterfactual conditions of the language will use proper names to refer to objects to which a true description of the real world conducted in that language refers"[13].

This means that objects must not be considered simple in an absolute way, but semantically in relation to any description of reality, to any chosen language. It is the chosen descriptive modality that determines what to assume as simple. This view makes legitimate the multiplicity of significant languages (L_1, L_2, L_3, …, L_n) for which in L_R are established the conditions of possibility. Therefore, nothing is in itself a simple object; that something exists as an object is shown by its appearance in a language.

Paradoxically, shifting the focus of the problem to the relativistic interpretation of simple objects allows us to face the issue of the realm of references and that of the realism of Wittgenstein's masterpiece. The problem is no longer posed in terms of the existence or non-existence of *the realm of the references* (i.e., the overall domain of simple objects independent from any given language), but in terms of the possibility of reaching, starting from the multiplicity of representative modalities, *a realm of reference* subsisting in relation to these modalities and at the same time transcendent to them. To this end the notion of picture plays a crucial role.

In fact, the picture theory of language proposed by Wittgenstein guarantees a plurality of representations by virtue of the plurality of the pictorial forms with which the same logical fact can be represented (cf. T 2.18). "Every picture is", indeed, "*at the same time* a logical one" (T 2.182). A proposition of the logical form *aRb* would represent a situation in which two objects *a* and *b* are in a certain relation *R*. By virtue of the criteria of significance established in L_R, the logical form *aRb* shows that the representation of a certain relation between two objects has to be provided by a picture logically structured as a relation of two objects. At this level one can abstract from the specificity of objects and the relations between them. If we take L_R as the linguistic level in which the conditions of every possible representation are given, it is not wrong to speak about a transcendental level. In this view L_T would be the level at which the transcendental analysis is made. This transcendental level guarantees the plurality of representative modalities[14]. Furthermore,

[13] MARCONI, *L'eredità di Wittgenstein* cit., p. 32 (translation ours).

[14] Here, we do not mean that at the time of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was a transcendental idealist, although it is well-known that for him idealism, realism and solipsism ultimately coincided (cf. TB 15.10.16). We only mean that an investigation over the conditions of possibility of any linguistic representation can be considered a transcendental

together with the functionalist interpretation it opens the possibility of a potential infinite number of modalities that could describe the world. These descriptive modalities (L_1, L_2, L_3, …, L_n) belong to the L_N-level and can be very different from each other: L_1 could be our ordinary language, L_2 the language of a natural science.

It is in this context that the issue of the link between language and world finds its proper place. In light of the explanation already given for the a priori argument, the treatment of this link cannot begin with two initially distinct things (language and world) which one must later try to reconcile: to talk about representation is to talk about the represented. Thus, if the necessary conditions of every representation are made explicit in L_R, so too will the conditions for the world to be represented. L_R is the level at which the link between language and world emerges in an indissoluble way. The world emerges in language; so, the link between language and world is internal to language. Wittgenstein expresses this concept when, speaking about a generic picture, he states: "A picture cannot, however, place itself outside its representational form" (T 2.174). In a coherent functionalist interpretation the radical nature of this internal link emerges: every L_N-language describes a world and different worlds emerge starting from different modalities of description. They would only share a formal representative structure (given in L_R) that would show the logical structure of the situations.

Nevertheless, what could look like a radical reduction of the world to its picture carries within itself a point of escape that is at once unavoidable and almost imperceptible. To begin, we consider the pictorial status of propositions.

As Wittgenstein states in several passages, a proposition is a picture or model of reality. To this he adds: "if I understand a proposition, I know the situation that it presents. And I understand the proposition without having had its sense explained to me" (T 4.021). We understand the sense of a proposition — the state of affairs it describes or represents — because the proposition shows it: "A proposition *shows* how things stand *if* it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand" (T 4.022). More clearly, the relationship between sense and truth has to be put in these terms: "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true", while keeping in mind that "[o]ne can

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investigation. There are attempts to read Wittgenstein's masterpiece in the light of transcendental idealism. See for example, A.W. MOORE, *Wittgenstein and Transcendental Idealism*, in G. KAHANE / E. KANTERIAN / O. KUUSELA (eds.), *Wittgenstein and His Interprets: Essays in Memory of Gordon Baker*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007, and his debate with Peter Sullivan in P. SULLIVAN / M. POTTER (eds.), *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus. *History and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 239-270. Incidentally, although we think that it is the notion of truth (see in part. § 4) that is decisive for the realism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, we quite agree with Roger White's account about the relationship between idealism, realism and solipsism, as developed in *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus cit., pp. 26-28, 98-100.

understand it […] without knowing whether it is true" (T 4.024). The relationship between the sense of a proposition and its truth can be seen as a transposition of the treatment Wittgenstein had already given to the notion of picture in the sections introducing logical pictures: on one hand, what a picture represents, independent of its truth-value, is its sense (i.e., a possible situation); on the other hand, the truth-value of a picture consists in the agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality (cf. T 2.201-2.225). Such agreement or disagreement could be established only by comparing the picture with something that cannot be reduced to it: "It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false" (T 2.224). Wittgenstein concludes: "There are no pictures that are true *a priori*" (T 2.225).

In these reflections Wittgenstein seems to recover our intuitive common conception of the world and the extreme realism that underlies this conception. He is brought to this reconsideration in light of the independence of representative content in respect of the existence of the state of affairs that it represents: i.e., in light of the logical independence of the sense of a proposition in respect to its truth and of the truth in respect to its sense. We understand the sense of a proposition knowing what is the case if it is true — independently of whether or not we know its actual truth-value. On the other hand, the truth of a proposition cannot be known a priori starting from its sense, but rather through a procedure (according to T 2.223, making a comparison with reality) of an extra-logical nature. Yet, this procedure is left by the *Tractatus* at an intuitive level; the reasons for which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

The notion of truth, which would unchain the world from its reduction to language, is not further investigated[15]. This is not due to carelessness, nor even because of an extrinsic limit of significant representation. Rather, truth cannot be expressed in a significant way within any representative system because of its internal and constitutive limits.

> "The general concept of two complexes of which the one can be the logical picture of the other, and so in one sense *is* so.
>
> The agreement of two complexes is obviously *internal* and for that reason cannot be expressed but can only be shewn.
>
> 'p' is true, says nothing else but p.
>
> ''p' is true' is – by the above – only a pseudo-proposition like all those connexions of signs which apparently say something that can only be shewn" (TB 6.10.14).

[15] Cf. H.-J. GLOCK, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996: entries "Truth" (pp. 365-368) and "Verificationism" (pp. 382-385). Hans-Johann Glock has also argued that in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is expressed an obtainment theory of truth — a synthesis of correspondence, semantic and deflationary theories — according to which whether a sentence is true depends solely on what is the case. For further details see H.-J.GLOCK, *Truth in the* Tractatus, in *Synthese*, 148 (2006), pp. 345-368. His account supports the realistic reading we are developing.

One must not be deceived by the terms appearing in this passage: here Wittgenstein is not talking about the truth of a proposition but rather its sense. However, by referring to the assertoric nature of propositions he is arguing why predicating the truth of them generates pseudo-propositions. What a proposition *p* shows is its sense, the possible situation it represents, and it asserts that this is the case. It is only in virtue of this that a proposition can be false. An apparent proposition of the sort "*p* is true" states merely what *p* states (the actual existence in the world of the possible situation represented by *p*) and does not have any representational function.

The statement of truth is thus internal to the proposition in that by showing its sense a proposition already states its truth (cf. T 4.022). Yet, the truth of the proposition is not decided internally because there is the possibility that it is false: there are no a priori true propositions[16]. In L_R the relation between truth and sense is put abstractly in terms of their mutual logical independence. Given the transcendental nature of the L_R-level, it should be clear that it is only possible to identify true or false propositions in L_N.

As a consequence of the logical independence between sense and truth we face the logical impossibility of a reduction of world to language. In every representative modality a world emerges, but this world cannot be reduced to the language that describe it. If the link between language and world is already given by the relation between understanding what a proposition asserts and the kind of objects about which the proposition speaks[17], it is also true that the world emerges in that link in its logical independence. It emerges in the link but as transcendent to the link. The notion of truth, introduced but not further investigated, is the *sign* of this independence[18]; it reveals the heart of language: an internal manifestation of something irreducible.

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[16] True a priori propositions are tautologies that do not show their sense since they do not have one. However, according to T 6.124 they show the logical structure of the world: cf. H. MOUNCE, *The Logical System of the* Tractatus, in H.-J. GLOCK (ed.), *Wittgenstein. A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 2001, pp. 47-58.

[17] Cf. H. ISHIGURO, *The So-called Picture Theory: Language and the World in* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, in GLOCK (ed.), *Wittgenstein* cit., pp. 26-46, in part. pp. 43-44.

[18] Cf. H. MOUNCE, *The Logical System of the* Tractatus cit., pp. 47-51. According to Howard Mounce, the world's independence in respect to language is already provided internally by the representative link, and the possibility of an external link and an external independence is a consequence of this — a conclusion with which we would ultimately agree. However, in making the content of representation depend on a given representative modality, the functionalist hypothesis would weaken this conclusion. To overcome this we have radicalized the functionalist hypothesis, drawing from it its most extreme consequences, in such a way that the external independence is shown to arise in spite of any relativistic objections. It should be pointed out that if the external independence is a consequence of the internal, it is, at the same time, the sign of this internal independence.

Just as we could not assert the existence of objects without making a pseudo-proposition, now we cannot assert the truth of a proposition without trespassing the limits of significant representation. However, in the case of objects we encounter the a priori argument whose logical necessity leads to the assertion of the necessary existence of simple objects about which a given significant language has to talk. Instead, being truth something that needs to be ascertained through an extra-logical procedure, there is no way to determine a priori the truth-value of a proposition. A priori, we can only know that in the representation the representative content refers to something that is ultimately independent, because the understanding of the represented fact does not determine the actual existence of that same fact. Thus, as the a priori argument tells us how the world has to be made in order to be represented (in a significant language), the notion of truth tell us that that world also has to be considered as transcendent.

4. Revisiting the issues crucial for realism

Let us revisit the two issues that clarify the realism of Wittgenstein's masterpiece: i.e., that of the existence of simple objects and that of the truth of propositions. In both cases we encounter things that cannot be said but can only be shown in what we say. We recall here that what can be said are possible situations in the world. However, while the first issue finds a proper treatment in the *Tractatus*, the second one, crucial to free the world from its possible reduction, does not. Something that has to be explained.

We have stated that a proposition such as "*a* is an object" is a pseudo-proposition. To this we add propositions of the kind "Red is a color". From these two examples one can see that what cannot be predicated with sense is the categorical type to which a thing belongs. In an abstract way, that *a* is an object is shown through the presence of names in language just as, in a more concrete way, that red is a color is shown in the propositions in which the term "Red" occurs. The ontological category of an object is given with the possibilities that the object has to combine with other objects. This is provided by the logical form of the object. Propositions of the sort "*a* is an object" or "Red is a color" attribute internal (necessary) properties to objects and go beyond the restrictions that the picture theory of representation gives to sense, according to which it is possible only to represent contingent facts. Thus these propositions are pseudo-propositions — such as "There are objects" or "There are $\aleph_0$ objects".

The L_R-level, displaying the conditions of significance of any representative language, places the solution to the problem of the existence of simple objects in L_N. It is in a given language, a language that talks about certain objects rather than others, that it becomes evident which objects

exists and which do not. In the investigation of the conditions of significance, and in the consequent banishment of some propositions from the realm of significance, one notes that the resolution of the problem of the existence of simple objects cannot be found amongst that which can be said, but is shown in what can be said. Here the transcendental nature of the L_R-level is clear: given a certain language L_R prohibits the predication in that language of the existence of its objects. Trying to overcome the impossibility of this predication from the inside, Wittgenstein employs the notion of showing. At the same time, it should be clear that the a priori argument, affirming the necessary existence of simple objects once given a certain significant language, is nothing but the attempt to say what is shown in that language. It also takes place in the linguistic level L_T, the level at which the whole *Tractatus* is written. Thus, the a priori argument constitutes a sort of transcendental foundation of significant representation: it says that which shows itself in language with the logical necessity of a valid argument, overstepping the boundaries of what can be said. Wittgenstein must say what can only be shown for two reason: to identify the correct functioning of language through defining the limits of what can be said and to free traditional philosophy from the morass of non-sense that bogs it down.

Therefore, if L_R establishes the legitimacy of the descriptive use of language in which possible situations are described, an analysis of this use attempts to elucidate the possibilities and the limits of representation. Providing these elucidations is the task that the *Tractatus* assigns to itself, a task that it completes in the L_T-level transcending the limits of descriptive language. The task of elucidation is to reveal the difference between saying and showing, established at the L_R-level. For this reason it falls under the realm of the nonsensical. From this standpoint, the task that the *Tractatus* fulfills is radically positive, even if definitely aporetic. By saying and only by saying the text shows something that can only be shown, in respect to the nature of language, the logical structure of the world, and the link between world and language[19].

[19] A reformulation of the issue of saying and showing in non-standard terms has been explicitly advanced in many places since the appearance of the "New Wittgenstein": cf. A. CRARY / R. READ (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*, Routledge, London-New York 2000. This reformulation has also generated a "resolute" reading of the method of the *Tractatus* and of the idea of philosophy contained therein. In proposing an austere conception of nonsense at work in Wittgenstein's early work — in particular with Cora Diamond and James Conant — the reading denies the possibility of showing something about language, the world, and their link to nonsensical propositions such as those in which the text is written. A version of the reading can be found in MCMANUS, *The Enchantment of Words* cit. It should be clear how far off the point is our reading from this one. In regard to the "New Wittgenstein", we agree with the many objections raised by Peter Hacker who, as the dissenting voice in the volume, argued that it is problematic both from a philological and from an internal point of view of the *Tractatus*, and also from an external point of view in respect to Wittgenstein's materials — previous, contemporary and subsequent to the text: cf. P.M.S. HACKER, *Was He Trying to*

The issue regarding the link between language and world is also developed through the problem of the logical independence of facts from representative modalities. Such independence emerges clearly through the notion of truth, which presented a problem analogous to that of the existence of simple objects: just as it was impossible to attribute existence to objects through a sensical proposition, likewise it was not possible to attribute truth to propositions. We have pointed out that the proposition "*p* is true" has no representative role; and if it were to have one, it would state nothing more than *p*. The same could be said for "*p* is false": it would state nothing more than ~*p*. What ~*p* asserts is merely the non-existence of the state of affairs stated by *p*. Both represent the same possible situation but *p* states it as the case and ~*p* as not the case. Thus, they have the same sense (cf. T 4.061). That a proposition has sense independent of its truth manifests its internal relation to the world. Only later does its external relation emerge. The logical independence between sense and truth shows the world's irreducibility only in an external way, starting from the idea of a comparison with reality that in the *Tractatus* is left to an entirely intuitive understanding. Even if it is true that the world emerges in a given representative modality, the fact that the verification of any proposition is accomplished through empirical means represents the final negative answer to its possible reduction.

Truth cannot be predicated; it is shown through a comparison with reality. Although the problem of the existence of objects can be given an a priori solution at the L_T-level, the nature of the L_T-level prevents it from providing any solution to questions regarding the truth-value of a proposition. This is because it is the level at which the conditions of possibility of any significant language are investigated in a purely a priori manner. But truth is not a problem that is decidable a priori. Consequently, the method of comparison is not adequately treated in the *Tractatus*. It is not at all a matter of logic. As Wittgenstein writes: "In order for a proposition to be true it must first and foremost be *capable* of truth, and that is all that concerns logic" (TB 29.10.14). The actual truth of a proposition concerns epistemology, a discipline Wittgenstein defines dismissively as philosophy of psychology (cf. T 4.112).

The problem of truth emerges at the L_R-level in terms of the logical independence of sense and truth, but at the L_T-level it becomes an acutely epistemological problem. Although the problem of the existence of objects can be solved given the internal necessary conditions of representation, the problem of truth can only be decided given an independent and external realm of reference. The notion of truth, impredicable as the notion of existence, does not allow a reduction of world to

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Whistle It?, in CRARY / READ (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* cit., pp. 353-388. However, the debate is open, as is shown by READ / LAVERY (ed.), *Beyond the* Tractatus *Wars* cit.

language. A world emerges in a language but ultimately reveals its transcendence. A *realm of reference* can certainly be admitted in this sense.

Abstract: The paper deals with the controversial issue of realism in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Most of the problems are grounded in the logical-linguistic foundation of important ontological notions given within the text (such as object, state of affairs, fact, etc.). This has led some scholars to think that there is no conception of the world in the *Tractatus* that is independent of language and that in his work Wittgenstein is simply engaged in a logical investigation of what it is essential for any language to represent reality. Therefore, no conclusions about a transcendent world can be drawn from it. Here we argue that it is true that the author of the *Tractatus* is engaged in a logical investigation, conducted a priori and internal to language, on the conditions that are (or have to be) satisfied by any significant language. However, what such an investigation reveals, given one of these languages, is the necessity to presuppose a world made in a certain way and transcendent to the language that pretends to describe it. Two issues are considered to clarify the sense of the realism of the *Tractatus* — that of the existence of simple objects, and that of the truth of propositions — and a new interpretative schema for the text is advanced.

Key words: *Tractatus* Realism; Argument for Substance; Simple Objects; Pure and Applied Logical Issues; *Tractatus* Method; Truth; World Logical Independence; Saying/Showing Distinction.

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