

# Wittgenstein on facts and objects: the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*

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## 1 A world of facts (1-1.21)

When Wittgenstein says

1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

he is not denying that there are things, in addition to facts. Rather, he’s saying that the totality of facts is something over and above the collection of things; even if we are given the totality of things, this does not yet determine the totality of facts.

Why would one think this? Here one plausible thought is that Wittgenstein had in mind something similar to Russell, who held similar views about facts and things. Russell said:

“I want you to realize that when I speak of a fact I do not mean a particular existing thing, such as Socrates or the rain or the sun. *Socrates himself does not render any statement true or false.* What I call a fact is the sort of thing that is expressed by a whole sentence, not by a single name like ‘Socrates.’ . . . We express a fact, for example, when we say that a certain thing has a certain property, or that it has a certain relation to another thing; but the thing which has the property or the relation is not what I call a ‘fact.’” (‘Logical atomism’, 41, my emphasis)

Russell explicitly held the following view, which at this time Wittgenstein also would likely have endorsed:

For any true sentence *S*, there is some entity, or entities, which makes *S* true.

If the italicized portion of the above quote is correct, then it seems to follow from this principle that facts, in addition to things, are real.

Wittgenstein adds two further claims. First, a claim about the nature of the world:

1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

The world, on this view, consists of facts — and consists of nothing but facts. He also adds a claim about the independence of facts from each other:

1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

We'll understand the reason for this later. As with much in the *Tractatus*, it is initially hard to see the motivations behind these cryptic remarks. Often (though not always) later places in the text will make clearer why Wittgenstein says what he does. For now, we'll continue to lay out his system.

## 2 Objects, states of affairs, and facts (2.01-2.0141)

Wittgenstein's next move is to tell us a bit about what facts are. He says:

2 What is the case — a fact — is the existence of states of affairs.

But this does not yet say much about what these states of affairs, or atomic facts, are. Wittgenstein then tells us

2.01 A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things).

We will examine this later, but this seems to differ from Russell's conception of atomic facts, as expressed in the quote above. Russell thought that every fact contained at least one universal; but here we have Wittgenstein saying that states of affairs are combinations of objects, without saying anything about properties or relations. He later expresses another thought which indicates that states of affairs contain only objects, and not properties:

2.03 In a state of affairs objects fit into one another like the links of a chain.

The idea seems to be that, at least in the case of states of affairs, there is no need for properties to join objects into states of affairs; rather, states of affairs are composed entirely of objects. In this sense, Wittgenstein's metaphysical system is more ambitious than Russell's; at the most fundamental level, we have only objects, and no properties or relations.

The natural next question is: what are these objects which make up states of affairs? (It will soon become clear that they are not the ordinary objects with which we are familiar.)

The first thing Wittgenstein tells us about them has to do with their relationship to states of affairs:

2.0122 Things are independent in so far as they can occur in all *possible* situations, but this form of independence is a form of connexion with states of affairs, a form of dependence. . . .

The idea seems to be that objects always have the possibility of occurring in a number of different states of affairs; but it is written into the nature of objects that they be a part of *some* state of affairs or other.

He makes a comparison, though it is only a comparison, to the case of color and material objects (§2.0131): “a speck in the visual field, though it need not be red, must have some colour. . . .”

### 3 The simplicity of objects (2.02-2.02331)

Wittgenstein then moves from talking about the relationship between objects and states of affairs to the natures of the objects themselves. He begins with the claim

2.02 Objects are simple.

What does it mean to say that an object is simple? One thing Wittgenstein seems to mean is that it cannot be analyzed as a complex of other objects. This seems to indicate that if objects are simple, they cannot have any parts; for, if they did, they would be analyzable as a complex of those parts.

It is not immediately obvious that there are objects which are simple in this sense. But Wittgenstein presents an argument for their existence here:

2.021 Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

2.0211 If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

2.0212 In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false).

Wittgenstein’s idea here seems to be that without there existing a class of simple objects, it would be impossible to picture the world — that is, to represent it. But we can represent the world; so there must be such a class of objects. The question is: why does the possibility of representation require the existence of objects which are simple in Wittgenstein’s sense?

In trying to understand this argument, we need to understand two things: (i) why would the absence of simple objects make whether a proposition has sense depend on whether

another proposition was true? and (ii) why would this situation mean that we could not sketch any picture of the world?

To answer these questions, we need to consider some doctrines which are only clearly stated later in the *Tractatus*. The first of these has to do with simple names:

3.203 A name means an object. The object is its meaning. . . .

Suppose that every object were complex. Then every name would stand for a complex object (there being no simple ones). Now, we know from §3.203 that a name is meaningful only if the object it purports to refer to exists. This means that a proposition containing the name will be meaningful only if the object the name purports to refer to exists. But the existence of a complex object depends upon its parts being arranged in a certain way; and its parts will be arranged in a that way only if some proposition, which says that they are arranged that way, is true. So we get the thesis stated in §2.0211: if all objects were complex, then propositions would be meaningful only if other propositions were true.

There are two routes from this to the conclusion stated in §2.0212.

*The regress argument.* A sentence can be true only if it is meaningful. But now consider the general principle that for every proposition  $S$ ,  $S$  is meaningful only if there is some other proposition  $S^*$  which is true. This seems to lead to an infinite regress. For if  $S^*$  is true, then it must be meaningful. But by our general principle, if  $S^*$  is meaningful, there must be some other proposition  $S^{**}$  which is true. And so on, and so on.

Objection to the argument: it is not obvious that this infinite regress is a vicious one; it is also not obvious that there is anything more problematic here than in the supposition that all objects are complex itself. (Recall Russell's distinction between two kinds of regresses in his reply to Bradley's regress argument in §99 of the *Principles of Mathematics*.)

*The argument from understanding.* A slightly different form of argument can also be given for the conclusion here, by employing a thought Wittgenstein expresses later about the relative independence of the meaning and truth of a sentence:

4.024 To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true. (One can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true.)

Using this principle, one might argue as follows: one can always understand a proposition without knowing its truth value. Indeed, one can understand *every* proposition without knowing *any* of their truth values. But one can understand a proposition only if it is meaningful; so to understand a proposition one must know that it is meaningful. But if the meaningfulness of a proposition depended on the truth of some other proposition, then one could only understand a proposition if one knew that some other proposition was true. But this contradicts our initial supposition that one can understand every proposition without knowing which of them is true. (See also §3.24.)

Objection to the argument: it has several questionable steps; but one is the seeming inference from (i) I know  $p$  and (ii)  $p$  depends on  $q$  to (iii) I know  $q$ . This seems not in general to be true. Is the argument stronger if we change (ii) to: *I know that  $p$  depends on  $q$* ? Why or why not?

#### 4 The immutability of objects (2.024-2.034)

Objects are not only simple, they are also, in a certain sense, unchangeable. After saying that objects are the substance of the world, Wittgenstein says

2.024 Substance is what subsists independently of what is the case.

and later

2.0271 Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable.

The idea here is that objects do not themselves change, but rather are that which explains change. Change is a matter of states of affairs coming into and going out of existence, and states of affairs are produced by arrangements of objects:

2.0272 The configuration of objects produces states of affairs.

There are two senses in which the simple objects underlie change. First, they underlie change in the actual world over time: this is, I think, the sort of change alluded to in §2.0271. But they are also what is held in common between the actual world and possible, or imaginary worlds:

2.022 It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have *something* — a form — in common with it.

2.023 Objects are just what constitute this unalterable form.

Just as there must be something which underlies change over time, so there must be something which underlies ‘modal’ change: the differences between the actual and various ‘imaginary’ worlds.

So far we have noted two aspects of Wittgenstein’s view of objects: they must be simple, and they must be what subsists through all change. One question we should ask is: how are these two aspects of objects related (if at all)?

One line of reasoning which suggests itself (though is not explicitly in the text) is the following: suppose that simple objects were susceptible to change: that they themselves could come into and go out of existence, rather than simply causing states of affairs to come into and go out of existence. Then it would be a contingent fact whether a given object existed. But every contingent fact is a matter of simple objects combining in a certain way. So an object’s coming into and going out of existence would be a matter of other objects combining or ceasing to be combined in certain ways. But then the object would be a complex made out of the objects whose combining brought it into existence.

(Objection to the suggested argument: it is not (to say the least) obvious that any object created by the recombination of other objects would have those objects as parts.)

## 5 The world, facts, and reality (2.04-2.063)

So far, we've introduced a number of Wittgenstein's metaphysical theses concerning objects, states of affairs, facts, and the relation between the three. Now Wittgenstein returns to the theme with which he began the *Tractatus*: the relationship between these three and the world, and reality, as a whole.

The most important claim Wittgenstein makes here concerns the relationship between states of affairs and the world:

2.04 The totality of existing states of affairs is the world.

The claim here is that if we had a list of all the states of affairs (i.e., all the atomic facts) we would thereby have given a complete account of the world: the world is nothing over and above the states of affairs that exist. Here we have a point of contrast with Russell's logical atomism, which held that, in addition to atomic facts, both negative and general facts made up the world. Wittgenstein states his disagreement with Russell over negative facts in his next claim:

2.05 The totality of existing states of affairs also determined which states of affairs do not exist.

All there are are states of affairs: these determine the whole world, including the 'facts' about which states of affairs do not exist.

But, if you recall, Russell had a kind of convincing argument for the existence of negative facts: suppose that we have a list of atomic facts  $f_1 \dots f_n$ . Now consider some true sentence 'not- $S$ .' Is the truth of 'not- $S$ ' determined by  $f_1 \dots f_n$ ? It seems not. For  $f_1 \dots f_n$  are atomic facts, and there is nothing to prevent a series of atomic facts from being consistent both with the truth of  $S$ , the falsity of  $S$ , or even  $S$  lacking a truth-value. Hence, Russell concluded, true negations of atomic propositions must correspond to negative facts. How can Wittgenstein avoid this argument?

I think that his ideas about objects provide him a way out. Recall that, for Wittgenstein, objects are not only what underlie change over time, but also what underlie necessity and possibility: all possible changes to the world are just a matter of the recombination of simple objects. As he puts it,

2.0124 If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are also given.

If there are a fixed number of objects, then a list of all the states of affairs (i.e., atomic facts) will *not* be consistent with both the truth and falsity of a sentence  $S$ .

A worry about this view: the intuition that all objects exist only contingently.

Wittgenstein often discusses the *world* or *reality*. How are these two notions related? (This question is made especially difficult by the fact that Wittgenstein seems to say contradictory things in §§2.04, 2.06, 2.063.) I think that the basic idea can be stated as follows: the world consists of all the existing states of affairs, whereas reality consists of the world plus all possible but non-actual states of affairs. Wittgenstein's claim is then

that the world determines reality: once we know everything about what states of affairs exist, we know everything about what states of affairs could exist as well. (Indeed, as Fogelin points out, this follows from the claims that the world consists of states of affairs, that all objects must be in some state of affairs, and the passage from §2.0124 cited above.)

## 6 What's the motivation for all of this?

At this stage, a reasonable question would be: given that these are Wittgenstein's views, why did he hold them? With the exception of the simplicity of objects, it is not obvious that he provides arguments for these claims. So are we supposed to just accept them, without argument?

I think that there are two replies to this worry. The first is that, at this point, you are not supposed to be convinced; rather, one is supposed to be convinced by the end of the book, after one has seen how this metaphysical system fits into a theory of representation, value, and the nature of philosophy.

But a second, more immediate reply is also possible. A central aim of Wittgenstein's metaphysics in the *Tractatus* is to avoid unexplained primitives. On this interpretation, he thinks that he has a kind of argument that simple objects must exist, and then his aim is to give a complete metaphysics in terms of those objects alone, without positing extra fundamental elements of reality, such as properties and relations, or extra kinds of facts, such as general and negative facts. This is a central point of opposition between Wittgenstein and Russell.

One strength of this sort of view is that it avoids the sorts of problems with properties and relations which we raised by Bradley. But a more important strength is that it gives Wittgenstein's theory extraordinary explanatory power. For now it seems as though — given the existence of objects which are simple, necessarily existent, and purely independent of each other, which together combine to form states of affairs — we are in a position to make the following claims:

- *States of affairs (atomic facts)* are combinations of objects.
- A *fact* is a collection of states of affairs.
- A *negative fact* is the non-existence of certain states of affairs.
- A *general fact* is the existence of certain states of affairs.
- A *possible world* is a combination of states of affairs.
- *Change* is recombination of states of affairs over time.