

Wittgenstein on the subject and solipsism

PHIL 43904
Jeff Speaks

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We've seen in Wittgenstein's discussion of logical form an introduction to the idea that some things can be shown, but not said. This theme re-emerges in Wittgenstein's discussion of the nature of the self in §§5.6-5.641, which forms a key bridge to the discussions of value and the meaning of life at the end of the book.

1 The denial of the subject

Wittgenstein makes some very strong claims about the self. For example:

5.631 There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. If I wrote a book called *The World As I Found It*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather showing that in an important sense there is no subject . . .

Why does Wittgenstein think that in an important sense there is no such thing as the self? This seems to be denying the one thing we can be most sure of.

To understand this, we have to return to Wittgenstein's views about objects and states of affairs. Suppose that the self were an object in the world. Then there would be an object that pictures facts using propositional signs. But what is the connection between the subject and the propositional sign on the one hand, and the fact which is represented, on the other? It seems that this relationship is necessary, not contingent. Once we have the projective relation supplied by the subject, it is a necessary truth that a given propositional sign represents the fact that it does. But this would mean that, if the subject were an object in the world, there would be a necessary truth about the relationship between objects. But, as we know, Wittgenstein denies that there are any necessary facts of this sort.

On this interpretation (defended by Fogelin), the denial of the subject's being part of the world is of a piece with the denial of the claim that there are facts about logical form, and about representation.

2 The truth in solipsism

This can help us make some sense of Wittgenstein's remarks about solipsism. On the face of it, it is odd for someone who denies the existence of the self to say things like

5.63 I am my world.

However, a view about how this sort of thing can be combined with the foregoing is suggested by the following remark:

5.64 Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

In the light of this, §5.63 should not be read as suggesting that in the end there is no world other than me and my mental states, but rather that there is no me other than the world. The sense in which what solipsism means is correct is that these ultimately come to the same thing: the existence of a world of states of affairs.