

The Problem of Simple Objects

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1. Introduction

The *Tractatus's* interpretation is beset by an old problem: What was Wittgenstein's view of simple objects? This problem is a fundamental one because the existence of the simple objects is the condition of the success of the central project of the book: the analysis of the ordinary language to demonstrate that philosophical propositions are nonsensical. Simple objects are actually the ultimate constituents of the proposition. We find them when analysis ends. Then, as a result of Enlightenment, what is nonsense and what is not nonsense can be seen immediately. The aim of Wittgenstein's methodology, the entire meaning of the enterprise is expressed in the introductory remark: "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."

Our reflection will proceed in seven stages. First, we will present the problem of the simple objects. Second, some of the solutions proposed, and third, two critical remarks concerning different interpretations. Fourth, we will examine the implications of the problem. This problem is related to the problem of the interpretation of the baffling section 6.54. Fifth, we will show how 6.54 is linked to the general problem of the relation between the conception and the practice of philosophy in Wittgenstein's thought. Sixth, three different approaches of the two last problems will be described. Finally, the comparison of the three approaches to 6.54, will show what can be called the real problem of the *Tractatus*, which relates the problem of the objects and the problem of the interpretation of the section 6.54. This constitutes a new basis for the comprehension of the relation between the conception and the practice of philosophy: *Can we do philosophy when we think philosophy is nonsense and, if yes, how?*

2. Presentation of the Problem of Simple Object

What is the problem of object? We said above that this problem can be formulated in the following way: What exactly did Wittgenstein think about the simple objects in the *Tractatus*? This general problem can be broken down into two questions. First, an ontological one: "Are the objects universal and/or particulars?" and, second, an epistemological one: "How can we know them?"

The method of philosophy is the analysis of ordinary language. It consists in illuminating the apparent structure of a proposition in order to clarify the expression of thought and to reveal the real structure of the reality that is also the real structure of thought. The analysis ends when the proposition becomes a concatenation of proper names: the completely analysed proposition. A proper name denotes a simple object (immediately without any description or intermediate). The analysis is the means for drawing the limit of the expression of thoughts so as to separate what, in ordinary language, is meaningful and what is nonsense. So using the term "nonsense", recognizing non-sense requires the existence and our knowledge of such objects. Moreover, Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as an activity demands that the analysis works. *Alternatively, the book is like a clock that does not work.*

3. Some Solutions to the Problem

A number of solutions have been suggested for the problem of objects. Without going into detail, we can give an idea of the different points of view. The important point is that there is absolutely no consensus about Wittgenstein's view of simple objects in the scientific community. The difficulty with this problem is that there is no textual evidence to support one of the possible solutions. We can briefly describe some of the existing solutions. We can classify the authors according to the two following fundamental questions regarding objects: 1) The *epistemological question*: How can we know the objects? 2) The *ontological question*: What is their ontological status?

- Those who think that we can answer the two questions.

Jaako and Meril Hintikka (1989) argued that the *Tractarian* objects are Russellian objects in disguise¹ except for the logical one. So objects can be known from experience and ontologically they are particulars and universals.

- Those who answer the ontological question and deny we can answer the epistemological one.

Peter Hacker (1972) affirmed that objects are universals and we cannot say that they are objects of acquaintance.

Elizabeth Anscombe and Irving Copi think that the objects are particulars and that we cannot say that they are objects of acquaintance.

- Those who think we can answer neither the ontological nor the epistemological question.

David Pears (1988), Anthony Kenny (1973) both think that we cannot answer these questions because Wittgenstein does not know a definitive answer. They consider this to be a weakness.

Sebastian Gandon (2003) asserts that Wittgenstein does not know but that is not a shortcoming. He believes that the necessity to answer these questions is an illusion?²

4. Two Critical Remarks

Firstly, we want to point out the weakness of Wittgenstein's statement argument about the problem of objects. The difficulty arises from the fact that the *Tractatus* does not give any textual evidence. That is partly the reason why different interpretations have flourished. Therefore, some external evidence plays a decisive role in the different interpretations, in some of Wittgenstein's remarks directed to L.Von Ficker, N.Malcolm, or D.Lee etc. The different solutions are not based on a solid foundation. Moreover, in

¹ Russell's ideas change a lot during the two first decades of the twentieth century. The expression "Russellian objects" refers to his posthumous book written in 1913 *Theory of knowledge*.

² The supporters of the New Wittgenstein did not give any direct interpretation of the problem. However, we can consider, even if he probably disagrees with this, that Sebastian Gandon's book defends Diamond-Conant's point of view.

our view, this plurality of remarks can be seen as reflecting Wittgenstein's difficulties in solving this problem.

Secondly, we would like to mention the fact that we lack proofs of the impossibility of the analysis³. Although we acknowledge that the problem of simple objects is still undecided, most of the commentators admit that the analysis is impossible. However, it seems that no proof is given to support this argument. Finally, the strongest reason to believe in the impossibility of the analysis is the history of Wittgenstein's thought. Indeed, he himself considered the concept of analysis, as developed in his early book, to be inconsistent and could not give us any analysis practice.

The implications of the problem of objects can be addressed on three related levels. As will be shown, the problem of object can be seen as a fundamental problem for the understanding of Wittgenstein's entire work.

5. The Problem of Object and 6.54

At the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein, in his famous and enigmatic remark, said that the propositions of the book "serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands [Wittgenstein] eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright." The use of the term "nonsense" in the passage must be understood in connection with Wittgenstein's notion of a simple object that is fundamental in the philosophical method of analysis. Indeed, if we accept the fact that the function of the analysis is to draw a limit of the expression of thought, then the reason why the book's propositions are nonsense rests on the concept of object. Then the idea of eliminating nonsensical propositions makes us wonder: What does the ladder metaphor mean?

Ramsey saw the end of the book as presenting a baffling position. He compared it as the following situation: A asks B to say "breakfast", B answers "I cannot", A replies "What cannot you say?" and B says "breakfast". In his later thought, Wittgenstein seems to agree with this. We usually say that Wittgenstein is cutting the branch on which he sits. He tries to avoid cutting the branch again. The baffling situation stems from his attempt to theorize, to generalize, and to construct a general theory of proposition. Therefore, in order to escape this dilemma, he thought that we couldn't construct any theory at all, even a general theory of proposition. He tried to give some examples without any generalization.

6. 6.54 and the Problem of the Relation Between Conception and Methodology in Wittgenstein's Philosophy

As Anthony Kenny (1973) remarks, Wittgenstein always thought that philosophical propositions are nonsense. This is the heart of his conception of philosophy. Numerous philosophers, like Frank Ramsey, Bertrand Russell or Alfred Ayer have been harsh in their criticism of this position, rejecting it as incoherent or absurd. Others entirely accept it as a revolutionary conception. The conception and practice of philosophy seem to be

incompatible. Where is the truth? To answer this question we must ask ourselves the following questions: Can we do philosophy when we think that philosophical propositions are nonsense and how? Can we see Wittgenstein's conception and practice of philosophy as adequate?

7. The commentators on 6.54 and the problem of the relation between the conception and practice of philosophy

There are at least three different competing answers (that have been debated in the past few years) to the problem of the relation between conception and practice of philosophy in Wittgenstein's works⁴. We can very cursorily sum up them as follows. Firstly, the general approach of the problem of the relation between conception and practice in Wittgenstein's philosophy; and secondly, the solution each one presents with respect to 6.54.

-The *classical* interpretation:

Some of the authors who can be included in these categories are Peter Hacker, Anthony Kenny, David Pears, Saul Kripke, Michael Dummett, and Crispin Wright. 1) They say that in *Tractatus* there is no suitability between conception and practice of philosophy because the method is vapid. The analysis does not work at all. The reason is the quest of essence, the search for purity. However, once Wittgenstein recognizes it as a disease, a source of mental confusion, he rectifies his error and in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the suitability is given. 2) The Tractarian propositions are substantial nonsense (Hacker 2001). Such nonsense is represented by metaphysical utterances of meaningful expressions combined in an illegitimate way because of the incompatibility of the component parts. Substantial nonsense denotes something ineffable, something we can neither say how and what it is. According to Peter Hacker, the *Tractatus's* propositions affirm the existence of ineffable metaphysical truths we cannot assert without cutting the branch on which we sit.

-The *new* interpretation:

The principal supporters of this interpretation are Cora Diamond, James Conant, John Mc Dowell, Hilary Putnam, Alice Crary and Rupert Read. 1) They maintain that both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* present a proper relation between conception and practice of philosophy. According to the supporters of the new interpretation, Wittgenstein's philosophy is a therapeutic one from the beginning to the end. 2) The therapeutic interpretation of the *Tractatus* says that the propositions of the book are literal nonsense as "Agga is frabble" is nonsensical. For them, the propositions that compose the book do not say ineffably that there are metaphysical truths, which cannot be asserted without cutting the branch. The *Tractatus* says nothing at all.

-The metaphysical point of view:

It is not systematic. It is composed of all those who reject Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical conception of philosophy. The principal interest of this third position refers to the problem of the understanding of 6.54. It was

⁴ The classification used here is the one described in the introduction of *The new Wittgenstein* published in 2003. According to us, it is partly misleading. The classical interpretation must be divided into two branches: the Realistic (Hacker-Kenny-Pears) and the anti-realistic interpretations (Dummett-Kripke-Wright). In the cited introduction, the implicit argument is that the realistic interpretation is reducible to the anti-realistic one. Anthony Kenny, even though he advocates this type of interpretation, defended a continuity against Hacker Peter.

³ We gave one in our contribution to a colloquium in San Sebastian, November, 2004.

defended by Goddard Leonard and Brenda Judge (1982). For them, it is usually assumed that the project of analysis of ordinary language to identify philosophical propositions is nonsensical and bound to fail?. Therefore, considering that the boundary line between sensical and nonsensical propositions must be traced by analysis, there is no reason to think that the thesis according to which philosophical propositions are nonsensical is true. However, they consider 6.54 to be wrong. We are not forced to believe Wittgenstein when he wrote this.

8. The Real problem of the *Tractatus*: Presentation and Implications

As we have seen above, it is usually assumed⁵ that logical analysis of ordinary language in the *Tractatus* is impossible. An important reason for this state of affairs is the enormous difficulty of solving the problem of simple objects. Nevertheless, we can note that the history of Wittgenstein's thought invites us to adhere to this thesis. Relatively to 6.54 section, the problem, for the *classical* and the *new* interpretations, is "In what sense are the *Tractatus* propositions nonsensical?" However, according to Goddard Leonard and Brenda Judge, we must remember that if we do not solve the problem of simple objects then there is no boundary line between sensical and nonsensical propositions because the method of philosophy is the analysis. According to Wittgenstein, this is the only approach to philosophical questions. Therefore, if analysis does not work, the *Tractatus's* conception of philosophy does not work either, and there is no means for distinguishing between what is sensical and what is nonsensical. Nevertheless, if Wittgenstein has no such means, how can he use the term "nonsense" to qualify his own propositions? This leads us to the following paradoxical acknowledgment: the analysis is impossible and at the same time, there is a use of the term "nonsense". The problem we will address is: Can we find a nonsense criterion to describe the apparent paradoxical acknowledgment?

This new problem constitutes a new basis for understanding the relation between the conception and the practice of philosophy: Can we do philosophy when we think philosophy is nonsense and, if so, how? It is not possible here to anticipate long developments, but as we have seen above, the comprehension of 6.54 is at the heart of the reflection on the possibility of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and its relation to the practice.

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⁵ Except in Jaako and Meril Hintikka's interpretation.