Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

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At the opening of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is talking about objects and facts. He appears to be giving some sort of information about them, for example that an atomic fact is a combination of objects; that it is essential to a thing that it can be a constituent of an atomic fact; that the object is simple; that objects form the substance of the world, and so on. It looks as if Wittgenstein is discussing a theme like those discussed by Leibniz or Spinoza, as Russell realises what he himself is doing in *Logical Atomism*. So let us call this Wittgenstein's 'ontological story'.

He then moves on (at 2.1) to some considerations about what is involved in something being a picture, sketch, or plan of something else, and in particular what it is for something to be a *true* picture of something else. I am going to postpone discussing this sketch. For brevity let us call it the 'picturing story'.

At about 3.1 he starts to talk about sentences, statements and words; about their senses, often denotations; about propositions, their truth and falsehood, and so on. Let us for brevity call this sketch the ‘propositional story’.

Now my problem is this. (1) Did Wittgenstein mean the ontological story to be read as a complex premiss from which the propositional story follows as a complex conclusion? Call this the ‘Euclidean’ interpretation. (2) Or did he think of the ontological story as a complex truth, the grounds for which are subsequently provided by the propositional story? Call this the ‘reversed Euclidean’ interpretation. (3) Or did he think that the ontological story was the same story as the propositional story but was told in a more dramatic, more hazardous manner, in that it was a crude, perhaps allegorical statement of something to be told more strictly later on. We might call this the ‘Aesop’ interpretation.
I am going to argue for the third interpretation, namely that Wittgenstein was at least partially clear that the ontological story stands to the propositional story as something said in the ‘material mode’ stands to the same thing said in the ‘formal mode’, to use Carnap’s terminology. But it may well be that Wittgenstein was not completely clear about what he was doing and that he half-thought that the ontological story, contained the grounds of the propositional story, half-thought that the propositional story provided the grounds for the ontological story and also half-thought that the ontological story stood to the propositional story as an Aesop’s fable stands to the corresponding ethical doctrine. What we want to decide, if we can, is which interpretation Wittgenstein would have stood by if he had been pressed.

I think it is clarifying to begin by considering Russell’s line of approach in his *Logical Atomism*. Here Russell, in saying ‘not experienced as such but known only inferentially is the limit of analysis,’ is clearly, I think, taking the reversed Euclidean line. We analyse or inspect the logic of the propositions of science and ordinary discourse. We find that compound propositions have simple propositions for their components; general propositions have more general or singular propositions for their bases; elementary or atomic propositions have terms or simples for their constituents. Therefore there *must* exist simples which can be only named and not asserted or defined. There *must* be atomic facts in which these simples function as subjects or predicates, etc. Only, alas, we never come across these termini of our analyses. We must infer that they are there, from the fact that ordinary expressions must be dissectable up to the point where we would reach undissectable bones, if only we could be thorough. We have no logically proper names for the subjects of our ultimate propositions, and we are acquainted with no such subjects. Yet all our ordinary and scientific talk can be true or false only if it is unpackable into talk which is explicitly about such subjects.

The obvious objection to this is that it follows that we never knowingly talk sense; we never understand anything that anybody says or writes, and we have no way of deciding whether any given statement is significant, much less whether it is true or false. We started by finding out that everyday statements can be analysed, since they are compound and general. Knowing what they meant, we could set to work to reveal their logical anatomies. And then at the end we find out that we could not have known what they meant since we could not know what their ingredients are. We could not therefore know what sorts of compositions of ingredients they are. You can’t talk sense by constructing general and compound propositions out of ingredients which are mysteries.
Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus

(1) In contrast with Russell, Wittgenstein never says (or, it is true, denies) that his objects, things or simples are found ‘inferentially as the limit of analysis’. He does not deny, or it is true affirm, that in the propositions that we actually use there occur names denoting objects or simples. He *does* say (4.002) ‘the silent adjustments to understand colloquial speech are enormously complicated’, and by saying this he commits himself to saying what is obviously true, that ordinary speech can be and is understood. At 5.5562 he says, ‘If we know on purely logical grounds that there must be elementary propositions, then this must be known by everyone who understands propositions in their unanalysed form’ (i.e., non-philosophers understand what they say and hear, without first having to give an analysis of it). At 4.411 he says, ‘It seems probable even at first sight that the introduction of elementary propositions is fundamental for the understanding of the other kinds of propositions. Indeed the understanding of general propositions depends *palpably* on that of elementary propositions’. However it might be said that Wittgenstein here shows himself either less clear-headed or less forthright than Russell; that he ought to have said what Russell did, but failed to do so.


Now Wittgenstein is perfectly clear from 4.126 on that to operate with category-words as if one were operating with ordinary words must generate nonsense. 4.1272: ‘Whenever it [the word ‘object’, ‘thing’, ‘entity’] is used otherwise, i.e. as a proper concept-word, there arise senseless pseudo-propositions. . . . The same holds of the words ‘Complex’, ‘Fact’, ‘Function’, ‘Number’, etc.’ Now whatever may have been Wittgenstein’s state of mind when he first wrote the ontological story, at least when he first revised the finished book he must have seen that the ontological story is or appears to be doing exactly what is being forbidden in these passages from page 85 onwards. He cannot then have thought that the ontological story was a legitimate premiss or a legitimate conclusion in an inference to or from the propositional story. He must therefore have left it in for some other purpose, and I suggest it was at least partly for an expository purpose. He was
deliberately saying something that would not do, as a lead in to saying something that would do or nearly do. It is worth noticing that we hear progressively less and less of atomic facts, simples, complexes, etc., the further we read in the Tractatus. It was, I suggest, not his message, nor part of his message, but a sort of prefatory parable.

(3) An ordinary reader of the Tractatus, like you or me, on reading the talk about objects, atomic facts and so on, does not quite see how these expressions are being used. He does not himself talk in these idioms over the breakfast table or find them employed in leading-articles or scientific books. How should he cash such expressions as ‘object’ and ‘fact’? Is this table a specimen of an ‘object’? Is the fact that infantile paralysis is on the increase a specimen of an atomic fact? He is the more baffled because Wittgenstein never produces any certificated examples of what he is talking about in these idioms. So how can we find out what he is trying to put across?

Now these interrogatives of mine are not complaints. They are answerable, and the important thing is to notice the sort of answer that is provided or suggested. Take first the phrase ‘atomic fact’ by which the translators interpret (rather than translate) ‘Sachverhalt’. From what universe of discourse does the adjective ‘atomic’ derive? Should we think of Democritus or of Dalton? Obviously not. It hails from the distinction drawn by Russell between ‘atomic’ and ‘molecular’ propositions. It is already a logician’s word. If we know what is the difference between an atomic or elementary proposition and a molecular, compound or non-elementary proposition, we know all that we need to know about the difference between an atomic fact and the other sorts of states of affairs which are compounds of atomic facts. Wittgenstein himself says (at 4.25) ‘If the elementary proposition is true, the atomic fact exists; if it is false the atomic fact does not exist’. Similarly, corresponding to 2.04: ‘The totality of existent atomic facts is the world’. We find 4.26: ‘The specification of all true elementary propositions describes the world completely’; and so on. Here and elsewhere we find Wittgenstein asserting in the propositional idiom the counterpart to what he had asserted in the ontological idiom, often making it partly explicit that the propositional assertion is equivalent to the ontological one. But he does not say what I am saying, that the propositional assertion is a philosophically careful reformulation of the corresponding ontological dictum.

Take next some parallels between what he says in the ontological story about objects and what he says in the propositional story about names. At 2.02 he says, ‘The object is simple’; a little later, ‘Objects form the substance of the world; therefore they cannot be compound’. At 3.202: ‘The simple signs
employed in propositions are called names. The name means (denotes) the object. The object is its meaning (denotation). 3.26: ‘The name cannot be analysed further by any definition. It is a primitive sign. . . . Names cannot be taken to pieces by definition.’ Compare also 2.032: ‘The way in which objects hang together in the atomic fact is the structure of the atomic fact’ with 4.22: ‘The elementary proposition consists of names. It is a connexion, a concatenation of names’.

I think that for nearly every seemingly factual statement Wittgenstein makes about objects, simples, complexes, etc., in the ontological story, we could find a corresponding meta-statement about propositions in the propositional story. I suggest that this correspondence is not that of premisses to conclusions or conclusions to premisses, but of nursery-statements to grown-up statements.

I think I have said enough for the present in favour of my suggestion that Wittgenstein’s ontological remarks are approximations in the material mode to what he is going to say later in the formal mode. Obviously what I have said needs to be amplified by an account of the place of the picture-story between the ontological story and the propositional story. Before we can talk about caricatures and maps, we have to be able to talk about faces and terrains. So Wittgenstein had to produce some seemingly descriptive talk about things and facts before he could say anything about caricatures and maps being true or false. How he thought his account of the truth and falsity of caricatures and maps contributed to his account of the truth, falsity and significance of propositions is a question that we need to discuss, but can, I think, momentarily postpone.

Before finishing I want to say a little about what I’ll call the logical alphabet used by Wittgenstein:

(a) By an ‘elementary proposition’ he, like Russell, means a proposition which is, to begin with, non-compound. A proposition is compound when it is expressed or could be expressed by a sentence containing at least two sub-sentences conjoined by a conjunction like ‘and’ or ‘or’, e.g. ‘p and q’, and ‘p or q’. For reasons that I need not go into, the negation of a one-verb sentence is ranked with compound sentences. So if ‘p’ is a non-compound sentence, ‘not-p’ is a compound one. For brevity I shall rank ‘not’ with conjunctions, despite the obvious solemism. The conjunctions on which the Frege–Russell propositional logic hinges are ‘and’, ‘or’ and ‘not’. It does not hinge on such conjunctions as the ‘ifs’ and the ‘ors’ of ordinary speech, on ‘because’, ‘although’, etc. This restriction will become important later on.
It is obvious that to know that ‘p and q’ is true it is necessary and sufficient to establish the truth of ‘p’ and the truth of ‘q’. To find out that Jack or Jill went up the hill, it is necessary to find out that Jack went up or else to find out that Jill went up. More generally, it is obvious that one could not understand a compound proposition incorporating ‘p’ and ‘q’ if one did not understand ‘p’ by itself or ‘q’ by itself. Compound propositions in these ways presuppose their component propositions; and the truth or falsity of these sorts of compound propositions are simple resultants of the truth or falsehood of their component propositions. Compound propositions of these types are truth-functions of the non-compound or elementary propositions of which they are compounds. Give me any propositions you like, flagged as true or as false, and I can without studying the subject construct any number of further true propositions out of them.

As a compound proposition is analysable into elementary or atomic propositions, which cannot themselves be similarly analysed, so elementary or atomic propositions are analysable by a different sort of analysis into terms or constituents which cannot themselves be broken down into ulterior terms or constituents. Roughly, this is to say that in an elementary proposition either there is one subject-term of which one determinable attribute is predicated or else there are two or more subject-terms between which a relation is asserted. (Wittgenstein does not say that these are the only sorts of elementary propositions. But these are the only sorts for which he provides an algebraic symbolism. (4.24)) The unanalysable constituents or terms of elementary propositions are expressed by names. But though the statement of a proposition contains two or more names, it is not just a list or conglomeration of names, any more than a sentence can be just a sum of nouns. A sentence must have some sort of syntax, usually involving at least a verb. A proposition is a complex and not a mere assemblage of named or nameable constituents which hang together according to some principle of logical syntax. A proposition has a logical form and this form is intrinsic to the constituents which come together in that proposition. [For logical form, see Bertrand Russell, Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, chapters XV and XVIII especially.]

(b) By an elementary proposition Wittgenstein, like Russell, also means a proposition of null generality, i.e. one into whose verbal expression there could enter no such words as ‘a’, ‘any’, ‘some’, ‘most’, ‘all’, ‘the’, ‘wherever’, etc. ‘You telephoned on Monday’ is in this way non-general in two respects in which ‘Someone telephoned on a weekday’ is general in two respects. If I say ‘Someone telephoned’, I leave a question open, namely who telephoned? If I say you telephoned, this question is not left open. Something
is left undetermined or implementable in the more general statement, which is determinate or implemented in the non-general statement.

Some general propositions can be construed as ordinary compound statements. ‘You phoned on a weekday’ = ‘You phoned on Monday or you phoned on Tuesday . . . or you phoned on Saturday’. To know that you phoned on a weekday it would be sufficient to know that you phoned on Wednesday; that you could not have phoned on a weekday without having phoned either on Monday or on Tuesday, etc.

Whether all general propositions, and particularly universal propositions, can be so construed is a point which I don’t want to debate now.

A question that we shall have to debate is whether all compound propositions are simple resultants or truth-functions of their component propositions, i.e. whether we could in principle say everything sayable, using for our conjunctions only ‘and’, ‘or’ and ‘not’. I think this doctrine is false. In particular, ‘If p then q’ and ‘q, because p’ seem to me clearly not to be truth-functions of ‘p’ and ‘q’. I think, correspondingly, that not all general propositions can be construed as conjunctions or disjunctions (etc.) of non-general propositions. If I am right, then there are lacunas in Wittgenstein’s logical alphabet. He has not allowed himself the equipment with which to say certain sorts of sayable things. But I don’t want to debate this now.