Methods and Perspectives
Analytical and Continental Philosophy
"Ceci n’est pas une ontologie"

A contribution to a quasi-resolute reading of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

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Abstract

The opening remarks of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus seem to outline the bases of an atomistic ontological theory. For the resolute interpreters, such an ontology should be considered as mere part of the set of nonsensical propositions that make up the parody of a semantic theory. However, resolute readers share with the traditional views an essentialist reading of the ontological section, according to which Wittgenstein’s remarks are intended to build up a real, though paradoxistic, atomistic ontology. By contrast, textual evidence supports the idea that the basic notion of Wittgenstein’s ontology, i.e. the notion of object, should be considered as an intra-linguistic, rather than an ontological one. In this paper, we want to show how some of the main claims of the resolute readings could be fruitfully combined with the analyses of Tractarian objects that illustrate them as the semantic roles of names.

1. Resolute and substantial readings: two perspectives of the ontological section

In the opening remarks of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein seems to outline the bases of an ontological theory. Objects (Gegenstände) are indicated as the simple elements (TLP. 2.02) which make up the substance of the world (TLP. 2.021). However, every object is to be conceived in relation to the set of articulate configurations, i.e. states of affairs (Sachverhältnisse), it can occur in (TLP. 2.0121, 2.0122, 2.0123).

Straightforward though it may seem, the ontological section gives rise to several interpretative problems. Among them, the nature of simples has been one of the most controversial issues. Since Wittgenstein does not give any definition or relevant example, how should his claims upon objects be seen? What is fundamentally at stake here is whether we should consider objects as some sort of independent entities (e.g.: atoms, sense data) for which names stand or, rather, whether we should identify them in relation to semantic criteria.

More generally, a problem arises in trying to define the role of the whole ontological section in the Tractatus. Indeed, Wittgenstein’s world exhibits a close parallel with the features of language described in the subsequent remarks in the work. Max Black has summarized this correspondence as follows:

[the world] is a mosaic of independent items – the ‘atomic facts’; each of these is like a chain in which ‘objects’ (logical simples) ‘hang in another one’; the objects are connected in a network of logical possibilities [...]; the simplest ‘elementary’ propositions are pictures of atomic facts; themselves facts in which names are concatenated, and all other propositions are truth-functions of the elementary ones; language is the great mirror in which the logical network is reflected, ‘shown’ (Black 1984: 3).

Such an account is by no means unambiguous. At first glance, Wittgenstein really seems to provide an atomistic ontology in order to describe the relation of correspondence between logical pictures, i.e. propositions, and facts. Consequently, Wittgenstein’s picture theory is to be seen as a semantic theory of correspondence in which he tries to single out the criteria that a proposition should meet in order to depict a fact. Thus, according to this classical view, the Tractatus describes the relation between language and world from a point of view in which the author stands “outside the mirror” and sets the requirements for an isomorphic correspondence between facts and pictures (Stenius 1960).

Nevertheless, the traditional view of the role of ontology does not match some fundamental assumptions of the Tractatus, as no “angelic point of view” (Maslow 1961: 146) upon language is consistent with the general perspective of TLP. This point has been put under the spotlight by the so-called resolute readers of the Tractatus. According to resolute interpretations, the aim of the Tractatus is to free us from the temptation to analyse language from the peculiar “sideways on” point of view (Diamond 1988: 185) which lies behind all sorts of philosophical confusion. Since language is the transcendental and species-specific cognitive device by which we access the world (Lo Piparo 1999: 194), we cannot station ourselves outside logic, within which only we can see the world as "mirrored". Putting this in other words,

in our ability to apprehend a fact we have a sort of a priori knowledge, which there is no way of expressing. In our awareness of the essence of a proposition we are aware of the essence of a fact and thus of the essence of the world (5.4711). Further, in our knowledge of any fact there is implicit all our a priori knowledge of logical truth (5.47, cf. 3.42) and Wittgenstein certainly thinks that logic shows us or mirrors for us something about the world (5.511, 6.12, 6.124, 6.13) (McGuinness 1996: 156).

Therefore, we cannot represent the world as it is per se, whatever this could mean, nor can we speak about “what propositions must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it” (TLP. 4.12). What resolute readers stress is that, as Wittgenstein will later put it, “we cannot use language to go outside language” (PR. §6).

Consequently, from a resolute point of view, the ontology of the Tractatus should be properly considered as part of the set of merely nonsensical propositions that make up the parody of a semantic theory throughout the book. Such a mock theory is aimed to act as a self-contradictory device that shows how any attempt to sketch a picture-theory
based on correspondence leads to nothing more than nonsense.

2. The weaknesses of resolute accounts of the opening section

What traditional and resolute views share is, to some extent, an essentialist reading of the ontological section. In this connection, both would agree with Black’s account in recognizing that what lies on the surface of Wittgenstein’s remarks is a real atomic ontology, although the former read it as a sequence of substantial claims, while the latter stress its iconic function. Resolute readers seem to accept the idea that Wittgenstein is describing the features of an independent ontology and then stating the criteria of correspondence with language in order to lure the reader into a metaphysical illusion (Diamond 2000). The sort of elucidation the ontological section is carrying out works exactly like the rest of the book: it affects the reader’s imagination and then it turns out to be self-ironical, though therapeutic, gibberish.

Undoubtedly, this interpretation succeeds in avoiding some of the contradictions of the traditional readings and stresses the importance of a key point, namely the impossi- bility of an external perspective upon language repeatedly stated by Wittgenstein (see TLP, Preface, 5.6, 5.61). On the other hand, many interpreters have highlighted some critical issues. First, resolute readers do not give a coherent explanation of how merely nonsensical proposi- tions could perform an elucidatory task. Moreover, resolute accounts of the opening section of the Tractatus fail as they read it as the setting of a pure ontological theory which has to be eventually rejected as a whole, whereas textual evidence supports the idea that the basic notion of Wittgenstein’s ontology, i.e. the notion of object, is an in- tra-linguistic, rather than an ontological one.

What we want to show here is how some of the main claims of the resolute readings could fit in, in a fruitful and consistent way, with the analyses of Tractarian objects that illustrate it as the semantic roles of names. Such a theoreti- cal combination will help to shed light on how the therapeutic function of the opening section actually works.

3. A quasi-resolute analysis of Tractarian objects

As mentioned above, the status of objects is far from un- problematic. In the Tractatus, no definitions or examples are given that could clarify how it should be seen. Wittgen- stein merely asserts that the very existence of objects is to be founded on a semantic requirement (TLP, 2.0201, 2.0211), namely the determinateness of the sense of a proposition (TLP, 3.23). This indication should not be con- sidered as a trivial or secondary feature, as the fundamen- tal element of the ontology is directly derived from a fea- ture of language. If we take it as the core aspect, it pro- vides a key to understanding both how name, reference and object are linked and how the opening section can act as a philosophical therapy.

Concerning the first point, in order to define what an object is, we should take into account the semantic role of the name of which it is the reference. According to Brian McGuinness, “the semantic role of the name is that of being combined with other simple signs or names to produce a proposition having a truth-value. Any sign which in the same combination will produce exactly the same truth- value is the same sign or has the same reference” (1984: 87). Two consequences can be drawn from this way of dealing with Tractarian objects.

Firstly, the Bedeutung of a name is to be conceived merely as the role of that sign in the context of meaningful propositions (Ishiguro 1969). This is a crucial point for any resolute reading, as it clearly shows a connection between the Tractatus and the Philosophical Investigations in the notion of meaning as use.

Secondly, it states that two signs refer to the same ob- ject, i.e. have the same Bedeutung, if and only if they have the same semantic role in a proposition. Hence, an object can be defined in terms of semantic equivalence as the way a name contributes to determining the truth conditions of a meaningful proposition. No bearer must be there for a name to have a reference: “the object it refers to, the reference of a name, is fixed, because the semantic property of the name is fixed. The object itself, the bearer of the name […] is neither fixed nor unchanged” (Ishiguro 2001: 30).

4. Back to common language: the unfolding of an anti-metaphysical therapy

Now we can easily move to the second of the above men- tioned consequences of McGuinness’s thesis, which is more of a general kind. According to his view, “there is al- ready contained in language and thought the possibility of all objects that are possible. All logical forms are logically possible within language, within thought.” Thus, “no sepa- rate investigation or exploration of reality is conceivable” (McGuinness 1984: 91), no “sideways on” point of view is achievable, and no theory of correspondence can be given. In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, “the idea that ‘logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits’ is not, therefore, a metaphysical claim about the necessary correlation between two systems – the world on one side and language on the other […]. It is not a proof that language necessarily fits the world, but a form of re- cognition that there is no gap to be bridged”. It is only in this sense that “world is mirrored in language; logical form is the form of reality” (McGinn 1999: 511).

If so, however, we are led back to the primary question of our essay. If no ontology can be given, what could the opening remarks of the Tractatus aim at? Following McGuinness’s insights, it is now clear that Wittgenstein is surely not trying to build up an ontological theory that would later support a theory of correspondence between pictures and facts, nor is he trying to infer the features of the world from the features of our language. In fact, what Wittgenstein is talking about when he refers to objects is not a set of entities belonging to the realm of reality; he is rather evoking a semantic notion.

Undoubtedly, the opening remarks of the Tractatus re- semble a metaphysical theory based upon logic, for they borrow its traditional vocabulary. However, behind this ap- pearance, a mere projection of linguistic items is concea- led. In so doing, Wittgenstein is trying to develop an introductory myth through which the reader begins to get a feel for some characteristics of propositions (McGinn 1999: 500).

At the same time, this is exactly the way the Tractatus starts acting as a therapy: our tendency to misuse some words (e.g. object, world, fact) in a metaphysical way, which relies on the abstract illusion of an “angelic point of view” external to language, is what Wittgenstein is ad- dressing here. His method consists in restating a proper
use of these words, thus bringing them back within the all-pervading domain of commonly spoken language. As a consequence, the reader is led back to focus on common language and freed from the temptation of the philosophical perspective.

On this point, the proposition by which the Tractatus makes the transition from the so-called ontological section to the introduction of Bild cooperates in supporting our interpretation: if "we picture facts to ourselves" (TLP, 2.1), then no access to the world is given in isolation from the logic that rules our language. If any correspondence between language and world is to be stated, it cannot be conceived as a mere parallel. As Wittgenstein will later put it, language accompanies the world: all we have to do is criss-cross it from the inside.

Literature