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SOLIPSISM AND NAÏVE REALISM IN WITTGENSTEIN'S *TRACTATUS*¹

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Abstract

This article seeks to present the idea that solipsism, in the *Tractatus*, can be understood as realism. It begins considering the concepts and properties of propositions; after which, it examines the connection which the propositions of language would have with the constituents of thought. That is, it develops the association between language and thought. It considers, then, the idea of the limits one would have in describing the world, which will be related to one's capacities of thought. It argues that, according to Wittgenstein, the particular limited world has to be understood as the world. This argumentation will bring Wittgenstein's position from relativism to solipsism. After which, it will consider some implications regarding the self. It concludes that, based on these implications, Wittgenstein's solipsism is a kind of realism.

Resumo

Este artigo procura apresentar a idéia segundo a qual o solipsismo, no *Tractatus*, pode ser compreendido como realismo. Começa considerando-se os conceitos e propriedades das proposições; depois disso, apresenta-se a relação que as proposições da linguagem teriam com os constituintes do pensamento. Desenvolve-se, então, a relação entre linguagem e pensamento. Considera-se, desta feita, a idéia das limitações que alguém teria em descrever o mundo, as quais serão relacionadas às capacidades de pensamento de uma determinada pessoa. Argumenta-se que, segundo Wittgenstein, o mundo particularmente limitado deve ser entendido como o mundo. Será, então, esta argumentação que trará a posição wittgensteiniana do relativismo ao solipsismo. Por fim, consideram-se algumas implicações concernentes ao eu, para, nelas baseado, concluir-se que o solipsismo de Wittgenstein é uma espécie de realismo.

I. Introduction

This article falls into four main parts. Part II, which is divided into two subparts, discusses the propositions of language. Part II.1 is concerned with elementary propositions and their relations to reality. Part II.2 develops the concept of complex propositions and tries to show how their truth-values are established as truth-operations on elementary propositions. Part III, which is also divided into two subparts, relates to the world itself. Subpart III.1 talks about the connections between the limits of language and the limits of the world. Part III.2 shows that the argument seems to impose a relativistic position, but, if certain aspects are considered, it can be

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understood as a solipsistic position. Part IV shows how relativism leads to solipsism in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (henceforth TLP). In part V, the conclusion, it will be argued that, abandoning the self, solipsism is reformulated to realism.

II. Propositions of language

Generally speaking, propositions are the constituents of language. As it is said in Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* (henceforth NB), they are symbols that have reference to facts (NB, 97). Furthermore, propositions seem to picture reality. Pictures and propositional signs, however, are facts (TLP, 2.141, 3.14). It could be said, therefore, that "propositions [...] are themselves facts" (NB, 97) in the sense that they behave themselves in language in the same way facts behave in reality. In other words, propositions are to language just as facts are to reality.

Propositions can be, according to the *Tractatus*, either elementary propositions or truth-functions of these. That is, they are either elementary propositions or complex ones, which are "results of truth-operations on elementary propositions" (TLP, 5.3). The characteristics of elementary and complex propositions are considered in the next two subsections.

II.1 Elementary propositions

Elementary propositions are those that cannot be reduced to any other simpler propositions. In other words, according to Wittgenstein, they are "the simplest kind of propositions" (TLP, 4.21). For elementary propositions are the simplest sort of propositions, it follows that their truth-values cannot be truth-functions of even simpler propositions. Alternatively, their truth-values must concern the existence or non-existence of states of affairs². In other words, as says Wittgenstein, elementary propositions declare whether there is a state of affairs (TLP, 4.21). It does so for two reasons. First, because elementary propositions designate states of affairs. They name states of affairs. That is why, according to Wittgenstein, "an elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a concatenation, of names" (TLP, 4.22). Second, because, for naming states of affairs, its truth-value is a function of the existence of the state of affairs it names, that is, the state of affairs it designates. As Wittgenstein claims, "if an elementary proposition is true, the state of affairs exists; if an elementary proposition is false, the state of affairs does not exist" (TLP, 4.25). In other words, when one analyses the truth-possibilities of an elementary proposition, one is analysing the possibility of existence of states of affairs (TLP, 4.3).

² At first sight, one might consider 'fact' and 'state of affairs' as synonyms. Yet, there is a slight difference between them. Wittgenstein considers facts as more complex structures than states of affairs. In Wittgenstein's words, "even if the world is infinitely complex, so that every fact consists of infinitely many states of affairs and every state of affairs is composed of infinitely many objects, there would still have to be objects and states of affairs." (TLP, 4.2211). That is, objects, the most elementary constituents of reality, form states of affairs. The way they do so is explained by Wittgenstein. He says, "In a state of affairs objects fit into one another like the links of a chain." (TLP, 2.03). Facts, however, are constituted by states of affairs. Facts constitute the world (TLP, 1.1). In Wittgenstein words, "the world divides into facts." (TLP, 1.2).

This link that leads from the truth-value of a proposition to the existence or non-existence of the corresponding state of affairs is one of the most important features in the argument of the *Tractatus*. This is so because the capacity of informing about the existence of states of affairs is the capacity of informing about the world. In other words, for “the totality of existing states of affairs is the world” (TLP, 2.04), the description of all true elementary proposition would be the description of the world. It is possible to describe the world from the description of all elementary proposition in first place because the description of all elementary propositions gives the description of the general proposition. Given the general proposition, the description of the world is given as well. As Wittgenstein says, “it must be possible to construct the unity of the elementary propositions and of the general propositions” (NB, 76e) because “if elementary propositions are given, then at the same time *all* elementary propositions are given” (TLP, 5.524). Furthermore, “that gives us the general proposition” (NB, 76e). The description of the general proposition is the description of the world. That is why Wittgenstein concludes saying that “if all true elementary proposition are given, the result is a complete description of the world. The world is completely described by giving all elementary propositions, and adding which of them are true and which false” (TLP, 4.25).

II.2 Complex propositions

Complex propositions are those that can be reduced to simpler propositions. Just like elementary propositions, complex propositions can be either true or false. Their truth-values, however, are not directly linked to the existence of simple facts, for, if it were so, they would be themselves elementary propositions. The truth-possibilities of complex propositions are related to the arrangement of the truth-conditions of elementary propositions. That is to say that all truth-values of complex propositions are functions of truth-values of elementary propositions.

An important point here is to note that some propositions are informative, that is, they give information about the world. If some proposition is constructed from two other true elementary propositions, the former will also be true, according to the laws of logic. This proposition will be called a complex proposition. It has to be understood that the description of all true proposition would be the description of the world because true complex propositions would have their truth-values as functions of truth-values of true elementary propositions. Alternatively, as says Wittgenstein, the apprehension of all true propositions would be the apprehension of all states of affairs in the world. That is, elementary propositions and those, the complex propositions, which are truth-functions of elementary ones, say something about the world. Apart from some extreme cases, which I shall consider in this subsection, they do not have an empty discourse about the world. Their truth-values are statements about what are states of affairs and also about what are not. Their truth-values designate what constitutes the world and what does not.

As it has already been said, concerning the truth-values of complex propositions, there are, however, extreme cases related to the arrangement of the truth-values of elementary propositions. These cases are, on one hand, the ones in which the truth-value of complex proposition is arranged in such a way it is true for all truth-possibilities of elementary propositions. On the other hand, the truth-function of a complex proposition can be arranged in such a way it is false for all truth-

possibilities of elementary propositions. The former propositions are called tautological propositions, or simply tautologies. The latter propositions are called contradictory propositions, or simply contradictions³ (TLP, 4.45, 4.46). Wittgenstein says that “the truth of a proposition might be called possible, that of a tautology certain, and that of a contradiction impossible” (NB, 29e). A contradictory proposition, therefore, cannot be true in any possible world, while a tautological one cannot be false.

For a proposition to be said, according to the *Tractatus*, one has to be able to determine whether and in what conditions it is true or false. Propositions that state mental states, for example, cannot be said because one would not be able to decide whether they are true or false. This problem is considered in the end of this article. For now, it must not be forgotten that, for a proposition to be able to be said, it has to be possible for one to decide the truth-conditions of this propositions in terms of the laws of logic and the truth-values of simpler propositions.

The propositions that, according to Wittgenstein, might be called possible propositions are those complex ones that can be either true or false. Those are located between the aforementioned extreme cases. Their truth-values change depending on the truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions. These complex propositions are called contingencies or descriptive propositions. They are called descriptive for a very important reason. As their truth-value is a function of the truth-values of elementary propositions, and as the truth-value of elementary proposition is a function of the existence of states of affairs, the truth-values of contingent propositions also describe the existence of states of affairs. Furthermore, as the world consists in all existent states of affairs (TLP, 2, 1.11), and as “propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (TLP, 4.1), it could be said that contingent propositions describe the world. That is why they are also called descriptive propositions.

The next step is to realise that tautologies and contradictions say nothing about the world. They do so because they give no information about the existence or no existence of state of affairs. They are, in this sense, meaningless propositions. To say that tautologies and contradictions say nothing about the world is not the same thing as saying that they are not somehow related to the world in the sense that they still are arrangements of truth-values of elementary propositions. That is, contradictory and tautological propositions, in spite of being meaningless, still are complex propositions based on elementary ones. The issue is that tautologies and contradictions do not delimit the set of possible worlds they could represent. As says

³ It is claimed that there are propositions that seem to be false for every truth-possibilities of elementary propositions but they are not themselves contradictions. Those propositions would be like ‘this table is blue and this table is red.’ It is claimed that, being red, a table cannot be blue in any possible world. Yet, being red and blue are not logical contradictions. As a solution for this problem, it could be pointed out propositions that talk about quantum physics, for example. It is said that a particle is in the point X in space and in the point Y at the same time, what would, at first sight, be regarded as false for any possible world. Yet, it is not in a quantum world. Therefore, the fact that a table cannot be blue and red is not a matter of falsity for every possible world. There may be one in which, just in the like manner as it happens to the case of the particle, a table can be blue and red with no further difficulties. Wittgenstein, then, makes a point in considering falsity for every truth-possibility of elementary propositions as a matter of logic.

Wittgenstein, “in the tautology the elementary proposition does, of course, still portray, but it is so loosely connected with reality that reality has unlimited freedom. Contradictions in their turn imposes such constraints that no reality can exist under them” (NB, 29e). In this sense, it must be repeated, tautologies and contradictions are meaningless propositions.

What has been said is that, since tautologies are always true and contradictions are always false for any truth-value of the elementary propositions, their truth-values would not change depending on the truth-values of the elementary propositions. Moreover, their truth-values would not change depending on the existence or non-existence of states of affairs. In other words, it follows from their independence⁴ of the truth-values of elementary propositions that tautologies and contradictions do not represent the existence of states of affairs. They do not say what constitute the world. Tautologies and contradictions form an empty discourse. Our non-empty (or meaningful) discourse, therefore, is structured only for descriptive propositions. These are, as it was demonstrated, the propositions that describe the world.

The idea that there are specific propositions (contingent propositions) that describe the world has some important consequences. First, it follows that the world one is able to describe is a function of his knowledge of the descriptive propositions. The more knowledge one has of true descriptive propositions, the bigger is one’s world. Therefore, if one were able to know all possible descriptive propositions of language, one would be able to describe the whole world. Unfortunately, as it seems to be the case, one is very unlikely to know all descriptive propositions of language. Furthermore, one’s capacities to acquire descriptive propositions varies from another person’s capacities. Just as with other kinds of knowledge, people have different repertoires for using and acquiring descriptive propositions. Then, the world one can describe is not the world another person who has different knowledge of descriptive propositions can describe. The problem is that, at first sight, it seems that there are different worlds for each person. That is to say that descriptive propositions somehow limit the world that can be described by someone. One perhaps could think of them as the limits of the world. Language, in this sense, limits the world. Alternatively, in another way, the language one has acquired limits the world one is able to describe. There are, to be sure, important considerations to be drawn from this idea, what are considered in the next section.

III. The world

As it was defined in the previous subsection, the world consists in all existent states of affairs (TLP, 2, 1.11). The world could be described for all true elementary propositions, and, as complex propositions are truth-functions of those, for all true complex propositions as well. Its limits, however, as was suggested, are linked to the

⁴ When I say ‘independence’ here I do not mean that the truth-values of tautologies or contradictions are not functions of the truth-values of elementary propositions. I agree that “every proposition is the result of truth-operations on elementary propositions.” (TLP, 5.3). I am just calling attention for the fact that, independently from an elementary proposition being true or false, tautologies would be always true and contradiction always false. It has to be understood, therefore, that I am using the concept of ‘independence’ here in quite an extensive and broad sense.

limits of language. Yet it is still important to discuss whether, and to what extent, the limits of language are connected to the limits of thought. It is so because it seems that one's world is related not only to one's language but also to one's possibilities of thought. Moreover, if thought is, according to Wittgenstein, different from language, one's world would have limits that would be related to something outside language. That is why it is important to analyse what Wittgenstein has to say about the limits of thought, and after which, to draw consequences regarding the limits of the world.

III.1 The limits

Our language is limited by propositions. That is, "the totality of propositions is language" (TLP, 4.001). Moreover, as all propositions are either elementary propositions or truth-functions of them, it could be said that language is also limited by logic. It could be said so because the truth-values of complex propositions, which are related to truth-values of elementary propositions, are obtained through the rules, operations, of logic. In Wittgenstein's words, "a truth-operation is the way in which a truth-function is produced out of elementary propositions" (TLP, 5.3). Moreover, all truth-possibilities are related to logic because "logic deals with every possibility and all possibilities are its facts" (TLP, 2.0131) In other words, "language stands in *internal* relation to the world, *it* and these relations determine the logical possibility of facts" (NB, 42e). Truth-values of elementary propositions, however, are a matter of existence of states of affairs, a matter of constituents of the world. Therefore, "logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits" (TLP, 5.61). Perhaps we are going too fast. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to put the problem in another manner.

We saw that we are limited in what we can say, but we have not discussed whether we are limited in what we can think. The question here is whether one can think what one cannot say, whether there are thoughts that cannot be expressed by language. For Wittgenstein, language and thought are the same. He says, "a thought is a proposition with a sense" (TLP, 4). Thought is, therefore, structured as language is. To Talk about the properties of propositions in language is to talk about the properties of the constituents of thought. Its limits are the limits of language. Moreover, since the only way the world can be described is through meaningful propositions, the limit of the world I can describe are the limits of my language, the limits of my thought. In Wittgenstein's words, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." (TLP, 5.6; 11:49e)

At this point in the article, a vague idea of solipsism is presented. It has been suggested that one's capacities of describing the world using the language mean one's world. It must not be forgotten, however, that solipsism, in this article and in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as well, has to be understood as the idea that, apart from a person, only what has been experienced by this person exists. In other words, solipsism is the idea that only a person and this person's thoughts and experiences exist. It is true, nevertheless, that the idea that one is limited in the way one can describe the world is not a straightforward solipsistic idea because, at this point, it looks more relativistic than solipsistic. It does so because, according to what has been said, there still might be a world outside the world one can describe. This external world could be described by another person. The very idea expressed by 'my world' suggests that there is a world which is not contained in 'my world', a world outside

my world, a world that could be someone else's world. This conception does not represent solipsism as it has been briefly defined in the beginning of this paragraph. On the contrary, it seems to be a relativistic concept because it claims that the world is a matter of subjective apprehension, that is, a matter related to one's knowledge of descriptive propositions. In order to defend the solipsistic view, one would have to argue that 'my world', according to the *Tractatus*, is 'the world'. That is, in order to consider the idea that the possibilities of my language (my thought) limit my world, the world I can describe as a solipsistic one, 'my world' would have to be 'the world'. That is what is discussed in the next section.

III.2 My world is the world

The idea I shall present in this subsection can be concisely presented in Wittgenstein's own words. He says, "the world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world" (TLP, 5.62). Yet the problem still is to pass from the particular, i.e., my world, to the general, i.e., the world. As it was already suggested, the problem is raised when it is said that one's language is limiting the world one is able to describe. That is, in this case, there is a presupposition that there is a world beyond the world described by one, which would make Wittgenstein's idea relativistic rather than solipsistic.

As it was already said, according to Wittgenstein, propositions are either elementary or truth-functions of these. Elementary propositions directly portray, or picture, reality. They assert the existence of state of affairs (TLP, 4.21). Doing this, no elementary proposition could assert the existence of what could not be state of affairs, of what could not constitute the world. The same consideration applies to complex propositions because their truth-values are functions of truth-values of elementary propositions. Therefore, only propositions that could possibly assert the existence of states of affairs can be true or false. Only those have truth-values. Apart from those, and also from tautologies and contradictions, no proposition can be proffered.

The proposition 'there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe', therefore, can not be said. This proposition is neither a contradiction nor a tautology, and it is not able to have a truth-value because it could not assert the existence of any state of affairs. In other words, the proposition 'there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe' refers to what is beyond the limits of the world in which it is uttered. That is, it would not be in the scope of the world one can describe. Furthermore, if it were in the scope of the world one describes, it would not be able to say anything beyond the limits of the world one describes. For if there were something beyond the limits of the world I describe, it would clearly not be in the scope of my descriptive propositions, which are the world I describe. Therefore, the proposition 'there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe', according to what has been argued, is self-refuting and cannot be said.

IV. Solipsism

At this point of the article, it seems that the aforementioned relativistic idea begins to become solipsistic. If one says that one's world is limited by one's capacities of acquiring descriptive propositions, that is, descriptive language, one is accepting that someone else can acquire another set of descriptive propositions and, then, another

world. When it comes to a point at which it has been argued that propositions like ‘there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe’ cannot be said, the idea expressed in the beginning of this paragraph has to be, at least, reformulated. As George Pitcher (p. 141-2) properly notes, when one says that the limits of my language represent my world, i.e., the only world I can describe, one is making two statements. First, the statement itself: i) the limits of my language are the limits of the only world I can describe. Second, following from the former statement: ii) there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe.

It is clear that (ii) follows from (i) because if it did not, (i) would be meaningless. It would be so in the sense that it is meaningless to talk about limits when there is nothing beyond them. Alternatively, it could be said that there is no limits when there is nothing beyond the limits. Proposition (ii) is, however, the same proposition as ‘there may be some other world beyond the world I can describe’, which cannot be said, as was argued previously. Therefore, as (i) makes no sense without (ii), and as (ii) cannot be said, (i) has to be reformulated. It must not be forgotten that (ii) brings the possibility of limitation to (i). In other words, (i) has to be reformulated in such a way that it will not need (ii) anymore. Moreover, in order to do so, (i) has to loose its appealing to limitations of worlds, its appealing to the subjective worlds. We should generalise the particulars in (i), which brings to it the idea of limitation. Doing so, (i) would be: ‘the limits of my language are the limits of the world, which I can describe’. Furthermore, as my language delimits the world, it would be a pleonasm to keep the idea that I can describe this world. It would be so because, as (ii) was abandoned, there is no sense in thinking of a world that is outside the world I can describe. Therefore, the final reformulation would be: iii) ‘the limits of my language are the limits of the world’. But, as we saw, language and thought are the same. Therefore, ‘language’ in proposition (iii) could be replaced by ‘thought’. Doing that, (iii) would be: iv) ‘the limits of my thought are the limits of the world’.

At this point, we come to solipsism. The limits of one’s thought are the limits of the whole world. Wittgenstein says, “the world is my world” (TLP, 5.62). My thought limits the world.

V. Conclusion: the realism in the *Tractatus*

Solipsism in the *Tractatus*, nevertheless, is a kind of realism. Before discussing the proper argument, it would be convenient to define what has been understood for realism in this article. Realism here is understood as crude realism (*Naiver Realismus*), according to which what exists is what exists. Coming back to the argument that solipsism in the *Tractatus* can be understood as realism, it could be appropriate to introduce it with Wittgenstein’s own words. He says, “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” (TLP, 5.64). Yet the problem of getting to this point still remains. That is, the issue is to show how and why proposition (iv) has to be reformulated in such way that it will be realistic rather than solipsistic.

The key consists in showing that the self, just like many other propositions whose truth-values cannot be decided by someone, cannot be said. The problem with the self is that it brings to the propositions the inability of having truth-

values based on truth-values of simpler propositions. 'I think today is Saturday' is of a kind of proposition that cannot be said because one would never be able to decide whether it is true or false. That is what happens to propositions that represent mental states, whose characteristic is the use of the self, the use of *das Ich*. It does not matter whether that is true that today is Saturday or not for the falsity or veracity of the proposition that states that someone think today is Saturday.

Therefore, the self has to be abandoned in proposition (iv), which represents solipsism. As it was said, solipsism is the idea that only one and one's experiences exist. In other words, the idea that only me and my experiences exist. Only the self and the self's experiences exist. The self, however, cannot be said but only the self's experiences. It means that everything that refers to the self in (iv) has to be abandoned. That is to say that 'the limits of my language' cannot be said but only the second part of the proposition, which is 'the world'. Proposition (iv), therefore, has to be reformulated and replaced by the following: v) 'the world is'; alternatively, 'the world exists'. But, as I intended to argue in this article, we can note that proposition 'the world exists' is totally realistic because it states that what exists is the set of objects, that is, the world itself.

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