Meaning before Subjectivity: The *Primäre Sprache* of the *Tractatus*

Nearly a hundred years have passed since the publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, yet it still provokes heated interpretative disputes. The broad range and sheer number of readings that have emerged, of almost every issue raised by this short book, fosters the impression that we, as a community of thinkers, know even less about the author's actual intentions now than half a century ago. However, such a pessimistic conclusion would, I think, be deeply mistaken. Thanks to a more accessible and comprehensive *Nachlass*, we now have a better sense of Wittgenstein's direction of development as far as his early-period thinking is concerned, as well as with regard to his main sources of inspiration. In a sense, then, the current diversity of interpretative standpoints is just what we would expect, given that evolution in the state of our knowledge.

My own starting point, whose justification lies outside of the scope of the present paper, is the so-called elucidatory interpretation presented by Daniel Hutto and Marie McGinn. This is compatible with Wittgenstein's general intentions, as laid down explicitly in the *Tractatus*' remarks on philosophy. This claim must, however, be accompanied by a reservation: the *Tractatus* is not entirely faithful to its own metaphilosophical stance. The reason for this is that although Wittgenstein radically transformed the conception of logic he had inherited from Russell and Frege, he was not radical enough. The Tractarian idea of logic called for something more than just a set of elucidations of how our language works – it required, at the very least, a minimal metaphysical foundation. Due to this fact, Wittgenstein's early thought must ultimately be regarded as incoherent.[1]

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[1] As Michael Kremer has noted, the *Tractatus* is to a certain extent a transitional work (Kremer, 1997, p. 91, 98, 109). Elsewhere I myself have propounded the view that almost all of Wittgenstein's works, save his very last writings, are in some sense transitional (Gomułka, 2019).

In the present paper I shall defend an interpretation of the *Tractatus* based on the following three theses:

1) The Austrian philosopher's work offers a double-layered vision of language, similar to the vision developed during his brief phenomenological period: the core of each symbolism is a universal structure which to some extent resembles a phenomenological *primäre Sprache* – i.e. a layer of language standing in an absolutely direct and immediate relation to reality.

2) This relation to reality must, however, be understood in quite specific terms, given that the so-called ontology of the early Wittgenstein is actually a purely formal construction, entailed by the structure of what we shall refer to as the inner layer of language. (One should consider Heinrich Hertz's *Prinzipien der Mechanik* as the main source of inspiration in this respect.)

3) It should be recognized that the metaphysical *residuum* within the early Wittgenstein's thought is a certain minimal form of transcendentalism, according to which language – or strictly speaking its inner layer – performs the function of the transcendental subject for itself.

Although each of these three theses may be entertained separately, together they make a consistent whole: at least, that will be the approach I defend here. A crucial element of my position will be the conclusion that, according to the Tractarian conception of language, the meaning of propositions is not only independent of empirical subjects, but also the condition of their possibility. This amounts to a resolute adaptation of Frege's principled anti-psychologism on Wittgenstein's part.

The *Tractatus'* inner layer of language

Bertrand Russell, in his *Preface*, expressed the view that one of the main goals of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* was to elaborate "a logically perfect language" (TLP, p. x[2]). This was mistaken. Interpreters have long ago shown that Russell projected the aims of his own philosophy onto his former student's work. The latter never sought to

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[2] All quotations and references to the *Tractatus* are indicated using the abbreviation "TLP", accompanied by the number of a thesis or a page (according to Wittgenstein, 2001).

create a new artificial language. On the other hand, however, the assumption of the absolute strictness of logic inherited from Russell and Frege spurred Wittgenstein to move towards a picture of language according to which the outer layer (common talk) disguises its inner logical core (thoughts). From this point of view our language – any language we can speak – is generally a two-layered phenomenon. Here I would like to point out that the Tractarian inner layer plays a similar role to that which so-called "primary language" (*primäre Sprache*) played in the short but distinctive phase of development of Wittgenstein's thinking that ran from February to October 1929. In other words, "primary language" amounted to a more comprehensive and explicit development of an idea already present in the *Tractatus*.

The idea of *primäre Sprache* is related to Wittgenstein's project (or perhaps we should say, outline of a project) of phenomenological research. Traces of such research appear in his 1929 notebooks,[3] as well as in the text *Some Remarks on Logical Form* (Wittgenstein, 1929) dating from the summer of that year. There are only a few of them, so this phenomenological phase in his thinking has not attracted much in the way of broader interest from scholars. According to Ray Monk's calculation, as of 2014 only 15 commentaries had been devoted to it (cf. Monk, 2014, pp. 335–336).

Wittgenstein's phenomenology was an attempt to examine the actual logical form of propositions expressing sensory phenomena, which he undertook in the wake of having conceded the points made by Ramsey in the context of the latter's criticism of logical atomism (cf. Zahavi & Overgaard, 2008, p. 63). The author of the *Tractatus* still held to his diagnosis that the grammar of common talk veils the real structure of thoughts, and he also continued to aim at the elaboration of a new, more perspicuous symbolism. However, the means for reconstructing the grammar of molecular propositions could no longer remain purely *a priori* in character. As he wrote in *Some Remarks on Logical Form*:

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[3] To be precise, they appear in the notebooks MS-105, MS-106 and MS-107 (in part), according to the von Wright catalogue. References to Wittgenstein's manuscripts are made according to the *Wittgenstein Nachlass* published online by the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen (Wittgenstein, 2016).

The idea is to express in an appropriate symbolism what in ordinary language leads to endless misunderstandings. That is to say, where ordinary language disguises logical structure […], we must replace it by a symbolism which gives a clear picture of the logical structure […]. Now we can only substitute a clear symbolism for the unprecise [sic] one by inspecting the phenomena which we want to describe, thus trying to understand their logical multiplicity. That is to say, we can only arrive at a correct analysis by, what might be called, the logical investigation of the phenomena themselves, *i.e.*, in a certain sense *a posteriori*, and not by conjecturing about *a priori* possibilities. […] An atomic form cannot be foreseen. And it would be surprising if the actual phenomena had nothing more to teach us about their structure. (Wittgenstein, 1929, p. 163)

Common talk (*gewöhnliche Sprache*) is, in the course of the 1929 notebooks, also referred to as "physical language" (*physikalische Sprache*), "our language" (*unsere Sprache*) and "secondary language" (*sekundäre Sprache*). It is used to describe and discuss something Wittgenstein called the "second system" (*zweite System*) – meaning just our well-known world of familiar physical objects. However, from the philosopher's point of view at that time, the latter objects were themselves theoretical postulates of some sort, as he reserved a less elusive mode of existence for just the phenomena that made up what he called the "first system" (*erste System*).[4] The author of the *Tractatus* focused on visual impressions, so his considerations usually concerned visual space. According to him, this space (as well as the whole "first system") was adequately captured by the deeper layer of language – so-called "phenomenological language" (*phänomenologische Sprache*) or "primary language" (*primäre Sprache*). He held that any knowledge of the structure of phenomena themselves – including the structure of visual space – requires knowledge of the structure of the deeper layer of language, in that the former is reflected in the grammar of the latter. By examining the form of common talk alone, then, we cannot come closer to knowing the limits of meaningful description of reality, as this form lacks the

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[4] Strictly speaking, common talk also serves to describe the first system, but uses a hypothetical mode of presentation (MS-105, p. 108).

required logical multiplicity[5] – it will only ever be either predicative or relational. Such limits can only be made explicit through a consideration of the form of "primary language".

The assumption of an intimate bond between the deeper layer and phenomenal reality led Wittgenstein to the conclusion that *primäre Sprache* could not be directly accessible to subjects. As the author of the *Tractatus* pointed out, what we know first and directly is *our* language, and *our* familiar physical space. Phenomena themselves are not "ours": we do not own *them*. The philosopher stressed that "visual space essentially does not have an owner" (MS-105, p. 122–124). For this reason, both gaining access to it and recognizing the proper structure of phenomenological language require some exertion.[6]

In consequence, one should admit that "primary language" does not belong to anyone, and that the justification of its existence is transcendental – this being a condition for the possibility of "physical language" (so that it is for this reason that the former counts as primary, the latter as secondary).[7] However, it is not clear what, for Wittgenstein during his phenomenological period, the actual method of examining the grammar of *primäre Sprache* was to be. After he had abandoned the idea of "primary language" at the end of 1929, the philosopher still tried to reach phenomenal structures through an examination of the syntactic invariants exhibited by the sense-data expressions present in natural language (cf. MS-107, p. 205n).

The thesis that the "primary language" of the phenomenological period is, in principle, a development of an idea already present in the *Tractatus* has been put

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[5] This important notion will be discussed in a subsequent part of this paper.

[6] Ray Monk has pointed out a certain resemblance between this idea and the Husserlian phenomenological reduction: i.e. to the bracketing out of the "natural attitude" which, according to the founder of phenomenology, also requires us to perform a certain sort of mental act. As Monk suggests, by means of the metaphor of a picture on a screen and pictures on a film reel (MS-105, p. 84–86), Wittgenstein wanted to say that in the context of our normal, physical attitude, we speak about things in time and physical space, while in direct experience what we have are timeless phenomena located within visual space (Monk, 2014, p. 329). However, other commentators have argued that the resemblance between the Wittgensteinian and Husserlian conceptions is merely an apparent one (Vrahimis, 2014, p. 345).

[7] As Jaakko Hintikka has rightly pointed out (2011, p. 167), the "first system" (phenomena) was also intended to serve as the basis for the "second system" (physical objects) from an ontological point of view: "The world we live in is the world of sense data", said Wittgenstein during one of his lectures in Cambridge in the thirties, "but the world we talk about is the world of physical objects" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 82).

forward, albeit only briefly, by Krzysztof Rotter (2006, p. 80). I believe that his intuition is to a certain extent correct; however, it requires further specification and also one fundamental qualification. The latter comes with the realization that the interpretation proposed by Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka thirty years ago (1986) and repeated later by Byong-Chul Park (1998), according to which the *Tractatus* was itself a work of phenomenology, cannot withstand criticism.

The Hintikkas and Park viewed the early Wittgenstein as a phenomenologist because, so they argued, he was preoccupied with the problem of what it is that is directly given to us, and to what extent it is so. In order to adhere to this interpretation, one must accept that Tractarian simple objects are contents of experience. To be sure, as Park argues, the theory of reference presented in the *Tractatus* is a critical development of sorts of Russell's conception dating from the 1910s (cf. Park, 1998, p. 34)[8]. But what speaks against this phenomenological interpretation of the early Wittgenstein is that the *Tractatus* offers a rather skimpy specification of simple objects (although in *Notebooks 1914-1916* the philosopher did consider some more substantial answers, including the idea that they are *minima sensibilia*), and what it says about them – that they are colorless, indestructible, and have practically no properties – seems to explicitly preclude just this interpretation. (This is in all probability the reason why such an interpretation has proved rather unpopular.) As we shall see, when we come to address the second thesis of this paper, there are persuasive reasons for recognizing Tractarian objects as being something like Heinrich Hertz's mass-particles: i.e. as being something that is required to exist just by virtue of being entailed by the structure of "primary language" itself.

The *Tractatus* points clearly to the idea of there being a surface layer and a deeper layer where language is concerned. It uses the metaphor of "clothes": our expressions are "clothes" covering a "body" corresponding to the proper structure of our thoughts. This structure is the inner core of every possible language, but it is also the very

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[8] It is also worth noting another phenomenological interpretation, which is presented by Mathieu Marion in his paper "Wittgenstein and Brouwer". Marion assumes that for the early Wittgenstein it is not things but propositions that are directly given to us (cf. Marion, 2003, p. 110). Criticizing this view would require a different line of argumentation from the one directed here against the Hintikkas and Park.

condition of possibility of its having sense. At the same time, it is not directly accessible to subjects: they themselves have no idea "what each word means" (TLP 4.002).

It must be added that according to the *Tractatus*, "our language" – the outer layer of language – consists not only in "common language" (4.002) but also in various systems of description of the world that result from the use of various networks imposed on reality (TLP 6.341–6.342): that is, various possible systems of mechanistic physical explanation, or other sorts of explanation of the world. See thesis 6.35:

> Although the spots in our picture are geometrical figures, nevertheless geometry can obviously say nothing at all about their actual form and position. The network, however, is purely geometrical; all its properties can be given a priori.[9]

Beneath the layer of common talk in language, and the language of scientific hypotheses – actually, we should talk here about languages in the plural, in that there are different national languages – there is a universal logical structure, the structure of thoughts. The *Tractatus* explicates this fundamental structure as a series of forms that are truth-functions of elementary propositions. The definition of this series, which is at the same time the general form of the proposition, is given by thesis 6: "[p, ξ, $N(\xi)$]".[10] One of the ramifications of this is that each meaningful proposition is, in its deeper layer, a truth-function of elementary propositions (cf. TLP 5). So the latter are the "bricks" of Tractarian primary language, being composed of names that simple objects correspond to. It may be shown that such names (but also the objects, as I will argue in due course) are strictly abstract postulates, and that it makes no sense even just to ask about what they look or sound like.

Note that just as with phenomenological *primäre Sprache*, Tractarian "primary language" was supposed to be capable of expressing reality without any ambiguities or

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[9] It is worth noting how similar this remark is to the fragment of *Some Remarks…* talking about figures on planes I and II: that metaphor was intended to describe relations between the two systems and so between the two languages (Wittgenstein, 1929, p. 164n).

[10] In this definition "p" means all elementary propositions, "ξ" means a general member of a series, and "$N(\xi)$" means a general nexus member being a result of the N-operation applied to a previous member.

confusions. "Secondary language", on the other hand – whether physical or common – would always lack precision, as is pointed out in thesis 6.35, quoted above. Nevertheless, the meaning of our sentences depends on their unequivocal analyzability – a process that should end with the appearance of elementary propositions. As thesis 4.52 says:

> Propositions comprise all that follows from the totality of all elementary propositions (and, of course, from its being the totality of them all). (Thus, in a certain sense, it could be said that all propositions were generalizations of elementary propositions.)[11]

That "certain sense" points to a problem, which is that Wittgenstein gives no example to illustrate his analysis: i.e. no instance of a transition from our sentences containing familiar parts of speech and grammatical structures to elementary propositions consisting of the names of simple objects. Neither are we given any real example of the structure of an elementary proposition.[12] Therefore, some interpreters suggest that the Tractarian talk of analysis, in its entirety, serves merely to explicate the thesis that our sentences have sense. They are thus inclined to view the whole idea of Tractarian "primary language" as being illusory. Such interpreters also tend towards the thesis that elementary propositions play no role except in the context of the analysis of our common talk, holding that their only role is that of pointing to essential features of standard sentences (cf. Eisenthal, unpublished, p. 20; see also Kremer, 1997).

Undoubtedly, Wittgenstein should not have sought to develop a theory of elementary propositions, if he had wished to remain faithful to his own meta-philosophy. The point is that if one gives autonomy, or even priority, to such a thing as the inner layer of language, one is abusing the scope of what philosophers are entitled to pursue as set out in theses 4.111–4.116: one is not engaged in the "logical

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[11] As is well known, universal generalization is, according to the *Tractatus*, a kind of truth-function: namely, multi-part conjunction.

[12] It may seem that Wittgenstein delivers some examples in 4.24, but if one takes these to be anything more than just loose metaphors, one runs into serious interpretative problems (cf. McGinn, 2006, p. 196n).

clarification of thoughts", but rather in some sort of transcendental speculation. The Tractarian view of language requires such speculation, because it assumes the transcendental nature of Russellian-Fregean logic (which is affirmed explicitly in the thesis 6.13). This assumption gives rise to a need to elevate the status of logical relations above all others. The latter may be grounded within our practice of using language (in common talk or in science), but the former cannot be, so one is forced to seek a firmer foundation. (As will be discussed in the third part of this paper, one is also forced to talk about the limit of the world and the metaphysical "I".)

The same assumption leads to an acknowledgment of the Russellian model of analysis. The "merit" of the British philosopher, admitted by Wittgenstein directly in the thesis 4.0031, is to have shown in "On Denoting" that the grammatical form of a (common) sentence may be merely apparent, so we need to work to seek out the "real" logical form of our utterances (cf. Russell, 1905). The doctrine of the *Tractatus* holds that if the latter exists at all (i.e. if a common sentence possesses sense), then it must be a truth-function of elementary propositions.

According to the early Wittgenstein, the inner layer – the Tractarian *primäre Sprache* – is thus an inherent part of any language. It will be universal, and common to all languages that can express any sense whatsoever. Due to its particular features, this layer is not given to us directly, and perhaps we are unable to reach it at all. Nevertheless, it does exist. It shows itself to some extent through the logical regularities of surface expressions, where how far it does so will depend on the particular logical apparatus employed in *unsere Sprache*. Because we can bring order to the surface layer of language through the use of proper notation, the underlying logical relations can be rendered more perspicuous. Wittgenstein thought that the greatest achievement of his German and British predecessors was to have created notations that give a certain insight into the real structure of the symbolism, and he understood his own task as a being that of following this up with further advances in

the same direction.[13] That was what his early understanding of the idea of perspicuous representation looked like.

A Hertzian interpretation of the *Tractatus*

The nature of Tractarian simple objects has long been a debated issue. Among others things, it has been disputed whether these can only be of a material sort or can be such abstract entities as predicates and relations, whether the sum of all objects makes the objective – and thus subject-independent – substance of the world or is, instead, a kind of transcendental form projected onto reality by the knowing subject, and whether they can be identified with elementary particles or – as a couple of the authors mentioned in the preceding section of this article have claimed – are rather phenomena. There is also a standpoint according to which all the above questions lack sense, as the *Tractatus* offers no ontology – nor an epistemology of simple objects.

Among both proponents and opponents of an ontological reading of the early Wittgenstein's philosophy, there are interpreters who try to solve the simple objects conundrum by examining similarities between the *Tractatus* and *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik*, by Heinrich Hertz. Wittgenstein himself explicitly pointed to Hertz as a significant source of inspiration: he had acquired a high level of knowledge and appreciation of the *Prinzipien* even before arriving in Cambridge to study philosophy with Russell (cf. Monk, 1990, p. 23). Moreover, Hertz's name appears twice in the text of the *Tractatus*.

Gerd Graßhoff, in his paper entitled *Hertzian Objects in Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (1997), defended an ontologically-oriented materialist interpretation of the early Wittgenstein's philosophy, arguing that it follows from the assumption of Hertz's influence. A similar idea was proposed earlier by James Griffin (1964). Both authors suggested that simple objects should be understood as counterparts of Hertzian material points. This article is not the place for a broader critical discussion of these proposals, but it should be highlighted that as their starting point they assume an

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[13] As Ian Proops stresses, Wittgenstein's project of finding a perfect notation was doomed from the beginning, due to the undecidability of the full predicate calculus (cf. Proops, 2000, p. 15n).

ontological interpretation of the *Prinzipien der Mechanik*. However, as has been argued by some other authors, to ascribe ontological intentions to Hertz is at least as disputable as with the early Wittgenstein.

Joshua Eisenthal and Sara Bizarro have each argued independently for the so-called logically-oriented Hertzian interpretation, according to which Tractarian ontology is nothing but an interpretative artifact. As Bizarro shows, the same arguments that can be used to refute the idea that simple objects are a kind of sense-data (briefly presented in the previous part) speak against Griffin and Graßhoff (cf. Bizarro, 2011, p. 155n). Both she and Eisenthal attempt to make explicit the fact that if one is going to look for Hertzian counterparts of Tractarian objects, one should turn to the notion of mass-particles (*Massenteilchen*).

How should this Hertzian notion be understood? Eisenthal (unpublished, pp. 10–15) presents a detailed elucidation of it, deconstructing along the way the supposed ontology of the *Prinzipien*. As he points out, the main goal of the work was to give the general form of every possible description of dynamic systems, in terms free from metaphysical confusions of the kind generated by, for example, questions about the "real nature" of physical force. So, it can be reasonably asserted that Hertz meant to present rules for the construction of models of these systems: rules that would allow one to achieve conceptual clarity within mechanics. According to him, the essential features of any given system were the number and type of its degrees of freedom. Those would be reflected in the configurational space ascribed to it, where one and the same configurational space could be related to infinitely many different physical systems, such that each of them could be considered a model of the others.

Despite the fact that almost all dynamic systems are subject to some external forces, Hertz postulated that we should treat all systems as free: that is, as independent of external influences. (His goal was to eliminate the notion of force from physical descriptions). What classical mechanics describes in terms of forces external to a given system, the *Prinzipien der Mechanik* represents by so-called "hidden masses". The system in question was to be regarded as partial: i.e. as forming part of a larger free system, whose other remaining part (represented by a hidden mass) was itself invisible

and unanalyzable while serving to explain the movements of the "visible" part. As Eisenthal stresses, symbolic pictures of dynamic systems constructed within such a Hertzian framework do not make any claim to ontological adequacy: the only requirement for such symbolic pictures is that they should entail consequences matching those of the systems depicted.

> In the context of a scientific theory, this boils down to the requirement that the theory provides successful predictions. What Hertz strenuously emphasizes is that, on his view, the representative content of a theory does not go any further than this: 'we do not know, and we have no way to learn, whether our conception of things conforms with them in any other way, except in this one fundamental respect alone' (Eisenthal, unpublished, p. 13).

So, neither material points nor *Massenteilchen* were conceived as particular physical elements of any sort: instead, they were just conceptual tools that allowed Hertz to create mathematical models of dynamic systems, such as would fulfill the requirement of predictive efficacy. The *Prinzipien der Mechanik* defined mass-particles as properties of spatio-temporal points, in that they served as a measure of mass ascribed to a given space. Again, the job of geometrical mass systems created according to Hertzian postulates was not to reflect actual physical structures, but rather to enable one to foresee the behaviour of fragments of the physical world considered as dynamical systems. Thus, it does not make sense to ask the question posed by Graßhoff (1997, p. 105) – what does it really mean that certain spatio-temporal places have certain attributes (*Massenteilchen*)? The mass-particles were just the most elementary components of the models described within the framework of the *Prinzipien der Mechanik*.

There is one place in the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein directly recalls the title of Hertz's book. It occurs in thesis 4.04, which says:

> There must be just as much that is distinguishable in a sentence as there is in the situation that it represents.

The two must possess the same logical (mathematical) multiplicity. (Compare Hertz's *Mechanics* on dynamical models.)

As is rightly pointed out by Eisenthal, the thesis suggests that logical (or mathematical) multiplicity is, in the context of the Tractarian conception of logical picturing, a feature analogous to the multiplicity of dynamical models in the *Prinzipien der Mechanik*. The equivalence of Hertzian systems consists in their possessing the same multiplicity and type in respect of their degrees of freedom (i.e. in the identity of their configurational spaces), while that of Wittgensteinian propositions consists in the identity of the corresponding sets of all their logical relations to other propositions (Eisenthal, unpublished, pp. 15–19). This is what is meant by thesis 3.4, which says that "the proposition determines a place in logical space".[14]

As regards molecular propositions, inter-propositional relations result from their sharing the same atomic building blocks: the corresponding truth-functions have the same elementary propositions as their arguments. So the truth-value of a molecular proposition can be dependent on the truth or falsity of other molecular propositions. By contrast, at the level of elementary propositions there are no such relations. However, given the fact that various elementary propositions contain the same names, relations between senses of these propositions will follow. As is pointed out by Marie McGinn, what constitutes the meaning of a name is its occurrence in a series of different elementary propositions which may be true or false in particular situations (McGinn, 2006, pp. 88, 194n).

The proponents of anti-ontological interpretations point out that the relation between a Tractarian name and a simple object is distorted by a certain confusion, as Wittgenstein gave in to the temptation to identify the meaning of simple signs with their bearers: namely, with objects (McGinn, 2006, p. 114n). Indeed, he noticed this

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[14] Logical space, as one of the ensuing theses states, must already be given by a single proposition which reaches through it as a whole (TLP 3.42). Thus, it follows from a logically-oriented interpretation of the *Tractatus* that the sense of a single proposition assumes the senses of other propositions. So the independence of elementary propositions with respect to truth/falsity declared in thesis 4.211 – the very foundation of Wittgensteinian logical atomism – should not be extended to their independence with respect to sense. In fact, the former excludes the latter (cf. Kremer, 1997, pp. 91, 98). It is worth noting that according to this view Tractarian logical space has a great deal in common with Sellars' space of reasons.

confusion himself and criticized it in several paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. §§39–41). What followed from this confusion was precisely his striking account of objects – i.e. of their non-complexity and indestructibility. This was because the postulate of the determinacy of sense assumed by the author of the *Tractatus* (TLP 3.23) required that the meanings of simple signs be unquestionable as regards their durability.

On the other hand, if we embrace the suggestion put forward by Bizarro and Eisenthal then we arrive at an interpretation according to which the scale of this confusion is significantly smaller: Tractarian simple objects are by no means independent elements of reality, but only certain aspects of reality determined by the grammar of elementary propositions.[15] To be more precise, they are the simplest elements that we may distinguish within reality understood as a correlate of language, and so perform exactly the same role as the *Massenteilchen* do within the Hertzian system.

It is worth noting that if Wittgenstein had trusted completely in his intuitions prompted by the *Prinzipien der Mechanik*, he might well have come up with a conception of meaning focused on use as early on as in the *Tractatus*.[16] He would not have had to give any elucidations regarding the nature of simple objects: the meanings of the smallest distinguishable parts of logical pictures would have been determined by nothing more than the mutual relations obtaining between the pictures themselves. The reason Wittgenstein chose another way was his respect for Frege and Russell – and, in particular, for the latter's "merit" in having formulated the paradigm of analysis put forward in *On Denoting*, as was already mentioned above. The point was that if it was reasonable to look for the "real" form of our utterances, then there had to be a criterion for that form's counting as "real". Such a criterion need not be a definite and subject-independent form of reality, as ontological interpretations of the *Tractatus*

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[15] As Eisenthal writes: "On a logically-oriented interpretation (…) analysis uncovers whatever forms of elementary sentences and forms of names are needed in order to capture the manifest logical relationships among colloquial sentences. On this view, elementary sentences and the names of simple objects do not have significance apart from the analysis of colloquial sentences" (Eisenthal, unpublished, p. 20).

[16] Nevertheless, this work does carry the seed of a meaning-as-use conception, as has been pointed out by Michael Kremer (1997), Cora Diamond (2000), James Conant (2000) and others.

propose. One could, instead, simply proceed on the assumption that there is a universal and fully logically adequate deep structure of language (and thought) hidden beneath the surface of *unsere Sprache*. That structure will itself ensure super-rigid references to its most elementary parts (i.e. names in atomic propositions), imparting a form to reality that is such as to ensure that the latter breaks down into atomic facts construed as combinations of simple objects.

Radical anti-mentalism, or subjectless transcendentalism

Many important interpreters of the early Wittgenstein take him to have been a mentalist. According to them, he thought that the sense of a proposition of language is inherently correlated with the fact that a subject has thought that proposition. Such a reading is proposed, among others, by Norman Malcolm (1977, pp. 120–164), Peter Hacker (1999) and Hans-Johann Glock. Its point of departure is thesis 3.11, which says that we use signs of propositions as projections of possible situations, and "[t]he method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition". The immediately ensuing thesis (3.12) then formulates the claim that propositional signs express thoughts.

However, a mentalistic reading of these excerpts from the *Tractatus* has proved to be by no means uncontroversial. It has prompted objections from Rush Rhees (1970, p. 39), Peter Winch (1995, p. 101) and Cora Diamond (2013). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss these views in detail. I shall instead point to just one of the serious obstacles facing such an interpretation: if it were true, the Tractarian critique of "modern epistemology" presented in theses 5.541–5.5423 would then look highly doubtful.[17] One version of that kind of approach to epistemology had been proposed by Russell in 1912-1913, in the form of his multiple-relational theory of judgment. He had assumed that the subject of judgment is external to language, and functions as a binding agent, linking words together into sentences. Wittgenstein had refuted this solution as early as summer 1913 (cf. Wittgenstein, 2008, p. 40). In his

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[17] An alternative is to assume that the theses 3.11 and 3.12 are framed in language of a higher-order level than that which the rest of the *Tractatus* talks about. However, this would spoil Wittgenstein's solution to the problem of set-theoretical antinomies.

wartime notebooks, moreover, he had argued that Russell's theory does not furnish us with criteria for telling apart sentences that are properly formed on the one hand, and such ill-formed pseudo-sentences as "the table penholders the book" on the other (cf. Potter, 2008, p. 121n). Later, in the *Tractatus*, he presented a view to the effect that such nonsensical mixtures of words cannot be thought. One aspect of this view is the thesis that so-called "intensional" contexts may, in the course of analysis, be replaced by propositions that lack such contexts, without any change to the sense of the utterance in question. As he wrote in thesis 5.542:

> But it is clear that "*A* believes that *p*", "*A* thinks *p*", "*A* says *p*", are of the form "'*p*' says *p*": and here we have no co-ordination of a fact and an object, but a co-ordination of facts by means of a co-ordination of their objects.[18]

It follows from thesis 5.542 that thinking subjects are not external to language, as had been assumed by Russell. For, given that "A thinks *p*" has, in fact, the form "'*p*' thinks *p*", then if A is a fact which symbolizes *p* and which is related to it by means of projection, as thesis 3.11 claims, then A should be understood as a set of propositions (beliefs) requiring language as a condition of its own possibility.[19]

However, this means that the thinking subject that thesis 5.542 talks about – the common human being to whom we ascribe certain beliefs, including the human being qua referent of the pronoun "I" when that pronoun is construed psychologically – cannot be the subject of an act of thinking the sense of propositions: i.e. some act such as would yield a method of projection responsible for imparting meaning to signs.

This conclusion brings us to the transcendental interpretation of the *Tractatus*. According to its classical version, there is a supra-empirical subject linked to various

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[18] It should be noted that this formulation is to some extent misleading. The sign '*p*' is supposed to express the idea that there is a symbolic fact exhibiting logical multiplicity identical to that of the fact *p*. But assume we have two different subjects, A and B, who both assert *p*. Wittgenstein's notation itself fails to adequately capture the multiplicity of the situation it tries to depict, as it is unable to distinguish between "A says *p*" and "B says *p*". So the sign '*p*' should instead be replaced by an indexically qualified sign, along the lines of 'p'_A', 'p'_B', etc., with such indices serving to pick out the particular spatio-temporal coordinates of occurrences of the symbolic fact in question. (I would like to thank Jan Wawrzyniak for drawing my attention to Wittgenstein's shortcoming in this regard.)

[19] This has been pointed out by Hans Sluga (cf. 1996, p. 325n).

mentions of the "I" construed in non-psychological terms, and a metaphysical subject, this latter being the limit of the world, as in thesis 5.641. Such a subject was, in a mysterious way, to be identical to both the narrator of the *Tractatus* and the world itself (theses 5.6 and 5.63), and so would constitute the inexpressible truth of solipsism.[20]

Yet, if we take seriously Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophy in theses 4.111– 4.116, this classical story of a supra-empirical subject loses its cogency. For the proper goal of the *Tractatus* is not then to construe theories based on *a priori* insights into the nature of reality,[21] but rather to elucidate certain problematic notions. One of these is the notion of "I" construed in a non-psychological sense, or the metaphysical subject. Thesis 5.641, read as an elucidation, says that there is, in fact, a certain context in which we are inclined to use such notions. This context is, however, very peculiar: it is a philosophical discourse about the world as a whole. In such a framework, the metaphysical subject is the limit of the world.

It may be said that the Tractarian notion of the limit of the world (which is also the limit of meaningful language and thinking – see 5.6 and 5.61) is limited itself, for there is no place for such a notion in a perfectly logically ordered language. This is because it is neither the name of an object or possible complex of objects, nor a formal concept (i.e. a concept expressing the character of a certain variable or the general term of a certain formal series). Its dubious status is revealed in the Preface, where Wittgenstein writes about drawing a limit to thinking and at the same time excludes any associations with the idea of dividing up some uniform area (cf. Stern, 1995, p. 76n). It is clear that the author of the *Tractatus* uses the concept of limit only provisionally, to express his aims, and was happy for it to be thrown away afterwards (cf. TLP 6.54).

The real reason the young Wittgenstein required the concept of limit was for his overall conception of logic, which is transcendental in spirit. It is true that the

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[20] Many interpreters take this approach to reading the early Wittgenstein: e.g. Hans Sluga (1996) and Richard Brockhaus (1991). Pasquale Frascolla goes a few steps further, and identifies the metaphysical subject with God (Frascolla, 1994, p. 30n).

[21] It is worth noting that the Wittgensteinian critique of transcendentalism, which was clearly expressed by him both in the 1930s and in later remarks, did not focus solely on epistemic issues. Wittgenstein considered transcendentalism in its many forms to be a manifestation of the decay of European culture (cf. Markewitz, 2019).

Tractatus was an important step forward on the way to removing confusions about the character of logical relations, compared to the metaphysical conceptions of Frege and Russell. But it did not go all the way. The early Wittgenstein claimed, on the one hand, that the theses of logic do not express anything, and that logic cannot be described as it sets the norms for any description itself. On the other hand, though, he also claimed that logical norms are unshakable and absolutely strict.[22] The actual empirical reality of our lives cannot itself justify any such absolute strictness: hence the need for such Tractarian metaphors as "the scaffolding of the world", "the essential in a symbol", and "the essence of the notation", expressing a belief in a deep layer of symbolism (as discussed in the first part of this paper). Only after his rejection of the postulate of "the crystalline purity of logic" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. §107) was he in a position to remove this metaphysical *residuum*, but the philosopher did not accomplish this before the thirties.

Returning to the Tractarian concept of limit, we may also note that in the first instance it serves to distinguish sense from nonsense: in order to eliminate misunderstandings that persist within *unsere Sprache*, we need to be able to separate them from what is truly meaningful. We do not accomplish this by drawing some line of demarcation, but rather by elucidating the structure of the inner layer of language (the *Tractatus' primäre Sprache*, as I have called it, following the example of Rotter). The aim of the latter is to make the relationship between the two layers transparent through the introduction of perspicuous notation into *unsere Sprache* – with this sufficing to fully disclose our nonsensical utterances. Once this goal has been fulfilled, there will be no further use for the notion of limit.

All this means that the non-psychological notion of "I" is provisional too. It has its place within philosophy understood as the activity of logically clarifying thoughts (see TLP 4.112), and serves that purpose,[23] but certainly only if not treated as a subject of

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[22] As has been noted *inter alia* by Marie McGinn, these claims were taken from Frege and Russell (McGinn, 2013, p. 112).

[23] It may be noted that another provisional notion of the kind used in the *Tractatus* is that of the world as a whole, employed in theses 5.6, 6.41, 6.43, 6.45 and commentaries upon these.

description.[24] For if the transcendental subject is to be understood as the limit of the world, and that limit is not external but internal, in that it is identical to the logical structure of *primäre Sprache*, then one may say that the non-psychological "I" is ultimately a hypostatization of a certain aspect of the activity of the inner layer of language. No wonder that Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that there is a truth in solipsism, but that it cannot be expressed! For its expression would have had to have been as follows: "primary language" is itself its own metaphysical subject, for *it* thinks the senses of elementary propositions and thus provides the method of their projection, and since logic is a unity, and in consequence *primäre Sprache* is universal, so there can only be one non-psychological subject.[25] Yet such an expression would have been nonsensical: the early Wittgenstein plainly does not construe the symbolism as constituting a subject of sorts in and of itself, as it has no will, no needs, and no goals to achieve.[26] The only thing that inclines us to construe the symbolism in such terms is its auto-projective function.

Conclusion

The interpretation offered in the present paper may prove controversial, not only because it is based on interpretative judgements that are open to dispute, but also because it holds that the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is incoherent in that it develops intuitions that ultimately cannot be made to fit together. It seems reasonable to assert that if this last point holds, then there is no definite answer to the question of the correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. The only thing which can still then be said is that a certain multiplicity of coherent but mutually exclusive

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[24] Note that Tractarian elucidations pass from non-psychological uses of "I" to possessive pronouns: "The I occurs in philosophy through the fact that the «world is my world»" (TLP 5.641).

[25] Cora Diamond has pointed out that Wittgenstein uses the impersonal mode of speech when he writes about thinking and the method of projection. She argues that he does so deliberately in order to dissuade readers from adopting a mentalistic interpretation (cf. Diamond, 2013, p. 154).

[26] Some interpreters have presented even bolder theories. Jaakko Hintikka, in one of his 1958 papers, proposed the thesis that the Wittgensteinian metaphysical subject is just the sum total of language (Hintikka, 1958, p. 89). However, Hintikka also identified the metaphysical subject with a factual subject, such as the subject A from thesis 5.542 (Hintikka, 1958, p. 90).

interpretations is maximally convergent with what the philosopher wanted to say in the *Tractatus*.

Perhaps this is so. Nevertheless, the view presented here may seem quite reasonable. Its starting point is the conception of philosophy given in theses 4.111-4.116. Yet this conception itself faces an impassable obstacle: a requirement of supra-empirical durability on the part of the fundamental structures of language, where this is taken to follow from the very idea of logic. Therefore the *Tractatus*, contrary to its own declarations, must after all contain a certain minimal metaphysics postulating a transcendental structure. This structure will be the perfectly logically ordered inner layer of language. On the basis of functional resemblances to the particular conception of a phenomenological language adopted by Wittgenstein in 1929, it can be referred to as "Tractarian *primäre Sprache*".

The non-classical version of a transcendental reading of the *Tractatus* presented here reduces its metaphysical content to an absolute minimum, in that it rules out any "full-blooded" transcendental subject. Some classical transcendental readings treat the latter as one of the two poles of the intentional relation that constitutes symbols (meaningful signs), the other one being extra-linguistic reality. Instead, the non-classical version imports this intentional relation, so to speak, into language itself: more specifically, into its transcendental part – *primäre Sprache*. The only metaphysical part of this image is the part that the early Wittgenstein assumed to be metaphysical from the very beginning. "Primary language" "absorbs" the non-empirical subject – or rather, takes over the function of this subject – much as it "absorbs" the ontological structure of reality, which latter turns out to be secondary to its own grammar.

It should be stressed that just as in the phenomenological period, so also at the time of the *Tractatus*, "primary language" functions above the level of empirical subjects. They are responsible only for the "clothing": i.e. the surface layer of the symbolisms they use, whose complicated texture results from tacit social agreements. This layer can only have sense, can only reach reality, because of the deeper layer. So it appears that *we* do not bind our sentences to what is the case: rather we are mere

users of a symbolic system that does the binding itself. This is how Wittgenstein fused together his Russellian and Fregean inspirations in the *Tractatus*. Frege had held that psychological states cannot be responsible for the meanings of propositions: otherwise, logic itself would be fact-dependent. The logician from Jena, at the end of his philosophical career, developed his anti-psychological intuitions into a conception according to which thoughts, as objective immaterial entities, allow our minds to be connected to external reality: human consciousness can be about the world only because it can grasp a thought. He wrote:

> Having visual impressions is certainly necessary for seeing things, but not sufficient. What must still be added is not anything sensible. And yet this is just what opens up the external world for us; for without this non-sensible something [a thought] everyone would remain shut up in his inner world (Frege, 1984, p. 369).

It seems reasonable to claim that the *Tractatus* presents a somewhat different line of development of the same intuition: one inspired by the Russellian conception of analysis. And in Wittgenstein's conception the role of Fregean thoughts was to be played by elementary propositions, whose truth-functions would be the content of our meaningful expressions.

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Abstract:

I defend an interpretation of the *Tractatus* based on the following three theses:

1) The Wittgenstein's work offers a double-layered vision of language, similar to the vision developed during his brief phenomenological period.

2) The so-called Tractarian ontology is actually a purely formal construction, entailed by the structure of what we shall refer to as the inner layer of language.

3) It should be recognized that the metaphysical *residuum* within the early Wittgenstein's thought is a certain minimal form of transcendentalism, according to which language – or strictly speaking its ore – performs the function of the transcendental subject for itself.

A crucial element of my position is the conclusion that, according to the Tractarian conception of language, the meaning of propositions is not only independent of empirical subjects, but also the condition of their possibility. This amounts to a resolute adaptation of Frege's principled anti-psychologism on Wittgenstein's part.

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