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ON WITTGENSTEIN'S 'SOLIPSISM'

THE main difficulties people have had in trying to understand Wittgenstein's pronouncements on solipsism in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London, 1922) are connected with the proposition 5.62 of the book. This proposition has recently been quoted by Professor J. O. Urmson¹ in the following form:

In fact what solipsism *intends* is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself. That the world is *my* world shows itself in the fact that the limits of language (*the* language, which I alone understand) means the limits of my world.

The clause in the brackets is, beyond reasonable doubt, a mistranslation. The German original reads: "... die Grenzen der Sprache (der Sprache, die allein ich verstehe) die Grenzen *meiner* Welt bedeuten." The joker here is the word 'allein'. In all the relevant examples that I have seen quoted in the dictionaries, this word is used to qualify the word it *follows*. The same is the case with all the other (relevant) instances of 'allein' that I have come across in the *Tractatus* (cf. 2.224 and 5.631). One of the dictionaries (Sanders, *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*) states that one of the nearly synonymous words *nur*, *bloss*, *einsig* is used instead of *allein* (to mean 'alone') in all the contexts where the position of the word could make it ambiguous. The parenthetical clause would be a case in point if 'allein' there meant 'alone'.

It is obvious, then, that a correct translation of the words in the brackets is "the only language that I understand". In fact, this is the way Russell reads the passage (see his introduction to the *Tractatus*, p. 18); and it is essentially the way the passage is rendered in English in the copy of the book I have at my disposal (third impression, 1947).

The removal of this mistake is not without interest, for the incorrect translation of 5.62 was the only passage of the *Tractatus* which would have forced one to conclude that Wittgenstein held something like solipsism in the usual sense of the word. In the passage I have quoted he says that what solipsism *intends* is correct; and many readers have taken this to mean that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* accepted ordinary solipsism. I shall suggest, however, that the passage is to be understood in a different way. What Wittgenstein thought solipsism *intends* to say is entirely different from what philosophers usually take it to say. When he says that solipsism is correct he means his peculiar interpretation of solipsism which can only be understood in the context of the other doctrines of the *Tractatus*.

This is shown, I think, by the way Wittgenstein presents his remarks on solipsism and argues for them in the *Tractatus*. His alleged solipsism turns on the claim that the limits of language

¹ J. O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford, 1956), p. 135.

are the limits of the world. What, then, is meant by this? What, in particular, is meant by the limits or boundaries (*Grenzen*) of the world? The answer is given on the page of the *Tractatus* which precedes the first remarks on solipsism: "Empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects. The boundary appears again in the totality of elementary propositions." And what is the relation of this 'boundary' to logic? Again we find an explicit answer in the *Tractatus*: Logic cannot anticipate what objects and what elementary propositions there are in the world. Although logic is prior to every 'how', it is not prior to 'what' (5.552). "We cannot therefore say in logic: This and this there is in the world, that there is not." (Cf. 5.61 and 5.557.) Questions of this kind are only decided by the application of logic, and this application cannot be anticipated by purely logical means (5.557). Although logic is prior to every representation of *how* the world is, its limits can in this special sense be said to coincide with the limits of the world.

The way Wittgenstein argues for this view is seen from 5.5-5.557. The basic reason for his view is that if the totality of elementary propositions could be discussed in logic, we should be able to tell *a priori* once and for all what the forms of all elementary propositions are. And this is taken by him to be impossible. (Cf. 5.55-5.551.)

But what does this have to do with solipsism? In view of the way Wittgenstein was seen to argue for his view, we can answer: *nothing*, as long as we do not grant him a further consequence of the view we have discussed so far. This further doctrine is *prima facie* very peculiar, for it in effect identifies the subject (the *metaphysical* subject, Wittgenstein says) with the sum total of his language. To be more accurate, Wittgenstein identifies the limits of one's language with the limits of one's self. The motives of this apparently strange doctrine are clear from Wittgenstein's remarks. What he is concerned with is not the empirical subject but the 'metaphysical' subject discussed in philosophy. In other words, he is interested only in what can be said to be mine *necessarily*; for otherwise he would only be doing empirical psychology. But the only necessity there is, according to the other doctrines of the *Tractatus*, is the empty tautological necessity of logic. There is nothing, therefore, in the world which can be said to be mine in the relevant sense of the word. If I can say that something is mine, it immediately follows that this something can possibly be yours, too.¹ In particular, it follows from the doctrines I explained above that there is no part of the world of which it can be said that it necessarily is. "No part of our experience is . . . *a priori*" (5.634). Hence, "in an important sense, there is no subject"; the 'thinking, imagining subject' does not do as the metaphysical subject (5.631).

¹ Cf. *Philosophical Investigations* 253 (p. 91): "In so far as it makes sense to say that my pain is the same as his, it is also possible for us both to have the same pain."

The only boundaries I cannot possibly transcend are those of my language. Whatever we think can be expressed in language; there is no way of getting 'beyond' language. "What we cannot think, that we cannot think; we cannot even say what we cannot think" (5.61). Hence, the only way of drawing the limits of the metaphysical subject seems to be to identify them with the limits of my language.

The fact that Wittgenstein's 'metaphysical' subject is a complex not unlike a totality of propositions is also seen from his analysis of the form of words "*A* believes that *p*". The analysis in 5.541–5.5421 is calculated to show that "*A* believes that *p*" is really of the form "'*p*' says *p*". In other words, to say that a person believes that *p* is to say (or, rather, to show) that the propositional sign '*p*' (which is a fact) represents or mirrors the fact that *p* (see 5.542). The original form of words which *prima facie* is about the person *A* in this way turns out to be about a *proposition* which is somehow connected with *A*. This proposition is taken by Wittgenstein to be a part of the "subject" *A*; for otherwise the complexity of '*p*' (or, under an alternative reading, the multiplicity of propositions believed by *A*) would not show that the subject (the soul) is complex, as claimed by Wittgenstein in 5.5421.

Unless the 'linguistic' nature of Wittgenstein's 'metaphysical' subject is recognized, it is open to a serious *prima facie* criticism. It has been argued¹ that Wittgenstein overlooks the possibility (and necessity) of a subject's direct self-consciousness. As a criticism of Wittgenstein's way of illustrating his point by comparing the world to the field of vision, it has been pointed out that while it is not essential for the eye to see itself through the constitution of the field of vision, it is (allegedly) essential for thinking to have consciousness of itself. Whatever is the ultimate force of this objection, it cannot be made within our interpretation of Wittgenstein's doctrines. If the 'metaphysical' subject is a totality of propositions, it *cannot* refer to itself, for it follows from the other doctrines of the *Tractatus* that no proposition can refer to itself (cf. 3.332).

Perhaps a more natural way of saying that Wittgenstein identified the metaphysical subject with a totality of propositions would be to say that he identified it with a totality of *thoughts*; for "the thought is the significant proposition". There is, however, nothing private and nothing psychological about Wittgenstein's notion of a thought. Like Frege's *Gedanke*,² it can be shared by different people. In the *Tractatus* the propositional signs are completely public, and so is that which "does not get expressed in the signs";

¹ See Francesco Barone, 'Il solipsismo linguistico di Ludwig Wittgenstein', *Filosofia*, Rivista trimestrale, vol. 2 (1951), no. 4, pp. 543–570, especially p. 560.

² See *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by Peter Geach and Max Black (Blackwells, Oxford, 1952), p. 63.

for if it were private, it could not be "shown by their application" (3.262). And the limits of the metaphysical subject cannot be the limits of one's actual thoughts, for there is nothing necessary about *that* limitation. The only necessary limits are the general limits of possible thoughts, i.e. the limits of language in general.

This is the basis of Wittgenstein's 'solipsism'. Having identified the metaphysical subject with the totality of one's language and the limits of language with the limits of the world, he could say that the limits of the (metaphysical) subject are the limits of the world. "I am my world." We must not fail to see, however, that the motives of this version of solipsism have little to do with what is ordinarily called 'solipsism'. For instance, it has nothing to do with the classification of elementary propositions into 'mine' and 'yours'. Wittgenstein's point is that if we can speak of such a distinction at all, then the distinction is irrelevant; for if we can speak of the distinction, it is automatically contingent. Hence, it appears rather far-fetched to see in Wittgenstein's 'solipsism' an anticipation of the troubles of the logical positivists about 'other minds'.¹ One can say that the reason why Wittgenstein claimed that solipsism is essentially correct is diametrically opposed to the reason usually given for solipsism. What is usually taken to be the claim of solipsism is the *impossibility* of getting 'beyond the boundaries of myself'. Wittgenstein's solipsism is based on the exactly opposite claim that all the ordinary boundaries of myself are completely *contingent* and hence irrelevant 'for what is higher'.

How little Wittgenstein's identification of one's self with the logical limits of one's language (which are nothing but the limitations of language in general) has to do with solipsism is perhaps seen by observing that essentially the same identification was used by Charles Sanders Peirce for the opposite purpose. In his early discussion of the 'consequences of the four incapacities' (The *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 1868; *Collected Papers*, 5. 264-317) Peirce came to identify, for reasons of his own, 'my language' with 'the sum total of myself'. From this he concluded that "the individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation". This is ordinarily neglected because man "persists in identifying himself with his will, his power over the animal organism, with brute force"; a remark which compares in an interesting way with the proposition 5.631 of the *Tractatus*.

The similarities, and dissimilarities, between Wittgenstein and Peirce should make us take seriously the former's claim that, under his interpretation, "solipsism, strictly carried out, coincides with pure realism".

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¹ Cf. Urmson, *op. cit.* p. 135.