Metaphysics Handouts
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Handout 6

Nonsense, objects, realism, idealism: Wittgenstein, White, Child

THE FUNDAMENTAL IDEA: NOBODY PLAYS 'OR'. Wittgenstein's 'fundamental idea' is that the 'logical constants' aren't representatives, and that there can be no representatives of the logic of facts. White translates '*vertreten*' as 'stand in for', the word for a police reconstruction of a crime, where a policewoman stands in for the victim and a policeman for the attacker. 4.0312 W72

Thus consider:

(6-1) a. John loves Mary or John loves Kate.
b. Few people love no one.

If (6-1a) is true, that's because one disjunct is. There's no disjunctive fact of John-loving-Mary-or-Kate for 'or' to stand in for. White won't retreat to elementary propositions, as some commentators do: the argument that propositions are pictures is completely general and must cover (6-1b). On White's reading, Wittgenstein's answer is that the proposition's logical complexity must mirror the situation's, so that the two have the same logical multiplicity. Having as many distinguishable parts as the situation is only the simple case, and for the logical constants the idea has to be extended. Namely, the job of the logical apparatus is to pick out the combinations of truth and falsity of elementary propositions that make a complex proposition true, and these mirror the combinations of existence and non-existence of states of affairs. Take (6-1a), and suppose John's loving Mary and John's loving Kate are two simple states of affairs. They can exist or not in four combinations: both, the first alone, the second alone, neither. The two elementary propositions picturing them can be true or false in four matching ways. That's the same multiplicity: four cases to tell apart on each side. Of the four, (6-1a) allows the first three and rules out the last. So 'or' divides the cases, and nothing in any of them answers to it. W73 W47, 72 4.04 W73-74 W75

Definition 1. A representation's 'logical multiplicity' is the number of distinct cases it can tell apart. It must equal the number of cases the situation can present: exactly as many distinguishable parts in the proposition as in what it represents. In the simplest case that's a headcount, two elements for two men fighting, and for (6-1a) it's the four combinations just counted, with 'or' doing the sorting and adding no part of its own. 4.04 W74

Could we communicate with false propositions, if everyone knew they were meant as false? No. If by '*p*' we mean not-*p* and things are as we mean, then '*p*', read our way, is true. Since '*p*' and 'not-*p*' can be made to say the same thing, nothing in reality corresponds to the negation sign. The two have opposite sense, but one and the same reality answers to both. 4.062 4.0621

Example 2. Imagine a police reconstruction of 'John loves Mary': one person stands in for John and another for Mary. Now try to reconstruct (6-1a). You can stage John loving Mary, and then, as a second scene, John loving Kate. But nobody plays 'or', no prop or arrangement does either, and Kate has to stand somewhere even if John doesn't love her. What (6-1a) adds to the two scenes isn't a third thing in the room but a verdict on them: at least one is the right one. So 'or' stands in for nothing in the scene: it tells you which of the stagings must be right. W72-73

Question 3. If 'not' stands for nothing, how does 'the cat is not on the mat' say something different from 'the cat is on the mat'? And is the structure Wittgenstein argues for, which (6-1b) doesn't show on its face, real, or, as White puts the worry, a 'fantastic mythology' grafted onto everyday language? W68

NONSENSE, NOT FALSEHOOD. Language disguises thought: from the outward form of the clothing you can't infer the form of the body, since clothes aren't cut to reveal it. So most propositions and questions in philosophical works aren't false but nonsensical. They're like asking whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful. Russell's theory of descriptions showed that apparent logical form (surface structure) needn't be real form (deep structure). Thus 'The present king of France is bald' isn't subject-predicate after all. 4.002 4.003 4.0031 W70

Next consider:

(6-2) a. Green is green.
b. Seven is red.

In (6-2a) the first word is a person's name and the last an adjective. The two don't merely have different meanings: they're different symbols sharing a sign, as 'is' serves as copula, identity and existence. On Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, as White reads it, we shouldn't say (6-2b) is nonsense because numbers can't be coloured. 'Is red' was introduced as a propositional variable ranging over sentences that never included this one, so (6-2b) doesn't contain 'red' in its familiar sense, and we've given it no other. 3.323 W64

Example 4. Three cases. 'The theorem is jealous' isn't false but nonsense of the (6-2b) kind: 'is jealous' was introduced over sentences about people, never over theorems, so the sign is here and the familiar symbol isn't, and no other has been supplied. So it says nothing. The rival diagnosis, that theorems can't have feelings, keeps 'jealous' in its ordinary sense and lets the nature of theorems rule the sentence out, so it treats the sentence as saying something, only something impossible. 'Nothing is better than God' and 'nothing is better than a ham sandwich' are each true or false: 'nothing' is a quantifier, no thing is better. Link them into 'a ham sandwich is better than God' and 'nothing' (like in Carnap's Heidegger!) has become the name of a thing with a place in the ranking: one sign, two symbols. 'Buffalo buffalo buffalo' is one sign and three symbols, a city's name, a common noun and a verb, so it says that bison from Buffalo bully, and that's true or false. The test isn't whether the world could make the sentence true but whether each sign has a symbol behind it in that place. W64 3.323

Question 5. Is this answer just ‘numbers can’t be coloured’ moved into grammar? And is the picture theory itself a set of philosophical propositions, nonsensical by its own standard?

Example 6 (Vulcan). In 1859 the astronomer Le Verrier found that Mercury’s orbit doesn’t quite fit Newton’s theory, and proposed that an unseen planet between Mercury and the Sun was responsible. It was named Vulcan, and astronomers looked for it for decades. There’s no such planet: in 1915 Einstein’s GTR accounted for Mercury’s orbit without it. Now take a sentence an astronomer of 1870 might have used.

(6-3) Vulcan is nearer to the Sun than Mercury.

Was (6-3) false? Then ‘Vulcan isn’t nearer to the Sun than Mercury’ ought to be true, but is it? Did (6-3) say nothing at all? Then nobody could tell that they were talking sense until they knew that a further sentence, ‘There is such a planet as Vulcan’, was true. Yet the astronomers understood (6-3) well enough to know where to point their telescopes.

So we want two things: a name means what it stands for, and a sentence makes sense whether or not that thing exists. The *Tractatus* keeps both, at a price: beneath all that might not have existed lie objects that exist whatever is the case.

What must the world be like for us to talk about it? The picture theory, from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and White’s ‘Pictures and propositions’, left us with one result. What a picture represents, it represents independently of its truth or falsity, and to tell which it is we have to compare it with reality. To understand a proposition is to know what is the case if it’s true, so we understand it without knowing whether it’s true. A sentence is understood before it’s checked, so what it says can’t depend on how the check comes out: a proposition makes sense independently of its being true. White draws the consequence: unlike a name, a proposition can’t get its sense by being correlated with something that actually exists. So what must exist for a sentence to make sense at all? One answer is nothing: we talk about what isn’t there all the time, and (6-3) was understood. The opposite answer is everything the sentence mentions: with no Vulcan, (6-3) says nothing. The *Tractatus* takes a course in between: something must exist whatever is the case, but it needn’t be what the sentence mentions. What must there be, however things turn out, if a sentence is to make sense before it’s checked? A book on logic opens with the world because its guiding concept is being true or false, and to be true or false is to answer to something. The world comes in only as what our sentences answer to, the sum of whatever makes them right or wrong. When the *Tractatus* says what the world must be like, is that the world’s own structure, which language has to copy, or a structure that our language lays over the world? White’s answer, given as Wittgenstein’s own, is that both alternatives are unreal: raising the question is an attempt to make ‘logic transgress the limits of the world’, and we’ve given it no sense. Child’s three readings in the last section, realist, idealist and deflationist, sort the possible answers, so the question comes back there.

2.22-223 4.024 W68 W22-23 W27 W27-28

Question 7. What’s the least a world must contain for someone in it to say something false about it? A speaker, presumably. What else?

Facts, not things. The world is everything that is the case, and that’s the totality of facts, not of things. Why not of things? A list of the things there are fits many ways the world might have been, since it doesn’t say how they’re arranged. And a sentence answers to the arrangement. What makes ‘John is happy’ true isn’t John but the fact that he’s happy. A fact is the existence of states of affairs, and a state of affairs is a combination of objects. Don’t picture bricks first and buildings afterwards. That is, don’t begin with objects and assemble facts from them. Instead, we arrive at objects by analysing facts.

1-1.1 W23 W30 2-2.01 W30

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Example 8. It’s tempting to picture a fact as a large object with the things it’s about as its parts, so that the fact that Daphnis loves Chloe is a whole made of Daphnis and Chloe. Frege took the *Tractatus* to mean that, White reports, and objected that what holds of parts and wholes doesn’t hold of facts. A part of a part is a part of the whole, so Daphnis’s left foot would be a part of the fact that Daphnis loves Chloe, which is absurd. So a fact isn’t a whole with things as parts. White’s moral is that you can name a person without a thought for what he’s made of, while a fact can be specified only by a sentence that displays its structure. That’s why we arrive at objects by analysing facts, and not at facts by assembling objects.

W32 W32-33

Question 9. Suppose you’re handed a complete list of the things in your room, and someone moves a chair to the window. The list hasn’t changed. Has the world? And can you point at the fact that the chair is by the window, as you can point at the chair?

Objects carry their possibilities. What are the objects? The text never says. Conceivably, the argument is that there are such objects, not what they are. Finding out would take empirical enquiry, chiefly a full analysis of our language. They aren’t tiny particles: if this is atomism, it’s logical and not physical. What we’re told is formal. It’s essential to a thing that it can occur in states of affairs, and nothing here is accidental: the possibility is written into the thing itself from the beginning. That possibility is the object’s ‘form’. So if you know an object, you know every state of affairs it could occur in, and no new possibility can be discovered later: given all the objects, all possible states of affairs are given too. Each thing sits, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs. You can imagine that space empty, but you can’t imagine the thing without it.

W25 2.0141 W36 2.011-0121 2.0123-0124 2.013

Example 10. A speck in your visual field needn’t be red, but it must have some colour. It’s surrounded by ‘colour-space’, as a spatial object is by space. A note must have some pitch, and what you touch some degree of hardness. These illustrate the space of possible states of affairs, but we aren’t told that a speck is an object.

2.0131

Example 11. You know what a chess knight is when you know how it can move. Its shape doesn’t matter, and a bottle top will do for a lost one. Could you know what a knight is and discover next year that it can also move along a diagonal? If it could, it wouldn’t have been a knight. Its moves are internal to it, and its shape and its present square are external.

2.01231

One more claim makes trouble. States of affairs are independent of one another: from the existence or non-existence of one, nothing can be inferred about another. 2.061-062

Question 12. If states of affairs are independent, none of them rules another out. Now take ‘The point *X* is dark blue’ and ‘The point *X* is light blue’. Each looks elementary, utterly specific and free of logical complexity, and yet the first rules the second out. So either they aren’t elementary after all, and each still analyses into something more basic that we can’t exhibit, or independence fails. White thinks that giving it up would do the book comparatively little damage. Which horn do you take, and what does each cost? Would a world still divide into facts, each able to be the case or not while everything else remains the same? W34, 57 W35 1.21

Substance. Objects are simple, and they make up the ‘substance’ of the world. The argument takes two sentences. 2.02-2.021

> If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true. In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false). 2.0211-0212

Notice the direction. The argument doesn’t run from a discovery of simple things to a language built on them. White remarks that Wittgenstein here appears to infer facts about the world from the fact that language must be possible. The last step, from 2.0211 to 2.0212, is disputed, he notes, and the reading that follows is his own. W38

Example 13. Take a teapot, a pot with a lid. It might not have existed. So treat it as a ‘complex’: what exists if and only if a certain proposition is true, here that the lid is in the pot. W41

(6-4) The teapot weighs five ounces.

(6-5) The lid is in the pot, and the sum of the weights of the pot and the lid is five ounces.

Then (6-4) resolves into (6-5), a clause that describes the complex and a claim about its constituents. The gain is that (6-5) doesn’t name the teapot: if there’s no teapot, it’s simply false. But it names the pot and the lid, which might not have existed either, so we have to do the same for them. 2.0201

The analysis either goes on forever or stops at constituents that aren’t complexes: simple objects, of which it makes no sense to say that they might not exist. Suppose it never stopped. Then at every level a proposition would make sense only if a further proposition were true, the one saying that the complexes it names exist. No proposition would make sense independently of how things are, and that independence is what the picture theory established above: without it there’s no picture of the world, true or false, to sketch. So the analysis must stop, and what it stops at are the simple objects. Otherwise every name, at every level, would be where ‘Socrates’ is on the everyday view. W41-42 W42

Example 14. On the everyday view ‘Socrates was wise’ names Socrates and says something of him. Then it makes sense only if a further significant proposition, ‘There was such a person as Socrates’, is true. Why should that matter? White puts the objection himself: we name the people around us without any trouble. His answer for Wittgenstein turns on a view of pictures. What a picture is a picture of must be an intrinsic property of it, to be read off the picture itself without reference to anything outside. A picture of Napoleon leading his army to Moscow can’t owe its being that picture to the contingent fact that there was a Napoleon. So it has to break down into pictures whose elements stand for things whose existence is guaranteed a priori. W42 W43 W43-44

One stock of objects for every world. Imagine a world as different from the real one as you like. It must still have a form in common with it, and the objects are what make up that unalterable form. Objects are what’s unalterable and subsistent, and their configuration is what changes. So to imagine another world, White says, is to imagine these very objects combined differently. It’s tempting to sum up: objects exist necessarily. For White, this misrepresents Wittgenstein. Objects are a precondition of there being any facts, so it can’t itself be a matter of fact that they exist. Better to say that they unquestionably exist, meaning that we can attach no sense to the question whether they do. What tempts us to say ‘necessarily’ is shown by the way our language works, and it can’t be said. 2.022-2.023 2.0271 W44 W38 W44

Question 15. Try to imagine a world that shares nothing with ours. What did you build it from? Could there have been more objects, or fewer, or others? If not, is that a discovery about reality or a limit on what we can imagine and say?

Names. Now the same structure from the side of language. Many remarks about the world have a twin about language, White observes: objects are simple, and names are simple signs. A thought can be expressed so that the elements of the propositional sign correspond to the objects of the thought. Such elements are ‘simple signs’, and such a proposition is ‘completely analysed’. The simple signs are names. A name means an object, and the object is its meaning. In the proposition the name is the object’s representative. W26-27 3.2-3.201 3.202-203 3.22

Example 16. White’s model is a police reconstruction of a crime. A policewoman stands in for the victim and a policeman for the criminal, and the way the two are placed shows how the crime is supposed to have happened. In ‘John loves Mary’ the two names stand in for John and Mary in the same way. Standing in is the whole of a name’s job, so a name is simple by its role, not by its look. A sign could be a single letter and still abbreviate a long phrase. W53

Objects can only be named: a proposition can say how a thing is, not what it is. And a name can’t be taken apart by a definition. Then how is its meaning explained? By ‘elucidations’, propositions that contain the name, so they’re understood only by someone who already knows what it means. White adds that pointing won’t do, since it doesn’t fix the name’s role in the language. We can only use the name in sentences and leave it to chance whether the learner catches on. 3.221 3.26 3.263 W61

Question 17. If every explanation of a name already uses it, how did you learn your first one? Is the circle vicious, or is it how any basic vocabulary is learned? And if objects can only be named, what are we doing when we say that they’re simple?

FOUND, MADE, OR NEITHER? What is the status of these objects? Child sorts the answers into three readings, and illustrates the first two with a board.

Example 18. What are the simple parts of a chessboard? Perhaps 32 white squares and 32 black ones. Or the colours black and white together with the schema of squares. Or 32 rectangles, each made of one white square and one black. Find a fourth division before you read on, and then ask whether any of the four is the board's own. If one is, simplicity is absolute, a matter of the board's intrinsic nature, and that's how the realist thinks of objects. If it depends on the system of representation we use to describe the board, that's how the idealist thinks of them. The board is the later Wittgenstein's, from *Philosophical Investigations* §§47–8. C55

Both sides accept that language and reality are isomorphic: reality divides into simple objects, language into simple names, and the two are correlated one to one. They disagree about which side comes first. For the realist, language must have names for these objects because reality is composed of them. For the idealist, language must be analysable into simple names, so whatever we describe is represented as divided into simple objects. The division then belongs to reality as we represent it, not to reality as it is in itself. On this reading, in White's phrase, objects and states of affairs are ' shadows cast by the forms of our language '. The deflationist refuses the question. There's a plain standard of simplicity: an object is simple if, at complete analysis, a simple name picks it out. Asking whether it's also intrinsically simple makes no sense, and the match between language and reality isn't to be explained by any theory. According to White, on the other hand, the two alternatives are unreal, and the question has no sense. Well, by the book's own lights ' Objects are simple ' is strictly nonsensical, since what it tries to say can only be shown by the language. That looks like a win for the deflationist, since you can hardly advocate a view you can't state. The realist and the idealist reply that their vision is among the things that are shown. C56 W27 C57 W27-28 C59