TROUBLE IN PARADISE?
ON THE ALLEGED INCOHERENCE OF THE TRACTATUS

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With completion of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [*TLP*] Wittgenstein had achieved the final solution to what he called “the problems”. As to what these are he remains silent. External evidence and the argumentation of *TLP* itself suggest that foremost in his mind was the nature of the proposition. We can, in fact, think of *TLP* as something like an extended theory of the proposition. A notorious consequence of the theory, registered in proposition 7, is that one cannot entertain, meaningfully, the individual propositions of the theory — including proposition 7. This consequence is given a kind of double indemnity by Wittgenstein’s opinion that his theory was “unassailable and definitive”. For what possible point could there be to further reflection on the nature of the proposition, or any other of the “problems” laid to rest in *TLP*? So it is hardly surprising that Wittgenstein retired from philosophy for a decade following *TLP*.

What would occasion his return were doubts about a thesis so fundamental to *TLP* that its demise would spawn philosophical work of an altogether different kind. The thesis in question is the mutual independence of elementary propositions [*MI*], namely, the thesis that the truth (or falsity) of any elementary proposition is compatible with the truth (or falsity) of any other elementary proposition. Wittgenstein’s rejection of *MI* has become an article of faith among commentators. Some, however, doubt that *MI* is essential to *TLP* and even urge that without it the book’s message survives in a new and improved form.¹

Such an appraisal is hard to square with the text of TLP. Consider, thus, 2.021,

Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

with its glosses, 2.0211,

If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

and 2.0212,

In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false).

In the space of three short passages, MI is unambiguously linked with the picture theory of the proposition, on the one hand, and with substance and simple objects, on the other hand. This is apparent from a closer look at 2.0211, which can be be formulated as

1. The world has no substance → (p has sense → q is true),

where q is a proposition different from p.2 Assuming for the moment that it is not to be written as an equivalence, 1 is equivalent to

1A. ~(p has sense → q is true) → the world has some substance.

In light of 2.021. 1A is equivalent to

2A. ~(p has sense → q is true) → the world has simple objects.

In other words, a sufficient condition for the existence of simple objects [TLP objects] is the existence of propositions whose sense does not depend on the truth of another proposition. Now these propositions may satisfy MI, so long as the following, at least, is true

3. p is an elementary proposition → ~(p has sense → q is true).

2. Context makes clear when I am using and when I am mentioning p. So it will be convenient to drop quotation marks, except where a serious use-mention confusion might arise.