THE SO-CALLED (AND ACTUAL!) REALISM OF THE TRACTATUS

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The purpose of this essay is to give added defense to David Pears’ (1981; 1987) contention that the Tractatus is to be understood as advancing a form of metaphysical realism. The greatest hindrance to seeing the Tractatus as such revolves around the difficulty in determining (i) whether Wittgenstein does in fact provide an argument for the existence of simple objects, (ii) what that argument is, and (iii) what role the existence of simple objects plays within the Picture Theory of the Proposition. If one sees neither an argument nor a purpose for simple objects, then one will be inclined — as was McGuinness in “The So-Called Realism of the Tractatus” (1981) — to treat Tractatus 1-2.063 as introducing nothing more than a metaphysical myth that may be employed to bring into prominence salient features of propositions. In what follows I shall try to reconstruct the argument for the existence of simple objects. My purpose is not to retrace Pears’ own steps, especially his counter-arguments against Ishiguro (1969) and McGuinness (1981), but rather to augment the existing account by providing further details of why Wittgenstein held that determinancy of sense requires the existence of simple objects.

Let us begin by noting what he says about simple objects. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein describes them as the “substance of the world” (1922, 2.021); they are “unalterable” (1922, 2.023, 2.026, 2.027) and “subsistent” (1922, 2.024, 2.027, 2.0271), whereas “their configuration is what is changing and unstable” (1922, 2.0271). It is their configuration that produces states of affairs (Sachverhalte)(1922, 2.0272). States of affairs are what correspond to (are the Bedeutungen of) elementary propositions (Elementarsatz) that describe configurations of simple objects when such propositions
are true (1912, p. 130).

In the *Tractatus* the existence of simple objects belongs to the very conditions which make representation possible. we read:

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) (1922, 2.0211-2.0212).

That there is a link between the possibility of sense and the existence of simple objects (i.e., the referents of simple signs) is repeated:

The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate (1922, 3.23).

The idea that the ontology of the *Tractatus* is intended as no more than mythology begins to pale when we see what sort of work is in store for it. Indeed, if the ontology is mythological, then so must be sense and representation in general.

In order to understand Wittgenstein’s argument, the relation between simple objects and the determinancy of sense must be made explicit. Most commentators interpret Wittgenstein’s argument as one in which one or another infinite regress is to be avoided. I am in agreement with this strategy; however I think neither the nature of the regress, nor the way in which it is avoided, has been appreciated.

Black (1964, pp. 58ff) suggests Wittgenstein maintains there must be a terminus for analysis if anyone is to know the meaning of a proposition. Unless there were such a terminus, a person would have to know the meaning of an infinite number of propositions in order to know the meaning of even one. This interpretation, however, does not seem to be motivated by the text. To the contrary, a *Notebooks* entry dated 16 June 1915 devoted to the question of whether the names of ordinary objects might serve as logical simples concludes: “... a proposition may indeed be an incomplete picture of a certain fact, but it is ALWAYS a complete *picture*” (1914b, p. 61). The moral here, which goes substantially unchallenged throughout the *Notebooks*’ discussion of the issue, is that the propositions of ordi-

1. This passage is retained in the *Tractatus* at 5.156 where it occurs within a discussion of probability and generality.