

Intentionality in the *Tractatus*

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IN THIS PAPER, FIRST OF ALL, I WILL TRY TO SHOW, in Section 1, how the appeal to thoughts as non-contingent superfacts endowed with meaning by their own (*original* intentionality) and as an essential property (*intrinsic* intentionality) is necessary to understand Wittgenstein's account of meaning in the *Tractatus* fully. Moreover, in Section 2, I will try to show how that appeal might have solved the so-called meaning-lending problem he raises in the *Investigations* against mentalist semantics by providing a solution to it that is neater than the account provided in the *Tractatus*. For, unlike the *Tractatus*, it does not have to appeal to the existence of a problematic metaphysical subject as the proper venue of those superfacts.

§1. How Thoughts Account for Meaning in the *Tractatus*

As is well known, Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus* revolves on the following two claims:

- 1) an elementary sentence must share its logical form with the (possible) state of affairs it (re)presents;
- 2) among all the (possible) states of affairs sharing its logical form that it might (re)present, the sentence presents only one such state; namely, the state of affairs whose substantial components, *objects*, are referred to by the sentence's subsentential elements standing for them, *names*.

While 1) explains in what sense an elementary sentence may be a *picture* of a (possible) state of affairs, 2) accounts for how that sentence may be a picture *of* that state. As is magistrally recapped in the *Notebooks*, 4.11.14:

One name is representative of one thing, another of another thing, and they themselves are connected; in this way—like a *tableau vivant*—the whole images the situation.

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The logical connexion must, of course, be one that is possible as between the things that the names are representatives of, and this will always be the case if the names really are representatives of the things. (Wittgenstein, 1961a, p. 26)

As is also well known, what in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein labels thought (*Gedanke*) plays an essential role in supporting the two above claims. For on the one hand, as regards 1), an elementary sentence shares that logical form insofar as it is a logical picture of what it (re)presents, and *thought* is a logical picture of facts (Wittgenstein, 1961b, §3), viz. of subsisting (possible) states of affairs. On the other hand, as regards 2), in order for names to stand for certain objects, they must be connected to them in virtue of their being so used by *thinking* the sense of the sentence, i.e., by projecting, by means of that use, the sentence on the (possible) state of affairs that contains them (Wittgenstein 1961b, §§3.11–3.12).

Now, as regards the first issue —let me call it the *logicality* issue— it may be plausible to defend a *functionalist* reading of the notion of thought in the *Tractatus*. For it might well be supposed that any picture, hence elementary sentences as well, work as thoughts insofar as, over and above its being a spatial, a temporal, or anyway physical, picture of what it (re)presents, it is the logical picture of it. For it shares with it not only the spatial, temporal, or anyway physical form of representation – what Wittgenstein labels the pictorial form of the picture – but the logical form (1961b, §§2.17, 2.171, 2.18).

Yet as regards the second issue, let me call it the *intentionality* issue, it is unlikely that a mere functionalist reading of the notion of thought¹ is enough. For it seems that there must be something like an independent entity underlying an elementary sentence, i.e., a thought, that is needed in order for that sentence to be endowed with the particular meaning it has.

In order to see that this is the case, let me start from Wittgenstein's distinction between *sign* and *symbol* (1961b, §3.32), which applies both to sentences and their sub-sentential elements. A sign is merely a meaningless expression; a symbol is a hybrid entity constituted by that expression plus its semantic interpretation, an entity-*cum*-meaning. On the one hand, one and the same sign may correspond to different symbols: this is what lexical ambiguity amounts to (1961b, §§3.321, 3.323). On the other hand, a symbol remains the same even if its linguistic expression changes: this is what captures synonymity (1961b, §§3.34, 3.341, 3.411, 4.243, 5.5303). In the most basic case, the simplest linguistic expressions, *names* —to stick to the Tractarian terminology—, one must

¹ As maintained e.g. by Marconi (2002:23–4).

particularize the sign–symbol distinction in terms of a distinction between a *name as such*, the mere nominal expression that may be used as standing for something, and what may be called, following recent literature,² a *name-of*, that expression plus its semantic interpretation, i.e., the object for which it stands. The name-of is thus a hybrid entity constituted by a nominal expression plus an individual, that expression’s referent.

But why is the sign–symbol distinction relevant for the present issue? Because the thing–symbol distinction cannot work unless one presupposes that there is a thought taken as an independent entity underlying an elementary sentence. For what is it that allows a sign, in particular a propositional sign, to be transformed into a propositional symbol? As is well known, the official answer in the *Tractatus* is that the propositional sign is *thought* as having a certain meaning (1961b, §3.5). Now, this answer can hardly be interpreted in merely functional terms. Unlike that sign, a propositional symbol, just as any other symbol, has its meaning in a particular way: that is to say, it has that meaning on its own sleeves—nothing ascribes that meaning to it—and in an essential way—if it failed to have such a meaning, it would not be the symbol it is. In the current philosophical jargon, a symbol has both *original* and *intrinsic* intentionality.³ As Mounce (1981) for one points out, there is an internal relation between the propositional symbol and its meaning component. As Wittgenstein puts it, the proposition (i.e., the propositional symbol) *shows* its sense (1961b, §4.022). Hence, in order for a propositional sign, notably a certain elementary sentence, to be transformed into a symbol, i.e., an entity that has both original and intrinsic intentionality, there must be something that is able to lend it those features. Now, this very something cannot but be a thought by virtue of which the propositional sign, notably a certain elementary sentence, is thought (Malcolm 1986). For it cannot but be an entity that has by itself the two features that a propositional symbol must possess for a propositional sign to be transformed into it; namely, both original and intrinsic intentionality (Sacchi and Voltolini 2012). In particular, this meaning–lending thought has inner constituents that are both originally and intrinsically

² This appeal to the notion of a name-of as a particular kind of an entity–*cum*–meaning, namely as a genuine singular term plus its referential interpretation, has been developed by some “direct reference”–theorists, i.e., people believing, in the wake of the early Wittgenstein, that at least the meaning of genuine singular terms is exhausted by their referents: cf. e.g. Almog (1984), Kaplan (1990).

³ For the label of original intentionality, see Dretske (1995) and Fodor (1990); for the label of intrinsic intentionality, as distinct from that of original intentionality, see implicitly Searle (1983). See for example this quotation from Searle: “the conditions of satisfaction of the Intentional state are internal to the Intentional state” (1983, p. 11)

about certain objects in the world, i.e., the building bricks constituting the relevant (possible) state of affairs that it (re)presents along with the corresponding propositional symbol. Hence, it enables the elementary sentence's corresponding names to be transformed into names-of, i.e., names that both originally and intrinsically have such objects as their referents.

At this point, a question arises as to what kind of entity a meaning-lending thought underlying a particular elementary sentence can be. A natural answer is that it is a *psychic* fact, i.e., something that obtains within either the mind or the brain of an individual, an empirical subject that, properly speaking, merely amounts to a collection, or series, of such psychic facts (1961b, §5.631). As is well known, this natural answer is supported by a passage of Wittgenstein's famous 19.8.1919 letter to Russell:

I don't know *what* the constituents of a thought are but I know *that* it must have such constituents which correspond to the words of Language. Again the kind of relation of the constituents of thought and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter of psychology to find it out. (Wittgenstein 1995, pp. 98–99)

Yet, as various people have stressed (e.g. Mounce 1981), this natural reading cannot work. For a psychic fact is just a *brute* fact like any other, whose constituents cannot but bear a contingent relation, whatever it is, with the corresponding objects in the world that is a matter of psychology, as Wittgenstein stresses, to find out. Thus, it could at most possess *original* intentionality – just as a sentence of a language of thought possesses according to Fodor (1990)⁴ – but not *intrinsic* intentionality. For intrinsic intentionality yields a *necessary* relation between the relevant underlying meaning-lending entity and such objects. Thus, a psychic fact cannot play the meaning-lending role that a thought is supposed to play. Hence, a thought playing that role, hence having an essential relation with its objects, cannot be a brute fact as a psychic fact is, but it must be something like a *superfact*.

Yet if one must interpret a thought as a superfact, where on Earth can one find superfacts? All facts in the world, i.e., all subsisting (possible) states of affairs, including the psychic facts which occur, so to speak, within an empirical subject, are characterized by *contingent* relations between the objects constituting them.

⁴ In (1994), McDonough proposes a similar solution, by equating Tractarian thoughts with Fodorian Mentalese sentences. Yet such sentences are for Fodor (1990) merely contingently related to their meanings. Indeed, they possess only original, but not intrinsic, intentionality.

But, as we have just seen, superfacts are *necessary* relations between their objects.

Tractatus' readers, however, have a chance to answer this question plausibly. Such superfacts do not take place in the world, but at its essential limit; in particular, at that limit of the world that Wittgenstein calls in the *Tractatus* the *metaphysical subject*, i.e., that which makes it the case that the world is a world for someone (1961b, §§5.632–5.633, 5.641). Indeed, many of the "*Tractatus*' scholars think that the roots of significance lie in this subject, which *inter alia* thinks the world through the meaning acts of her will (Kenny 1981, p. 146; see also Hacker 1972, pp. 47–48, 77) and which is altered through the good or the bad exercise of that will (1961b, §6.43). That is undoubtedly a coherent answer, even if it seems to explain *obscura* (the *Gedanke* superfacts) by *obscuriora* (the metaphysical subject, about whom Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* notoriously remains very elusive).

§2. How Thoughts Could Still Account for Meaning in the *Investigations*

Curiously enough, at the time of the *Investigations*, no relic seems to remain of the above, admittedly complicated, Tractarian theory of intentionality. As is well known, in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein raises a strong criticism against the mentalist theories of meaning, i.e., the theories according to which the meaning of linguistic expressions lies in some kind of mental factor underlying language use. According to this criticism, meaning cannot lie in something mental, for no mental candidate is able to solve the *meaning–lending* problem, i.e., the problem of how to give semantic life to linguistic expressions that by themselves are meaningless: "Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life?" (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, I, §431). For whatever is mental has no meaning–lending power, since in itself is just a brute fact as any other (Wittgenstein 1953/2009 I, §§139–141, 198, 201).

Now, as we have seen before, this is precisely the criticism that one may raise against a psychologicistic reading of the meaning–lending factor in the *Tractatus*. Psychic facts —e.g., mental images— are just as brute facts as any other, so they can lend no meaning to nothing whatsoever. Nor, stress the *Investigations*, can anything lying even further inside than psychic facts – e.g., cerebral facts – play the meaning–lending role, for it would turn out to be just another brute fact, and so on *ad infinitum*. Yet, as we also saw, the *Tractatus* had the resources to account for such a factor, by appealing to superfacts endowed not with only original intentionality like psychic facts, but also, unlike psychic facts, with intrinsic intentionality, while these superfacts are located in the mind (whatever that is)

of a metaphysical subject. But in the *Investigations* there is no trace of this possible way out of the meaning–lending problem, which would immediately stop the regress.

At first blush, one may observe that a work such as the *Investigations* that is devoted inter alia to show that a private language is impossible may hardly appeal to a metaphysical subject as the venue of meaning–lending superfacts. For, even though language in the *Tractatus* does not amount to a private language (cf., e.g. Mounce 1981), if a metaphysical subject might *ex absurdo* talk with herself, she would end up mobilizing precisely an impossible private language in the *Investigations*' sense; i.e., a meaningless structure because of its normative failure, given that believing that one follows a rule and following it collapses in it. (Wittgenstein 1953/2009 I, §§202, 258)

But if one looks at the matter more closely, it is hardly the case that the metaphysical subject is the culprit. For in the *Tractatus*' perspective, that subject is invoked precisely in order to explain how there can be superfacts, i.e., facts that involve necessary relations between their members. For, as we saw, in the world there is no room for such superfacts; the world only contains brute facts, which involve contingent relations between their members.

Yet why is it the case, in the *Tractatus*' perspective, that the world cannot contain superfacts? Well, this depends on an assumption that frames the *Tractatus*' ontologico–metaphysical scaffolding. According to this assumption, which Frascolla (2011, p. 50) labels the *contingency assumption*, the world can contain only contingently subsisting facts, insofar as these facts are the subsisting combinations of what is not contingent; namely, the Tractarian objects which constitute both the form and the structure of the world, being the fixed domain of worlds as well as what a world depends on:

Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable.

The configuration of objects produces states of affairs.

All that happens and is the case is accidental. (Wittgenstein 1961b, §§2.0271–2.0272, 6.41)⁵

⁵ According to Frascolla (2020, pp. 14–15), one cannot meaningfully ascribe existence to Tractarian objects. For existence is a feature that can be meaningfully ascribed only to possible states of affairs—saying that a state of affairs exists amounts to saying that it is a fact—which turns out to be a contingent property of such states. I think that the point is merely terminological. Being a necessary feature, the kind of existence that objects necessarily have in their form–substance role, i.e., in their constituting the fixed domain of all possible worlds is another—call it *existence in a logical sense*, à la Williamson (2002), if you like. Objects can be beyond existence and non–existence, as Frascolla (*ibid*, p. 15) adds, if by

Yet in the context of the *Investigations*, which has renounced the *Tractatus*' ontologico–metaphysical scaffolding in favour of the idea that the essence of the world is rather constituted by the grammar of language (Wittgenstein 1953/2009 I, §§371, 373), i.e., by the systems of the rules according to which we use language expressions, there is no more need for that assumption.

One might rebut that it is precisely because in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein had replaced that scaffolding by appealing to the idea that essence is constituted by grammar, that there is still no room there for superfacts, in particular mental facts involving a necessary relation between the thought and its objects. And indeed, this is the *Investigations*' official lesson, in particular with respect to intentionality. The idea that there is such a necessary relation must be cashed out in grammatical terms, as the expression of a rule according to which the expression for an intentional state means the same as an expression saying that such a state is satisfied (Voltolini forthcoming).

Is it experience that tells me that this sort of game usually follows such an act of intending? So can't I actually be sure what I intended to do? And if that is nonsense —what kind of *super-rigid connection* obtains between the act of intending and the thing intended?— Where is the connection effected between the sense of the words “Let's play a game of chess” and all the rules of the game? —Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the everyday practice of playing. (Wittgenstein 1953/2009 I, §197; my italics)

Still, that is not a forced lesson to be taken from the *Investigations*. For in the *Investigations* (just as in the preparatory texts for the second part of it, in particular, those that have been published posthumously under the label *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*), we find explicit mention of non–contingent facts, i.e., facts which are constituted by necessary relations —or, in Wittgenstein's terminology, internal relations— among its members. For example, what is seen in a seeing—as experience bears one such relation with other items:

The colour in the visual impression corresponds to the colour of the object (this blotting paper looks pink to me, and is pink) — the shape in the visual impression to the shape of

“existence” one means the other aforementioned kind of existence that affects possible states of affairs. Since the kind of existence I am instead talking about here is a necessary feature for objects, having it amounts to another superfact, i.e., a necessary fact, which cannot be said, but only shown by means of ordinarily meaningful sentences in showing their necessary sense (Wittgenstein 1961b, §4.1211). For the general idea that the notion of existence is polysemous see (Voltolini 2012, 2018).

the object (it looks rectangular to me, and is rectangular) — but what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an *internal relation* between it and other objects. (Wittgenstein 1953/2009 II, xi, §247)

It is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact (Wittgenstein 1953/2009, §445).

The statement that the wish for it to be the case that p is satisfied by the event p, merely enunciates a rule for signs: (the wish for it to be the case that p) = (the wish that is satisfied by the event p). Like everything metaphysical, the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language (Wittgenstein 1969, §112; see also Wittgenstein 1953/2009, §458).

So, once the contingency assumption is given up, theoretically speaking, even in the *Investigations* one may appeal to non-contingent facts without also appealing to the obscure metaphysical subject as their own venue in order to solve the meaning-lending problem (Voltolini 2010)⁶. Wittgenstein himself flirted with this solution once he came back to Cambridge in order to do philosophy again. For in the *Philosophical Remarks* he explicitly treats intentionality as an internal act—object relation, *qua* constitutive element of his own picture theory of meaning:

If you exclude the element of intention from language, its whole function then collapses.

It may look as if, in introducing intention, we were introducing an uncheckable, a so-to-speak metaphysical element into our discussion. But the essential difference between the picture conception and the conception of Russell, Ogden and Richards, is that it regards recognition as seeing an internal relation, whereas in their view this is an external relation (Wittgenstein 1964, §21)⁷.

All in all, for me, there would have been room in the *Investigations* to preserve the Tractarian solution to the meaning-lending problem he raises there, while simultaneously dropping the appeal to a metaphysical subject that made that solution problematic. In a way, then, the *Investigations* could have improved some of the *Tractatus*' ideas.

⁶ Zemach (1989, 1995) defends this interpretation of the *Investigations* explicitly.

⁷ To be sure, one may observe that in the *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein still appeals to a metaphysical subject as the essential limit of the world. For on the one hand he says that there is no subject in the world, and on the other hand for him the essence of the world showing the unsayable truth of solipsism makes reference to that subject (cf. Wittgenstein 1964, §§71, 85).

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Intentionality in the Tractatus

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to appeal to the idea that thoughts manage to explain how sentences, primarily elementary sentences, can be such that their subsentential elements refer to objects. In this respect, he seems indeed to appeal to the claim that thoughts, *qua* endowed with not only *original*, but also *intrinsic*, intentionality, lend this intentionality to names, by transforming them into names-of, i.e., symbols endowed with intrinsic intentionality as well. Such a claim, however, entails that there must be necessary superfacts (as he implicitly meant them in the *Investigations*). Since according to the *Tractatus*’ ontology there cannot be necessary facts in the world, but at most only in its logical scaffolding, the most likely chance is that such facts are facts for the limit of the world, i.e., the metaphysical subject. Curiously enough, in his later critique, in the *Investigations*, of mentalist semantics, Wittgenstein fails to appeal to this claim, which can block the infinite regress that he there changes the mentalist position with. Since in the *Investigations* necessary facts seem to be allowed, this failure is even more striking.

Keywords: Original and Intrinsic Intentionality · Thought · Symbols · Necessary Facts · Metaphysical Subject.

Intencionalidad en el Tractatus

Parece que Wittgenstein apela en el *Tractatus* a la idea de que los pensamientos logran explicar cómo las

oraciones, en primera instancia, las oraciones elementales pueden ser de tal manera que sus elementos suboracionales se refieran a objetos. En cuanto a esto, parece que él de hecho apela a la afirmación de que los pensamientos, al estar dotados no sólo con intencionalidad *original*, sino también *intrínseca*, confieren dicha intencionalidad a los nombres, al transformarlos en «nombres de», es decir, símbolos dotados igualmente con intencional intrínseca. Semejante afirmación implica, sin embargo, que debe haber súperhechos necesarios (según él implícitamente se refirió a ellos después en las *Investigaciones*). Puesto que de acuerdo a la ontología del *Tractatus* no puede haber hechos necesarios en el mundo sino, cuando mucho, su estructura lógica subyacente, lo más probable es que semejantes hechos sea hechos para el límite del mundo, es decir, el sujeto metafísico. Curiosamente, en su crítica posterior de la semántica mentalista en las *Investigaciones*, Wittgenstein no apela a esta reivindicación que puede bloquear el regreso infinito del cual allí acusa la posición mentalista. Puesto que parece que en las *Investigaciones* se permiten los hechos necesarios, esta omisión es aún más llamativa.

Palabras Clave: Intencionalidad original e intrínseca · Pensamiento · Símbolos · Hechos necesarios · Sujeto metafísico.

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