

# The Self in the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*

My aims in this paper are twofold. First, I try to cast light on Wittgenstein's discussion of the Self in the *Tractatus*, the opacity of which has both repelled and attracted commentators. I attempt to clarify its arguments by focussing on the role of the metaphysical subject, and urge that we conceive of it as a *universal perspective*. Second, while Wittgenstein has no parallel discussion of the Self in the *Philosophical Investigations*, I argue that he deploys the notion of a form of life to similar ends. The two notions, however, come apart in that the priority assigned to the respective roles of language and the world are reversed. This reversal reveals that while Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* account dissolves the realism / anti-realism distinction, the *Investigations* account, while blocking solipsism, leaves room for a form of anti-realism.

## I. THE SELF OF THE *Tractatus*

### 1. Language and World

Wittgenstein's discussion of the self occurs between 5.6 and 5.641. That discussion concludes:

Thus there really is a sense in which philosophy can talk about the self in a non-psychological way. What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that 'the world is my world'. The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world — not a part of it.<sup>1</sup>

Two conceptions of the self are here distinguished. One, the psychological self, is connected with personal identity, with a body, answers to

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<sup>1</sup>5.641

indexicals and is the proper subject matter of psychology.<sup>2</sup> The metaphysical subject is not to be confused with this empirical conception of the self: the psychological self is in the world, but the metaphysical self, being the limit of the world, cannot also be a part of it. It is this conception of self with which philosophers must deal.

What is the metaphysical subject? Wittgenstein writes at 5.62:

This remark provides the key to the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism. For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest. The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) means the limits of *my* world.

The remark referred to is 5.61:

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

The self with which Wittgenstein is here concerned is the self with which solipsism is concerned. If I were a solipsist, I would say that *I* am the only subject, and that the world and all its contents are mere representations, and, in particular, representations for me *alone*. The implication is that such a statement of the solipsistic thesis is incorrect, though what the solipsist *means* by it is correct. But what is true in solipsism cannot be said; any attempt to state it yields Tractarian nonsense. There are thus three questions to be answered:

- (A) What is incorrect in the statement of the solipsist's thesis, and why?
- (B) What does the solipsist mean, and why is that correct?
- (C) Why can we not say what the solipsist means?

I take this to be Wittgenstein's argument:

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<sup>2</sup>By which Wittgenstein might also mean what we nowadays call the philosophy of mind. Bear in mind that Moore's 1912 Cambridge lecture series, which Wittgenstein attended, had the title 'Psychology', but was concerned with the philosophy of mind, and contained little reference to empirical psychology.

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| 1. The limits of <i>my</i> language <i>mean</i> ( <i>bedeuten</i> ) the limits of <i>my</i> world.                                       | TLP 5.6   |
| 2. The limits of <i>the</i> world <i>are</i> the limits of logic.  | TLP 5.61  |
| 3. ( <i>Any</i> ) everyday language is in perfect logical order.   | TLP 5.563 |
| 4. If any language is in perfect logical order, then <i>my</i> language is in perfect logical order.                                     | 3         |
| 5. If the limits of the world are the limits of logic, then the limits of any language are the limits of the world.                      | 2, 3      |
| 6. But since <i>my</i> language is logically identical to <i>all</i> languages, <i>my</i> language means the limits of <i>the</i> world. | 4, 5      |
| 7. So <i>the</i> world is <i>my</i> world.   | 1, 6      |

What we are to understand is that since logic is the limit of the world, by which is meant that logic is the limit of the ways in which things could be, that limiting role is connected to language. According to Wittgenstein's conception of language, a meaningful proposition, one with a sense, has its sense in virtue of sharing a logical form with the fact that it expresses.<sup>3</sup> What this means is that an atomic proposition has the sense that it does - expresses the fact that it does - in virtue of consisting of simple names standing for simple objects such that the arrangement of the simple names is identical to the arrangement of the simple objects, the *fact*, that is being represented. Names are proxies for Tractarian objects, such that the combinations that names can enter into in forming atomic propositions are just the combinations that the objects for which they stand can enter into in forming facts. This sharing of logical form between a proposition and a fact is the basis of representation in both thought and language. And it follows immediately from the premise that my language contains a name for every simple object, that what facts there could be is mirrored exactly by what propositions can be formed within my language. That is why logic, and thus language, is 'the great mirror' of the world.<sup>4</sup> Language - any language, and thus also my language - limits the world in that the world cannot be any way other than that which is expressible in my language.

I said that to be a solipsist is to conceive of the world and its contents as mere representations for me. Leaving aside the question of whether the solipsistic self could itself be a representation,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that it cannot be,

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<sup>3</sup>2.15, 4.022

<sup>4</sup>5.511

<sup>5</sup>According to the *Tractatus*, the metaphysical subject is not represented, since if it were, it would have to be in the world. If it were in the world, it would then be either a simple or a complex object. But no worldly object can fulfil the role required of the metaphysical self (a role which I hope becomes clear over the course of the next few pages), namely that of representing the world as a whole. If the metaphysical self were a complex object, it would disappear on analysis into facts about simple objects. But were it simple, it seems that it could not have the complexity required for representing the world as a whole. Further, were the metaphysical self in the world, it could not represent the world as whole, that is, from a perspective outside of the world.

at risk of incoherence, a *mere* representation. Were the self a mere object of experience, then either it would be an object merely of *its* experience, or an object for the experience of another. But in the latter case, we have simply posited another self, for which the same question can be asked, regressively. And in the former case, what sense is to be made of an object which is both a mere object of experience, as well as the subject of experience? That would be like saying, to adapt an example of Wittgenstein's, that the eye was not only in the visual field, but was merely a perceptual experience itself. Thus, at risk of incoherence, the solipsistic self must be something more than a mere representation if it is to serve its role as the locus of all representation.

Insofar as my statement of the thesis appears to make the metaphysical subject something private, identifying it with the *res cogitans*, this kind of solipsism is *Cartesian solipsism*. It is not what Wittgenstein intends:

There is no such thing as the subject which thinks and entertains ideas.<sup>6</sup>

I take it that Wittgenstein here means the subject that is within the domain of philosophy, as opposed to the psychological subject. And if that is right, then this proposition is a simple denial of Cartesian solipsism, which conflates the two. But is there an argument to support this rejection?

## 2. Against Cartesian Solipsism

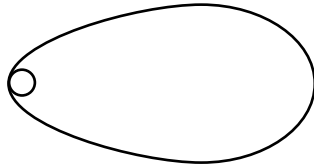
Consider a statement of Cartesian solipsism: I am the only subject, and the world is a representation for me *alone*. A recurring theme in Wittgenstein's Tractarian thought is that what can be an object of thought must be in the world; that is, the propositions that concern those objects must be ultimately analysable to elementary propositions expressing atomic facts. What this means is that if propositions in which an indexical occurs are to be meaningful, then the referent of the indexical must be an object, presumably complex, within the world, namely the psychological subject. And since the statement of Cartesian solipsism contains an indexical, its referent must be the psychological self if it is to have sense. But since the psychological self is itself within the world, and assuming that ordinary indexical statements do have sense, it cannot be what is intended by the Cartesian solipsist, since whatever represents the world as a whole *sub specie aeternitatis* cannot itself be a part of the world; the mistake that the Cartesian solipsist makes is just the mistake made by someone who draws a picture of the visual field and places the eye within it.

The subject does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world. Where *in* the world is the metaphysical subject to

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<sup>6</sup>5.631

be found? You will say that this is exactly the case of the eye and the visual field. But really, you do not *see* the eye. And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye. For the form of the visual field is surely not like this:



What is wrong with the Cartesian solipsist's thesis is thus the identification of the psychological self with the representing subject. What she means, however, which is correct, is that there is *a* representing subject, and that world is a represented world. Returning to Wittgenstein's argument, let us call his version of solipsism *linguistic solipsism*, a thesis which holds that the metaphysical subject is the subject of all linguistic representation. And while *my* language is the limit of the world, *my* language might as well be called *the* language, for what is logically relevant, and thus world-limiting about *my* language, is common to all language. The metaphysical subject is thus connected up with the representing features of any language at all; it is both a precondition for and the subject of any representation, and thus the subject for which the world is a represented world. Linguistic solipsism does not identify the metaphysical subject with a private *res cogitans*, but takes it to be the self which is common to all users of language. That is why it is a *universal perspective*; it is the perspective from which the world is represented for any user of language.

### 3. The Metaphysical Subject

Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it. Thus there really is a sense in which philosophy can talk about the self in a non-psychological way. (5.62)

If we have correctly followed Wittgenstein's argument, we see that there can be no difference between solipsism, properly understood, and realism. The implication of realism is that there is a particular, mind-independent

way that the world is, and that how the world is can be expressed by propositions which will be true or false. On Wittgenstein's view, this is just the implication of linguistic solipsism - the world is, in fact, a particular way, and the way that it is is the way it is represented for the metaphysical self, and expressed by propositions with determinate sense. Where realism and linguistic solipsism differ is that the former claims that the world is independent of my language. In a sense, the linguistic solipsist does not deny this, for the world is independent of my language, where the 'my' there is an indexical referring to the psychological subject. But what the linguistic solipsist does deny is that there is a way of conceiving of the world *sub specie aeternitatis* - from a point of view independent of my language — a *perspectiveless* perspective.

The linguistic solipsist claims that the world consists of what is representable by language; that is, that there is no perspective, other than that with which language equips me, from which I represent the world. In order for this proposition to have sense, according to the *Tractatus*, its negation must have a sense.<sup>7</sup> But the negation of that claim, that there is *another* perspective from which I can represent the world which is independent of my language, dissolves into Berkeleyan incoherence, since to conceive of the world from some other perspective requires me to assume that perspective. But any attempt to do so involves attempting to modify ways in which the world is represented to me into forms nonetheless expressible by propositions, which is not to assume another perspective, in the relevant sense, at all. Since the negation of the solipsist's claim is nonsense, so too is the claim itself. It is in this regard that *philosophy* can talk about a self which is not the psychological self; for Wittgenstein, what we say in (good) philosophy fails to express genuine propositions, and is nonsense, the product of attempting to say what can only be shown. But there is a sense in which the nonsense one produces when one does philosophy well conveys an understanding, and I take it that this is the point of the first remark that I quoted. The thesis that there is informative nonsense is a contentious one, and not one I will defend here. On that view, philosophy *can* talk about the metaphysical subject, but we should not mistake what philosophy says about it for sense

#### 4. Realism and Anti-realism

The linguistic solipsist claims that the limits of language and the limits of the world are coincident, so that the world is to be understood as a represented world. That this is made manifest for Wittgenstein arises, I think, from reflection upon the intuition that I could neither stumble across a patch

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<sup>7</sup>Letter to Ramsey, 2 July 1927.

of reality that I was incapable of representing propositionally, nor that I could come across a proposition that I could not understand.<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein explains this by holding that there is a general propositional form, a form such that any symbol satisfying that form expresses a proposition, and every proposition can be expressed by a symbol satisfying that form.<sup>9</sup> Thus every aspect of the world is representable by a proposition, and every proposition expresses a possible fact. But if the world is independent of my representational abilities, why should this be so? That the world conforms to the general propositional form *shows* that the world is a represented world, that language and the world are inseparable.

What saves this thesis from being a form of anti-realism is that the general form of the proposition is to be understood as *necessarily* the form that any proposition must satisfy. This means that the world, while represented, could not have been represented other than it is, for to attempt to conceive of it as such would be to attempt to conceive of a world from a perspective other than my own, which is incoherent. Similarly, the thesis does not constitute a form of realism since there is no conceiving of the world independently of my perspective. Thus, in the *Tractatus*, neither realism nor anti-realism is denied or asserted; the distinction is, instead, rendered inert.

## II. THE SELF OF THE *Investigations*

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein extends his conception of the nature of language from that of mere fact-stating to include such activities as commanding and questioning. Additionally, a number of Tractarian theses are given up, not least of all that of the general form of the proposition. Once this thesis in particular has been given up, however, we appear to have no means of preventing a slide into anti-realism, for now there is no reason at all to suppose that *my* perspective on the world is the only *possible* perspective on it. Rather than there being a single language obeying *a priori* logical restrictions and which marks the limit of the world, the door is open for the admission of many possible languages, many possible ways that the world might be represented. What then is to prevent linguistic solipsism from collapsing into Cartesian solipsism, to prevent an identification of the metaphysical self with the *res cogitans*? If *the* logical foundations of language no longer secure a mind-independent reality, how can I make the inference from *my* world to *the* world?

Two interconnected arguments are used in the *Investigations* to prevent

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<sup>8</sup>Assuming, of course, that I understand the words that are used to express the proposition in ordinary language.

<sup>9</sup>4.5.

just this slide. The first is the private language argument, which secures the impossibility of a language which is only mine, thus blocking Cartesian scepticism. I won't discuss this here. The second is the introduction of the notion of a form of life, which, I think, secures the inference, if not from *my* language to *the* world, at least from *my* language to *our* world, where we are a *we* just in case we share a form of life. This means that while the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* blocks Cartesian solipsism, he does not block a more general form of anti-realism, which allows that the world could be differently represented to beings whose form of life was not ours.

Wittgenstein explicitly claims that the possibility of a language entails the possibility of a form of life for which that language is a language:

...to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.<sup>10</sup>

The idea here is that a language (which, for Wittgenstein, is now to be conceived of as consisting of more-and-less loosely interlinked language games) must be tethered to a particular form of life, that to conceive of an activity in which beings communicate, no matter how simplistically,<sup>11</sup> is to conceive of those beings as involved in a complex system of interconnected activities, ends (very broadly construed) and behaviours such that the particular activity of communicating is seen as enmeshed within that system. *That* these beings communicate thus-and-so is because their language is (and must be if it is to be language at all) fitted to their form of life; if I am to understand their language, I must share their form of life. That is what Wittgenstein means when he writes:

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.<sup>12</sup>

There are two parts of this discussion which require explanation. First, it is assumed, without argument, that the lion and I do not share a form of life, but in order to determine this we would have to know how to individuate forms of life. Second, what argument is to be made for the conclusion that to understand a language, one must share a form of life with the speaker of that language?

Addressing the second first: I take it that Wittgenstein does not have in mind that, for instance, a French person and I do not share a form of life since understanding French is simply a matter of my learning it. Of course, it may be that I cannot fully understand the French language without proper training in the nuances of French society and culture, for there may be French language games which have no correlate in English. But in the case of the lion the implication is that I could not understand a talking lion *at all*, that I could never come to learn his language. So it cannot be that

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<sup>10</sup> *PI*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Think, for instance, of the *Slab* language which follows this quotation.

<sup>12</sup> p. 190



Wittgenstein means by ‘language’ a particular human language, in which case the contrast between me and the lion would be just like the contrast between me a French person. Rather, he must have in mind by ‘language’ something like ‘the human language’ or ‘the language of a human form of life’.

If I am right, then, just as in the *Tractatus* *my* language and *your* language are both instances of *the* language, so that *my* world is *your* world, and both are *the* world as represented by the metaphysical subject, so too in the *Investigations* does Wittgenstein conceive of a particular language being an instance of, or an embellishment upon, a core language tethered to a form of life. That core language is fitted to the form of life of the speakers of a particular language, and that form of life is shared with the speakers of any other language that they could come to understand. It is that the French person and I have something in common, a form of life and a core language fitted to it, which enables us, eventually, to understand one another. And it is this conception of a core language which is relevant to the notion of a form of life.

If this conception of a core language is the correct one, we are still left without an explanation of why it should be the case that in order to share a core language we must share a form of life. This is the respect in which I think that the metaphysical subject and a form of life serve the same theoretical role. Remember that the role of the metaphysical subject was to stand in common to all speakers of language as that which represents the world, thus ensuring that we share a world, the world as represented from a single universal perspective. In the *Investigations*, while I think it is our sharing a form of life which ensures that we share a world, I think that the direction of explanation is reversed, for it is not *the* language that gives rise to our representation of the world, but our representation of the world which gives rise to a core language.

If this is right, then forms of life are presumably to be individuated in terms of the representational capacities of the organisms that partake in the particular form of life in question. One way to put some flesh on this theory, but which I cannot detail here, is by way of what I wish to call a semi-naturalistic account of a form of life.<sup>13</sup> Such an account holds that, like various biological capacities, a diversity of representational capacities might be explained by reference to natural selection.

The point I wish to make here is that if a form of life is individuated in terms of representational capacities, then it follows that, on the mild

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<sup>13</sup>I call it ‘semi-naturalistic because I do not wish to imply that a description of a form of life can be given in purely naturalistic terms, nor that a theory of meaning for human languages can be given in purely naturalistic terms. It seems to me that any attempt to do the latter must always fall foul of a Putnam-style ‘just more theory’ argument. Rather, I think that an account might be given in the language of evolutionary theory of why different forms of life should give rise to radically different representations of the world.

assumption that a core language will reflect in its grammar and logic various features of an individual's representation of the world, that where two communities differ as to their representational capacities, and thus to their forms of life, they will have incommensurable core languages. To put it slightly metaphorically, their languages will be responsive to the very different worlds that they occupy. Since the lion (I take it that Wittgenstein is not making a *claim* about lions, but using the lion as a mere example) and I do not share a form of life, we occupy quite differently represented worlds; were the lion to have a language, it could never be one that I could understand, for in order to do so I would have to occupy the lion's perspective, become an inhabitant of his world. But since we do not share representational capacities, such a shift in perspective is not possible.

I said that the Tractarian view eradicated the distinction between realism and anti-realism as it rendered moot the question of there being perspectives other than my own. But since the view of the *Investigations* that I have proposed advocates the possibility of there being radically incommensurable perspectives upon the world, it is anti-realist. Of course, it does not follow that the question of anti-realism is one that can be meaningfully posed, for just as the world of the *Tractatus* is one limited by the metaphysical self, the world of the *Investigations* is limited by my form of life. Any attempt to say what another language, another form of life, an alien perspective, might be like, collapses into incoherence. And of what we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence.

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