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Neither Realism nor Constructivism: The Tractarian Conception of Language

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Abstract

This paper proposes a disjunctivist interpretation of the relation between Tractarian "symbols" and Tractarian "signs" and suggests that, if such an interpretation is correct, the Tractarian conception of language is neither realist nor constructivist.

I

My goal, in this paper, is to propose a disjunctivist interpretation of the relation between Tractarian "symbols" and Tractarian "signs" and to suggest that, if such an interpretation is correct, the Tractarian conception of language is neither realist nor constructivist. I will begin, in this section, by pointing out six aspects of the Tractarian distinction between symbols (or "expressions," 3.31) and signs.

First, a definition of symbol:

- 1) "[Symbols] are everything—essential for the sense of the proposition—that propositions can have in common with one another." (3.31)

A proposition, for the *Tractatus*, is a sensibly perceptible item (3.1) which represents a possible situation and says, truly or falsely, that such situation obtains (4.021-4.022). Propositions can share with one another parts and features that contribute to determine their sense—namely, parts and features that contribute to determine which possible situations the propositions represent (4.031). These parts and features are symbols, and so are complete propositions (3.31, 3.313).

Second, a definition of sign:

- 2) "The sign is what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol." (3.32)

A symbol is a sensibly perceptible item (e.g. written or spoken, 3.321), and a sign is what is sensibly perceptible in it (*das sinnlich Wahrnehmbare am Symbol*).

Third, a constraint governing the relation between signs and symbols:

- 3) "Two different symbols can...have the sign...in common..." (3.321)

The same sign can belong, on different occurrences, to different symbols. One of the examples given by the *Tractatus* is the English word "is," which symbolizes sometimes as the copula, other times as the sign of identity, and yet other times as the sign of existence (3.323).

Fourth, a characterization of the relation between signs, symbols, and use:

- 4) A symbol is a sign in use.

In order to identify the occurrence of a symbol, it is not enough to identify the occurrence of a sign: we must identify, in addition, how the sign is used on that occasion for characterizing the sense of a complete proposition. "In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use" (3.326; cf. also 3.11, 3.12, 3.5, 4).

Fifth, an idea that, while not explicitly stated in the *Tractatus*, can be plausibly inferred from (3) and (4):

- 5) A sign, on some of its occurrences, may not belong to any symbol.

Just as a sign can be put, on different occasions, to a different significant use, and belong therefore to different symbols, so a sign can be put, on some occasions, to *no* significant use, and belong therefore to *no* symbol, amounting to nothing more than a *mere sign*.

Finally, the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*:

- 6) Signs are defined after and in terms of symbols.

The sign/symbol distinction is discussed systematically in the 3.3s. The *Tractatus* defines the symbol in the 3.31s and then goes on to define the sign, in 3.32, as what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol. The same order of presentation and definition appears in an earlier part of the book, the 3.1s, where signs are first mentioned. The *Tractatus* begins by defining the proposition as the sensibly perceptible expression of a thought (3.1) and then goes on to mention "the sensibly perceptible sign (sound of written sign, etc.) of the proposition" (3.11). From the very beginning, the sign is characterized as what belongs to a meaningful proposition.

II

I am now going to contrast three accounts of the Tractarian construal of the sign/symbol relation.

First, the *Extra-Feature Account*. This holds that the *Tractatus* analyzes the notion of symbol into two independently intelligible conceptual ingredients: the notion of sign and a relevant notion of use. Symbols form a species of the genus comprising all signs, where both the genus and the differentia that singles out the species (i.e. the property of being-in-use) can be specified without any reference to the species to be singled out.¹ Given the set of all sign-occurrences, we can ask which ones are occurrences of symbols, and the answer is given by indicating the extra feature that the occurrence of a sign must possess in order to be the occurrence of a symbol—namely, the property of being put to significant use. Sign-occurrences that lack this extra feature are mere signs. Among all the occurrences of a particular sign, those that receive the same significant use are occurrences of the same symbol, and those that receive a different significant

¹ Here and elsewhere in this section, I am indebted to Anton Ford's discussion of different forms of genus/species relation (Ford 2011).

use are occurrences of different symbols. This account is consistent with (1)-(5) above, but attributes no philosophical significance to (6).

What would it be to attribute philosophical significance to (6)? One option is to adopt the *No-Distance Account*. This holds that a sign, for the *Tractatus*, is a *conceptually inseparable aspect* of a symbol: we have a sign *only* on those occasions in which we have a symbol, and we have the *same* sign only on those occasions in which we have the same symbol. Such a reading fits well with the Tractarian characterization of a sign as "what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol." But it is incompatible with (3) and (5): it rules out the possibility of mere signs, and does not allow for the same sign to be common to different symbols.

The No-Distance Account is not the only way of according philosophical significance to the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*. It is possible to hold that signs are conceptually dependent on symbols, but in a manner that allows signs to be common to different symbols and leaves room for occurrences of signs that are not occurrences of any symbol. This takes us to the account I want to recommend, which is consistent with (1)-(5) and attributes philosophical significance to (6). I shall refer to it—for reasons that will become evident in a moment—as the *Disjunctivist Account*.

The account runs as follows. The notion of symbol is primitive and irreducible. It can be elucidated: a symbol can be described as a *sign in use* or as a *sensibly perceptible mark of the sense of propositions*; but it cannot be reconstructed from independent conceptual ingredients. In particular, it cannot be reconstructed in terms of a prior and independent notion of sign and a prior and independent notion of use, as maintained by the Extra-Feature Account. Given the notion of symbol, a mere sign is defined as what *merely appears* to be a symbol, and a sign *simpliciter* is defined disjunctively as what is *either* a symbol (i.e. a sign in use) or a mere sign. Symbols and mere signs are species of the genus comprising all signs; but such species are not defined in terms of the genus and an independently intelligible differentia. Rather, the genus is defined as the disjunction of the species, and the species of mere signs is conceptually dependent on the species of symbols, since nothing could *merely look like* a symbol if nothing could actually *be* a symbol. The notion of a sign that is common to different symbols is also defined disjunctively in terms of its species. We begin with the conceptually primitive notion of a plurality of symbols which misleadingly appear to be the same symbol; we then define the notion of a mere sign which looks like each of those symbols without being any of them; and finally, we define the notion of a sign which is either one of those symbols or the correspondent mere sign.

According to the Disjunctivist Account, different occurrences of the same sign may be occurrences of different symbols or of no symbol. In this sense, a sign may "be common" or "belong" to different symbols, as well as to mere signs. But this does not mean that a sign may belong to different symbols and to mere signs as an independently intelligible, conceptually separable common factor. The occurrences of different same-looking symbols and of the correspondent mere sign are not occurrences of the same sign *because* they possess some independently specifiable property, such as geometrical shape or acoustic structure. Rather, the sign that is common to different symbols and to mere signs is defined disjunctively in terms of what it is common to. Thus, to use a Tractarian example, the word or sign "is" is common to at least three different symbols: the copula, the sign of identity, and the sign

of existence. But the sign that is common to these different symbols is what, on each of its occurrences, is either an occurrence of one of those misleadingly same-looking symbols, or an item that merely appears to be an occurrence of each of those symbols.

The Disjunctivist Account does not deny that each occurrence of a sign may be described by means of a conceptual apparatus that makes no reference to symbols—say, in terms of purely geometrical or acoustic properties. And it does not deny that, for some or any given sign, there *might* be properties specifiable independently of any symbols (such as the property of exemplifying a certain geometrical shape or sound pattern) which belong to all and only the occurrences of the sign. But the existence of such properties, for the Disjunctivist Account, does not follow *a priori* from the existence of signs. All the occurrences of a sign have the property of appearing (either misleadingly or non-misleadingly) to be occurrences of each of the symbols to which the sign belongs; but this does not entail that there is a set of symbol-independent properties which single out all the occurrences of the same sign.

The Disjunctivist Account, unlike the No-Distance Account, provides a viable alternative to the Extra-Feature Account. It is compatible with (1)-(5), and has the advantage of explaining the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*. Moreover, it is supported by the fact that the *Tractatus* never refers to signs as shapes or sounds, or otherwise in terms that can be uncontroversially taken to be intelligible independently of symbols. I do not claim that these are decisive considerations for preferring the Disjunctivist Account to the Extra-Feature Account. I believe that the strongest reason for preferring the Disjunctivist Account is that it ascribes to the *Tractatus* a more promising philosophical view. This is not, however, a claim that I will try to substantiate on this occasion. It is enough, for my present purposes, if I have established that the Disjunctivist Account is a plausible exegetical option. In what follows, I am going to discuss how the Disjunctivist Account bears on the question of whether the Tractarian conception of language should be associated with a form of realism or a form of constructivism.

III

The terms "realism" and "constructivism" have several different uses in philosophy. Here I shall call an interpretation of the Tractarian conception of language "realist" if it construes Tractarian signs as items fully intelligible without any reference to meaningful signs—say, as geometrical shapes or acoustic patterns—and holds that simple signs acquire a meaning, for the *Tractatus*, when they are correlated, through some sort of ostensive definition or psychological act, to independently specifiable features of reality. By contrast, I shall call an interpretation of the Tractarian conception of language "constructivist" if it adopts the same characterization of Tractarian signs, but holds that simple signs acquire a meaning, for the *Tractatus*, when they are used in accordance with appropriate linguistic rules, where these rules can be fully specified without any invocation of meaningful signs and any appeal to semantic notions such as reference and truth.

Realist readings of the *Tractatus*, in the sense just specified, have in fact been proposed by several influential commentators (such as Peter Hacker, Norman Malcolm, and David Pears). This exegetical tradition has been challenged by so-called "anti-metaphysical" readers of the *Tractatus* (such as Hidé Ishiguro, Warren Goldfarb, Peter Winch, and Brian McGuinness), and the interpretations

proposed by these other commentators, or some of them, may perhaps be taken to be constructivist in the sense I have described. (Whether this is a fair representation of anti-metaphysical readings, or the product of the mistaken assumption that we must choose between realist and constructivist readings, is a question that I will leave open on this occasion.)

My claim here is that, if the Disjunctivist Account of the sign/symbol relation is correct, the Tractarian conception of language is neither realist nor constructivist. Realist and constructivist readings have an important feature in common: they are both committed to the Extra-Feature Account of the relation between signs and symbols, even though they construe very differently the extra feature that must be added to a sign in order to give it a meaning and thus turn it into a symbol. Such readings are therefore equally incompatible with the Disjunctivist Account of the sign/symbol relation, which treats the notion of meaningful sign as fundamental.

The Disjunctivist Account does not entail that a sign, for the *Tractatus*, cannot acquire a meaning (and thus become a symbol) by being correlated with a feature of reality. But the sign, the relevant procedure of correlation, and the relevant feature of reality must be intelligible only in light of the unitary notion of meaningful sign. Similarly, the Disjunctivist Account does not entail that a sign, for the *Tractatus*, cannot acquire a meaning by being used in ac-

cordance with the rules of the language. But the sign, the relevant sort of use, and the relevant linguistic rules must once again be intelligible only in light of the unitary notion of meaningful sign.

By adopting the Disjunctivist Account of the sign/symbol relation, we deny that the *Tractatus* is concerned to explain how language can get on its feet by reconstructing the notion of meaningful sign in terms of a prior and independent notion of sign and some prior and independent extra features, however exactly these extra features are to be construed. We can maintain that the *Tractatus* seeks to elucidate the notion of meaningful sign by appealing to a number of other notions—such as the notion of what is sensibly perceptible in the sign, of significant use, of sign-referent correlation, and of linguistic rule. But each of these other notions must be taken to presuppose the notion that they serve to elucidate.

References

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