

The Metaphysical Subject as Background to the Early Wittgenstein's Epistemology

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Proposition 4.1121 of the *Tractatus* states that epistemology is the philosophy of psychology. What should we take this to mean? Philosophy, on Tractarian terms, is an activity by which thoughts are clarified. This activity ranges from checking terms to see if they have meaning to investigating a network for its regularity. Epistemology, then, would be the philosophical analysis and clarification of any possible psychology, although it is not clear what a psychology on Tractarian terms would be. Understanding what such a psychology might be is necessary if we are to understand better what this epistemology would demand of us; however, to approach such an understanding, we will need to attend to the notion of subjectivity at work in the *Tractatus* and to the way it is related to thought and logic.

According to the *Tractatus*, thought is able to picture a possible world because both world and thought always have something in common: they have a shared logical form. However, this logical form is not itself a thing in the world that can be pictured. Instead, it can only be shown. This simple metaphysics sets up two pressing questions, both of which have epistemological implications. The first question is: what insures the unidirectional nature of this logically grounded thought-world relation? Presumably, this insurance is not an empirical matter; however, it would nevertheless give us the parameters within which any possible psychology would have to be developed. It would put constraints on what an empirical agent could be. The second is: what, exactly, is the ontological status of something that can only be shown (such as logical form)? The epistemological implication would be found in the need for any possible psychology of the actual empirical agents in this world to deal with how we have 'access' (if that proves to be the right word) to something shown.

With respect to the first question, the problem is that the picture that presents a state of affairs is a fact, while the state of affairs presented is also a fact. Thus, in picturing, we have a fact-fact relation. However, if left as it is, there is nothing in this relation to tell us which fact is the picture and which fact is the state of affairs. The absurd possibility of taking the world as a picture of the thought arises. This cannot be so, but how does the *Tractatus* avoid this absurdity? Two responses are possible: one is that there is something in the thought itself that insures this unidirectional relation; the other is that this is the function of the metaphysical subject.

If thoughts were to have something in them that insured this unidirectional relation, it is not clear what it would be. The thought must have the same mathematical multiplicity as the state of affairs that it pictures, and so there could be nothing additional in the picture that provided or insured this relation. There is, of course, the logical form of the thought, which is not a part of the thought's multiplicity, but this form is a matter of the *internal* relation of the members of this multiplicity. This form gives the thought its sense, but this sense is "independent of the facts" (4.061). It is only put into relation with the facts through "the method of projection," which is "the thinking of the sense of the proposition" (3.11). The thought then becomes, via the propositional sign through which it is expressed, the

proposition, which is "the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world" (3.12). It is this projection, which is not itself part of the thought, that puts the thought into relation with reality. The thought itself is independent of the facts and cannot put itself into relation with them.

So who, or what, engages in the activity of projection? Without this 'who,' thought will not be put into a relation with the world that is to be thought. This 'who' is thus necessary not just to insure the unidirectional relation of thought and world; it is necessary if there is to be any meaningful relation between them at all. It would seem that the only candidate for the 'who' is the metaphysical subject, since "there is no such thing as the soul – the subject, etc. – as it is conceived in contemporary superficial psychology" (5.5421) and "there is no such thing as the thinking, presenting subject" (5.631). There is no such thing because there are no propositional attitudes, and so it makes no sense to speak in terms of someone who thinks that such and such is the case (5.541).

But how do we make sense of the fact that Wittgenstein then seems to qualify this 'there is no such thing' by saying that "there is therefore really a sense in which in philosophy we can talk of a non-psychological I" (5.641)? This philosophical I is the metaphysical subject, which "does not belong to the world but is a limit of the world" (5.632). We have here something that is, ontologically speaking, quite odd: we have something about which we can talk and yet which is not. The subject is, in this oddness, similar to logic, which also limits the world. It is here that the question of how the unidirectional relation is insured dovetails with the question of the ontological status of logic: it would seem that the metaphysical subject is what must insure this relation, and this subject raises the same ontological perplexity raised by logic itself.

However, before we deal with this ontological perplexity, I still need to address the way in which the metaphysical subject could be thought to insure the unidirectional relation. One common approach is to treat the metaphysical subject as an entity of some kind, such as a transcendental ego, and to attribute some kind of activity to it. Wittgenstein himself never attributes any activity to this subject, and it is difficult to think of a limit that does not belong to the world as engaging in an activity. The main reason for this attribution of activity to the metaphysical subject stems, I suggest, from the contiguity of the propositions in which he discusses these things. The idea is that, although there is no thinking, presenting subject in the world, there must be one that does not belong to the world. Thus, the subject that does not belong to the world – the metaphysical subject – is the very thinking, presenting subject that is not, with 'is not' being read as 'is not something in the world.'

This reading of the metaphysical subject as an active entity that does the thinking that we experience seems to raise the very problems that are supposed to vanish as a result of the *Tractatus*. For if the metaphysical subject does in fact do the thinking that we experience, we must explain how this metaphysical entity is related to the empirical agents who are subject to this activity. It seems to raise the specter of Cartesian dualism: how is this thinking

thing related to the bodies that give us the very things about which we think? But, again, this seems to be the type of thing that Wittgenstein sees his logical atomism and picture theory of meaning as solving: it solves such problems by showing them to be nonsense. They are not problems at all.

If this is the case – if the metaphysical subject understood in this way leads to a troubling dualism – then what other way is there to understand the metaphysical subject? The answer seems to be that it is a condition for the possibility of determinate meaning. One such condition must be that pictures are pictures of the world, and this is insured through the necessary orientation that takes place in any thinking: thinking thinks its world. Since neither world nor thought insures this relation, there must be something else that does, and this is the subject. And since this subject cannot be a part of the world, it must, like logic, be something transcendental. It does not do the thinking, but it somehow speaks to a necessity that takes place in thinking.

But then who does the thinking, and how, exactly, does the metaphysical subject provide a condition for such thinking without being reified as an ego of some kind? The answer is, I think, that psychological agents do the thinking. However, they do not do it as subjects. In other words, there *is* thinking in the world, there is just no thinking subject. Wittgenstein is rejecting subjectivity as a philosophical problem in which philosophers try to get at the conditions for any possible thinking by speaking of an entity that is pure and that is beyond the world. On the terms of the *Tractatus*, there is no possibility of such an entity or of access to it. There is only the world that thought can give. The only condition for my thinking *this* world (*my* world) is that I must do so through some medium in which thoughts can be expressed. Thinking must take place in a language, and this will be the language of the one who thinks: it will be *my* language (and I cannot have a language that is not mine). Thought will then be limited by what it is possible to express within my language, and so the notion of the metaphysical subject seems to mark our subjection to expression as well as to the thinking of a world.

This leads us to our second question: what is the ontological status of these limits (the metaphysical subject and logic) that make thought possible? They are not features of the physical universe: although they are limits of it, they do not belong to it. Nor are they features of the internal experience of human agents; such internality does not in fact stand as a separate realm (from the physical universe) for the early Wittgenstein. Nor do they exist in some platonic 'third realm' as timeless, non-mental, non-material entities. How, then, are we to think the nature of that which has no substance?

As long as we think in terms of some kind of entity – a thing or substance that stands in relation to other things or substances – we will continuously fall prey to metaphysical temptations. Instead, we must attempt to think the notion of limit differently. For instance, if we strip away everything in the proposition that is its perceptible cloak, we would be left with nothing. Yet we cannot think without some medium through which to express the thoughts, and we cannot think without some possible world that is thought. This medium – language – will only enable me to say a limited

number of things (I can only say what is possible within it), and so any possible world will be delimited by it. I simply will not be able to think a thought that I cannot somehow express. In this sense, the subject limits the world: it designates our subjection to what our language enables. Further, this limit can only be sensed, as it were, from the inside: only by actually putting propositions out before ourselves can we see if they'll make sense, just as we must actually put them up against a world to see if they are true. The limit is thus encountered only in investigation.

In our investigation of what we say, we are not dealing with the appearance of something hidden that exists apart from the appearances. There is, so to speak, nothing but appearances and nothing can be extracted from them except more appearances, i.e. more description. The notion of appearance thus ceases to be useful. Such a notion suggests that there might be some transcendental rails that we follow in our investigations and that make these investigations possible, but Wittgenstein rejects the notion of something noumenal that exists *behind* what is said. There aren't tracks that we follow but limits that we come up against. These limits aren't transcendental in the sense of being beyond the world. The point is that there is no world beyond the limits of thought.

Whatever we gather up from this and set aside will not capture the essence of logic or the subject; it will only better enable us to describe the world. We could never think this logic or subject, but there would be no need. Instead, the *Tractatus* would require that the problem of the ontology of logic and subject vanish: it cannot make sense, and so there can be no answer to it. However, if we trust to the necessity of logic and to its assumption that "names have a meaning, and that elementary propositions have sense" (6.124), then we can get down to the important business of exploring the world that happens to be the case. This exploration will depend on our physiological and psychological capacities, and one important task will be to have as accurate a sense of these capacities as possible.

It is here that we begin to see the impact these considerations have for epistemology. They are twofold. The first is that epistemology, which is the philosophy of psychology, will have to deal with thinking and how it empirically takes place. How the psychological theory itself comes about is not important; it will most likely rest on inductive means that have no logical foundation (6.3631). But its task will be to account for the causal means by which we make pictures to ourselves and then test them against the actual world we picture. However, in doing so, such a theory will not be able – logically – to rely upon the notion of subjectivity. This would then be one of the tasks for philosophy (which, as Wittgenstein stresses, is an activity and not a matter of doctrine) with respect to psychology: it would have to correct any possible psychology when it attempted to speak of such a subject. Second, epistemology will be in large part a matter of the investigation of language, since the world that I attempt to know is given to me as knowable in thought. This even points to a positive dimension for philosophy: by analyzing the language with which we think the world, we can come to see its inadequacies (if there are any, which at present there certainly are) and be moved to find better means of expression.