SIMPLES ON DEMAND : A PROBLEM
IN THE *TRACTATUS*

One of the important doctrines of the *Tractatus* is the one about a proposition's making sense and its having bipolarity, namely, truth/falsity polarity. This talk of the sense of a proposition is again linked to a doctrine of simples. In what follows we shall try to understand the nature of this link.

To understand a proposition is to know what would be the case if it is true and what would be the case if it is false (TLP 4·024). But to understand a proposition we do not have to know whether it is true or false. And the relationship between a proposition's truth and of its falsity is not accidental, but is such that in determining what would be for a proposition to be true we thereby determine what would be for it to be false. As Wittgenstein says, " A proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives : Yes or No " (TLP 4·023). That is to say, a proposition must describe reality completely so that no situations are allowed as possible which do not count either towards truth or falsity.

Frege's distinction between sense and reference allowed him just such a possibility. For Frege, a sentence of the form 'The ϕ is f ', where there is no object answering to ' The ϕ ', would not be true, but it would not be false either. To use Fregean terms, the sentence would be without a reference, but would retain its full quota of sense. Frege, however, considered such a contingency an imperfection of language and sounded a warning against apparent proper names having no reference.[1] Frege's remedy for the imperfection takes the form of a stipulation that vacuous names should designate the number 0. Frege thus had no use for Russell's Theory of Descriptions to help him out of a situation in which names, descriptions or sentences—— all names according to Frege—— failed to have a reference.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions, by analyzing ' The ϕ is f ' into ' For some x, ϕx and for all y, ϕy only if y = x and fx ', shows that the proposition would be false when there is no object answering to ' The ϕ '. Wittgenstein, having equated a proposition's having sense with its having truth/falsity polarity,

naturally endorsed it. " A proposition that mentions a complex will not be nonsensical, if the complex does not exist, but simply false " (TLP 3'24). But Russell's Theory of Descriptions has, as Dummett points out, a major defect, namely, that of encouraging a hunt for the logically proper name[2]. The Theory eliminates ordinary proper names and definite descriptions, with or without reference, as being apparent singular terms and prompts a search, made all the more pressing for Russell and Wittgenstein by the rejection of the Fregean theory of sense and reference, for the genuine proper name that carries with it a logical guarantee that the name has a reference, and consequently, the whole burden of meaning. Was Wittgenstein's acceptance of the Tractatus names and the simple objects named by them a consequence of his endorsement of Russell's Theory of Descriptions ?

Anscombe argues that the proposition ' There is an x such that ϕx, and, for y, ϕy only if y = x ' could not be true, unless some singular proposition of the form ' ϕb ' were true. Thus, according to Anscombe, we have

(1) fA where A is of the form ' The ϕ '.

(2) There is an x such that ϕx, and, for all y, ϕy only if y = x.

(3) ϕb.

She insists that the sign ' b ' in the postulated proposition (3) must be such as not to allow a distinction between $(\sim \phi)$ b and $\sim (\phi b)$. If such a distinction were allowed ' the proposition ' There is not an x such that ϕx ' would in turn be ambiguous in its truth-conditions.[3] There being two ways in which ' $(\exists x) \phi x$' might be false.

Hidé Ishiguro interprets Anscombe as meaning that ' b ' in ' ϕ b ' is a name on all fours with a Tractatus one : ' Where b can be paraphrased as ' the ψ ' and so on until we arrive at Xc where ' c ' cannot be paraphrased anymore. '[4] And in this she is wrong. Anscombe does not deduce Wittgenstein's necessity for names from his acceptance of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, which, she points out, does not lead us to *simples*. The theory in its logical aspect, she continues, has nothing to do with any theory of reduction to simples.[5] As Anscombe herself explains, ' b ' in ' ϕ b ' happens to be a name like ' Parliament' if ' fA ' happens to be the proposition ' The body

making laws for Britain is corrupt.' Nor does she imply, as Ishiguro seems to take her to be doing, that in order to understand 'fA' we have to know the truth value of the existential proposition in (2). All Anscombe means is that the two ways of being false of '($\exists$x) ϕx', due to a distinction between ($\sim \phi$) b and $\sim$ (ϕb), would result in ambiguous truth-conditions for '($\exists$x) ϕx', and consequently, for 'fA'. Anscombe has no quarrel with Ishiguro when she says that we do not have to know the truth-value of '($\exists$x) ϕx' in order to give a definite sense or truth-conditions to 'fA'. For Anscombe the trouble is that if there are two ways in which '($\exists$x) ϕx' can be false then '($\exists$x) ϕx' is without a definite sense.

In the *Tractatus* as in the *Note Books* the demand for simples is linked to the demand for the definiteness of sense. Anscombe seems to follow Wittgenstein along this line to arrive at his simples. To understand (1) 'fA' involves knowing the truth-conditions of (2) 'There is an x such that ϕx, and for all y, ϕy only if y = x', and to know the truth-conditions of (2) involves knowing the truth-conditions of (3) 'ϕb'. The sting is in the tail. In a world where there are no bodies corporate, the proposition 'ϕ Parliament' would be false, radically false as Anscombe puts it. The proposition would also be false if ϕ does not hold of parliament. So there would be two ways in which ϕ parliament', or for that matter any proposition in respect of which the question of radical falsehood can be raised, might be false. This, she thinks, affects the definiteness of sense. 'One kind of indefiniteness in a proposition might be that there was more than one way of its being false'[6]. The remedy therefore lies in closing this possibility by shutting off at a certain stage this question of radical falsehood. This might be done in either of two ways. A radical falsehood depends on an ordinary falsehood. So in order to close the possibility of a radical falsehood we would have to start from the *truth* of some proposition. But then whether a proposition makes sense would depend on our knowledge of facts, which it should not. Or, we might opt for propositions incapable of radical falsehood. For such propositions there would be just one way of being false. 'That is to say' Anscombe argues, 'there must be names of simples which can only be named, and not defined by a description such as parliament is, and whose existence is guaranteed.[7]

I am afraid this is not Wittgenstein's argument. That a proposition can be false in more than one way is not something we can hold against a proposition. By the same token, we cannot hold it against a proposition that it can be true in more than one way. Consider the propositions ' P·Q ', and 'PvQ' where ' P ', 'Q' are let us say, elementary propositions, and therefore with definite sense. ' P·Q' can be false, and 'PvQ' true, in three different ways. Does this condition make the propositions indefinite in any way ? If it did, it would put in jeopardy Wittgenstein's whole idea of building up language from elementary propositions by means of truth functions. There is no problem so long as we know what the different ways of being true or of being false are.

We got worried about the problem of the conditions of the falsity of a proposition. Let us now turn to the problem of the conditions of the truth of a proposition of the form 'fA' where ' A ' is of the form ' The φ '. There is only one way, everybody agrees, for the proposition to be true, namely, that of A existing and f holding of A. So the truth of 'fA' depends in part on the truth of ' The complex A exists '. This proposition is, as Wittgenstein points out in the *Notes on Logic*, equivalent to 'the proposition which describes the complex perfectly'. (NB. p. 99).

What would a perfect or complete description of a complex be like ? At TLP 2·0201 Wittgenstein says : ' Every statement about complexes can be resolved into a statement of their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely. This is the spirit of Russell's Theory of Descriptions brought to bear on descriptions which describe objects by enumerating their parts. Wittgenstein was deeply interested in such descriptions of complex objects formed by the use of two-place predicates, descriptions such as ' Alsace-Lorraine '. Thus his model for analyzing propositions containing such descriptions is :

$\phi(a) \cdot \phi(b) \cdot aRb =$ Def. ϕ [aRb] (NB. p. 4). That is to say, to say of a complex object consisting of constituents a and b that ϕ holds of the complex object is to say that ϕ holds of a, ϕ holds of b and that a and b are related in an appropriate way so as to account for the existence of the complex object. In terms of TLP 2.0201, ' aRb ' is a statement describing the complex completely, a statement equivalent to the assertion of the existence of the complex object as pointed out in the *Notes on Logic* and

' φa ', ' φb ' are statements about the constituents of the complex object, the conjunction of all of which gives us an analysis of ' φ [aRb]'. Kenny rightly points out that Wittgenstein's criticism in the *Philosophical Investigations* of the analysis of propositions such as ' My broom is in the corner ' into ' My broomstick is in the corner, and my brush is in the corner and the broomstick is attached to the brush' was directed against propositions analysed along these lines.[8]

It is now possible to understand the statement ' A complex can be given only by its description, which will be right or wrong'. (TLP 3'24). Such a description is not a statement about a complex such as ' FA ', but consists of propositions that describe the complex completely, a proposition equivalent to an assertion of the existence of the complex object, i.e., a proposition of the form ' aRb ' as shown above. In the broom example of the *Philosophical Investigations* the description that gives the complex would be ' the broomstick is attached to the brush '. And such a description will be right accordingly as it gets right about the constituents of the complex and about the way they are related.

The adoption of the above mode of analysis for statements of complexes does not, however, lead to simples. The constituents a and b might themselves be complex, just as the broomstick and the brush are, and we shall find ourselves thrown back on TLP 2.0201 for help and guidance, only if there is reason to seek further analysis. The process of analysis end with our reaching simples, simple signs naming simple object. But why should it be necessary to push the analysis so far? Wittgenstein's argument is that the process must terminate in simples in order for our proposition to have determinate sense, to a consideration of which idea we must now turn.

What is it for a proposition to have determinate sense ? Following out an idea in the NB we may say that for Wittgenstein definiteness of the sense of a proposition is secured by a complete specification of its syntactical employment, i.e., by a specification of all the propositions that follow from it ' . . . . what propositions follow from a proposition must be completely settled before that porposition can have a sense'. (NB. p. 64) And for a proposition to have a sense is to have a determinate sense, what can be said can be said clearly. In the Prototractatus we find the same ideas of determinateness expressed : The requirement of determinateness

could also be formulated in the following way : if a proposition is to have sense, the syntactical employment of each of its parts must have been established in advance. For example, it can not occur to one only subsequently that a certain proposition follows from it ' (PTLP 3' 20103). And this ties up with TLP 4'024 and TLP 5'124.

Thus the syntax of a proposition has to be fixed in a manner that is once and for all complete. This cannot be done without our giving a complete analysis of the proposition and there is only one complete analysis of a proposition. Speaking of subject-predicate propositions, Wittgenstein noted the difficulty of fixing the syntax of a proposition without being able to give an analysis of the proposition. (NB p. 4) Logic by itself cannot discover that ' ϕa ', ' ϕb' or 'aRb' follows from the proposition ' ϕ(aRb)' ', which, according to Wittgenstein, they certainly do. Thus the importance of analysis in fixing the syntax of a proposition is clear. Given the complete analysis and the rules of logic we have all that, we need for the purpose.

In case a, b, themselves are complex the propositions ' ϕa ', ' ϕb ', ' aRb ' will have, Wittgenstein tells us, indeterminate sense (TLP. 3'24). That is to say, a proposition mentioning a complex would resist a complete specification of its syntax. Consider the proposition ' The watch is lying on the table ' . The watch and the table are complex, and x even if we suppose that the syntax of ' the watch ' together with that of ' the table ' , is completely fixed, the question whether a proposition of the form ' The watch is in such—and—such a position ' follows from 'the watch is lying on the table' might leave us *uncertain* (NB. p. 70). The proposition is thus shown to be indeterminate in sense, we do not know what exactly is asserted, when we assert the proposition. This is because of a failure to fix the complete syntactical employment of, at least, ' lying on '. (' I did not know what I meant by ' lying ' in general ' (NB p. 70) And such a failure is bound to result when we are concerned with a relation of complex objects, such a relation being compatible with a variety of situations, a variety too bewildering to be completely specified. Here in the watch-table example the problem is not that the watch or the table, being complex, might not exist, creating the possibility of a radical falsehood, but that supposing them to exist, and unambiguously, we still cannot get on. We could adopt the

Fregean ploy, however artificial, that a vacuous description or an empty name would denote the number zero and thus close the possibility of a radical falsehood, still we would be plagued. That is the heart of the problem. The point that Wittgenstein wishes to make by means of the watch-table example is that objections on grounds of ambiguity could always be raised as long as we talk about complex objects, objections that leave us *uncertain*. ' A proposition like ' This chair is brown ' seems to say something enormously complicated, for if we wanted to express this proposition in such a way that nobody could raise objections to it on grounds of ambiguity, it would have to be infinitely long' (NB p.5).

It is perhaps now clear that Wittgenstein considers the question of the determinateness of the sense of a proposition by inquiring into the conditions of the truth of certain propositions, and not, as many are inclined to think, by worrying about the conditions of the falsity of a proposition, e.g. of the form ' The ϕ is f '. ' What he principally had in mind ', rightly says Anscombe, ' was the sort of proposition where there is a variety of ways for the proposition to be true.'[9] But it would be wrong to think, as Anscombe seems to do, that a proposition suffers from indeterminateness simply by virtue of there being a variety of ways in which it might be true or be false. We have indeterminateness only when we have no way of telling what exactly this variety is. This was precisely the problem with the proposition ' The watch is lying on the table '. ' In such cases we know that the proposition leaves something undetermined ' (TLP 3.24). And such a case will obtain as long as our analysis of a proposition, in terms of TLP 2'0201, mentions constituents themselves complex. We therefore find Wittgenstein talking about the process of analysis coming to an end so that meaning may belong to signs in a way that is once and for all complete (PTLP 3'20102) and a proposition's having a final sense (endlischen Sinn) : ' If there is a final sense and a proposition expressing it completely then there are also names for simple objects' (NB p. 64). Such a proposition marks the end of our analysis and the end of our search for determinateness of sense; exactly what propositions follow from it is a question that would no longer cause trouble.

Now, is not there any scope for vagueness, ambiguity, or our becoming *uncertain*, when we are concerned with relations of

simple objects ? A simple object is either concatenated with simple objects or is not. The relationship is too simple to be vague, too discreet to generate rumours. And a feeling of the simple relation, Wittgenstein says, is what ‘ comes before our mind as the main ground for assuming the existence of ‘ simple objects ’ (NB pp. 49-50). If the relationship of simple objects were such that it would, like ‘ lying on ’, be compatible with an unspecifiable veriety of situations then even elementary propositions would be indeterminate in sense, and the guaranteed existence of simple objects would be a poor consolation.

We could, of course, secure determinateness for ‘ The watch is lying on the table ’ by accepting as true a statement saying what propositions follow from it. We would not then need simple objects, but then whether one proposition made sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

Department of Philosophy
The University of Burdwan.   DILIP K. BASU

NOTES

1. P. Geach and M. Black (ed), *Translation from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, (Oxford, 1970), p. 70.

2. M. Dummett, *Frege : Philosophy of Language* (Harper & Row, 1973), p. 163.

3. G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, (Hutchinson 1971) p. 47.

4. Hide Ishiguro, Use and Reference of Names, in Peter Winch (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1971) p. 42.

5. G. M. Anscombe, *Op. Cit.* p. 48.

6. Ibid. p. 34·

7. Ibid, p. 49.

8. A. Kenny, Wittgenstein, (Penguin, 1976) p. 80.

9. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

ABBREVIATIONS

N. B. Note books : 1914-1916 Translation by G. E. M. Anscombe : Harper & (Row, 1969)

PTLP : Prototractatus, Translation by Pears and McGuinness, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

TLP : Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Translation by Pears and Mc-Guinness (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).