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THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOGICAL WHOLISM*

Words are like a film on deep water

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
Notebooks 1914-1916

ABSTRACT. The present paper is one installment in a lengthy task, the replacement of atomistic interpretations of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by a wholistic interpretation on which the world-in-logical-space is not constructed out of objects but objects are abstracted from out of that space. Here, general arguments against atomism are directed toward a specific target, the four aspects of the atomistic reading of *Tractatus* given in the Hintikkas' *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Hintikka & Hintikka 1986). The aspects in question are called the semantical, metaphysical, epistemological and formal.

What follows a précis of the Hintikkas' rendering of Wittgenstein's perspective is a characterization of the wholistic interpretation, comparing Wittgenstein's world and the transcendental conditions it sets upon possible notation to a blank page and the conditions it sets upon what is about to be written there. There will not be occasion to bring arguments against each plank in the atomist's platform or in support of each facet of wholism. But there is an extended treatment of the first two aspects - the semantical and metaphysical - which takes off from Wittgenstein's determination that, in his hands, "logic must take care of itself".

The second half of the paper contains a negative assessment of the support the atomistic reading can glean from the texts of *Tractatus* and *Notebooks*. From a detailed look into a range of relevant textual and translational issues, we find little there to encourage that interpretation and much to discourage it.

The paper closes on a preliminary consideration of one segment of the formal aspect of the Hintikkas' atomism, the idea that the analysis of *Tractatus* is the analysis of Russell or is, at worst, a near relative. Examination shows that Wittgenstein would have little reason to model his analysis on that of Russell. The fundamentally wholistic vision expressed in *Tractatus* requires a distinctively non-Russellian, decompositional version of analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

If there was a specifically "early" Wittgenstein, he was not a logical atomist but a logical wholist. By this, I mean to break with a long interpretative tradition and to turn a standard view of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and contemporaneous writings on its very head. By my lights,
Wittgenstein's *Welt*, the world-in-logical-space, was not the great logical fabrication, built up by iterable semantic constructions out of independent units of meaning, the logical atoms. To read Wittgenstein's treatise is not to read a mild revision of Russell's semantics, or of any semantics, provided that a semantics is codified as a set of principles of meaning, a knowledge of which would constitute an understanding of language. Wittgenstein's logic, his perspective on the logical, was not an extension of a line first drawn by Frege and extended into our century by Russell, but a determined attempt to rub that line out.

The tradition of logical atomism and of atomistic interpretations of Wittgenstein was established in Russell's troubled *Introduction to Tractatus*, where he wrote "the naming of simples is shown to be what is logically first in logic" (Russell 1981, p. xiii). It was extended through *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (Russell 1985), and commentaries such as Black's *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Black 1964). More recently, it is upheld in Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka's *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Hintikka & Hintikka 1986). Toward this book are my remarks principally directed. However, it is clear that many apply far more widely.

Banishing logical atomism and welcoming logical wholism is setting up an opposition between two ways of reading *Tractatus* or, better, of picturing to ourselves Wittgenstein's world. For the atomists – those who favor the attribution to Wittgenstein of logical atomism – the world of *Tractatus* is semantically structured. Its image is absolutely clear, preternaturally sharp: a logical mosaic tiled with purely referential units, each lying at the lower limit of conceptual and perceptual resolution. For the wholists, Wittgenstein's world has no philosophical image at all, no picture of a logically primeval landscape which later gets reported in the grammar of our language. The world there is not one which is represented to us. It is not there to be an object of our intelligence but emerges to make intellection possible. Certainly, it is not a world constructed from semantical ephemera.

I caution the reader that this opposition is not one between philosophical views comparable with the outposts of warring tribes which overlook a neutral terrain. We ought to refuse the temptation to borrow a metaphor from the information-processing trade and call atomism a "bottom up" version of Wittgenstein while wholism is "top down". There is danger in this metaphor's false suggestion: that the two readings might go variously up and down the same ladder and then meet