

SCHOPENHAUER AND WITTGENSTEIN ON SELF AND OBJECT

In the 5.6's of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein introduces remarks about the self and solipsism. These remarks are usually held by commentators to reflect the influence of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*. These commentators point to Schopenhauer's doctrine that the "world is my idea", that the self is the presupposition and support of the world, that the world exists in the sensorium of the single ego.¹ But if Schopenhauer is Wittgenstein's inspiration here it is not these aspects of his doctrines that we should especially have in mind. For Wittgenstein is not so much saying in the 5.6's that the self is the support of the world, as that the self collapses into the world. This is not really a form of solipsism but, as Wittgenstein himself stresses, a form of realism:

...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 coordinated with it.²

And in the *Notebooks* for 15th. October 1916 he says the following:

Idealism singles men out from the world as unique, solipsism singles me alone out, and at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*.³

¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Hutchinson, London, 1959), p. 168; P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 88, 99-100; J.S. Clegg, 'Logical Mysticism and the Setting of the *Tractatus*,' *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 59 (1978): 39.

² *Tractatus* 5.64 (translation by Pears and McGuinness, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961). Also *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. Anscombe and von Wright (Blackwell, Chicago, 1979), p. 82.

To find parallels to these ideas in Schopenhauer we have to look to some of the things that Schopenhauer says about art in Book 3 of *The World as Will and Idea* where we find the following passage:⁴

When an individual knower has raised himself...to be pure subject of knowledge, and at the same time has raised the observed object to the Platonic idea, the world as idea appears complete and pure... The Idea includes object and subject in like manner in itself, for they are its one form; but in it they are absolutely of equal importance; for as the object is here, as elsewhere, simply the idea of the subject, the subject, which passes entirely into the perceived object, has thus become this object itself, for the whole consciousness is nothing but its perfectly distinct picture.⁵

What is of interest about this passage is the way Schopenhauer sees the subject, in its activity of pure knowing, as passing entirely into the object, or, as he says in related passages, “losing” itself in the object.⁶ This is more in line with what Wittgenstein means in the 5.6’s of the *Tractatus*. However it is not altogether the same, partly because Schopenhauer still wants to say here that the subject is somehow the support of the object, and partly also because what Wittgenstein regards as a feature of logic and

³ *Notebooks*, p. 85; Clegg, *op. cit.*: 32, 39. Consider also the remarks in *Tractatus* 5.542: “It is clear that ‘A believes that p’, ‘A has the thought that p’, and ‘A says p’ are of the form ‘“p” says p’.

⁴ Hacker refers to Schopenhauer’s aesthetic doctrine (*op. cit.*, pp.97-98) but does not note its non-solipsistic character.

⁵ *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (hereafter *WWV*) in *Schopenhauer Werke* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1982) vol. 1, pp. 258-59. I have used the English translation of Haldane and Kemp (hereafter *HK*) (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1883), vol. 1, pp. 232-33.

⁶ *WWV* vol.1 pp. 257, 266; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 231, 240.

knowing as such, Schopenhauer confines to the aesthetic knowing of artistic genius. Clearly, despite the similarities between Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein on the relation of subject and object, there are significant differences too.

A) Schopenhauer

For Schopenhauer the world is, of course, both will and idea. The idealistic doctrines he espouses concern the world as idea. For as idea the world is only *for* a perceiving and knowing subject; it exists only insofar as it is in consciousness.⁷ But the world as idea is partial and unsatisfying, If this is all there were the world would be for us like “an empty dream, a baseless vision, not worth our notice”.⁸ What gives the world substance and reality, what gets it beyond mere ideas, is will. The world as idea is just the external appearance, the external “objectification”, of will. But will itself is the reality or the substance of the idea, the true ‘thing-in-itself’ behind the appearances.⁹

The world, of course, contains many different particulars. These are both idea, insofar as they are objects for knowledge, and will, insofar as they are objectifications of the world’s substance. The will is one; its objectifications many. These objectifications are both the individuals and the types or kinds that the individuals fall into. Adapting Plato, Schopenhauer calls the kinds or types Platonic Ideas. These types become multiplied into many particulars through what Schopenhauer calls the *principium individuationis*, or the forms of time, space and causality. Here Schopenhauer adapts the

⁷ “...all that exists for knowledge, and therefore this whole world, is only object in relation to subject, percept of a perceiver, in a word idea.” *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 31-32; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 3-4. Notice the approving reference to Berkeley.

⁸ *WWV* vol. 1, p. 156; *HK* vol. 1, p. 128.

⁹ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 158-63, 170; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 130-35, 142.

thought of another great philosopher he admired, Kant.¹⁰ These forms are only forms of knowing and belong only to the world as idea; they have nothing to do with the world as will, or with the thing-in-itself. To speak generally, the world as idea is governed by the principle of sufficient reason. For space and time belong to this principle, and individuals are thought in their spatial and temporal relationships according to it. But what is true of particulars is not true of the Platonic Ideas or the types of the particulars. These are not subject to causality or time and space, for they are not particulars.¹¹ The Platonic Ideas are in fact a sort of intermediary between the will itself and the particulars. They are direct objectifications of the will, while particulars are indirect objectifications mediated by the principle of sufficient reason. This is also why the Platonic Ideas are the will's only adequate objectification.¹²

To appreciate the Platonic Idea which is apart from, and prior to, all individuals, Schopenhauer contends that it is necessary for the individual knower also to pass beyond particularity.¹³ What limits the Idea to Individuality, namely causality, time and space, is also what limits the subject to individuality. In order to see the object as Platonic Idea, the subject has to cease being concerned with the object's connection to other things, and its place in the causal nexus, in short to cease being concerned with all that is of concern to individuals. The subject has to become completely absorbed in the object and to know it pure and by itself. The subject has to become pure subject of knowledge.¹⁴ This kind of pure knowing, a knowing that is not governed, like science, by the principle of sufficient

¹⁰ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 173-74; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 145-46.

¹¹ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 245-46; *HK* vol. 1, p. 220.

¹² *WWV* vol. 1, p. 253; *HK* vol. 1, p. 227.

¹³ *WWV* vol. 1, p. 256; *HK* vol. 1, p. 230.

¹⁴ *WWV* vol. 1, p. 257; *HK* vol. 1, p. 231.

reason, exists only in the case of art.¹⁵ It is aesthetic knowing, the knowing that is achieved in moments of supreme contemplation. As Schopenhauer himself puts it:

The particular things of all time and space are nothing but Ideas multiplied through the principle of sufficient reason... When the Platonic Idea appears, in it subject and object are no longer to be distinguished, for the Platonic Idea, the adequate objectivity of will, the true world as idea, arises only when the subject and object reciprocally fill and penetrate each other completely; and in the same way the knowing and the known individuals, as things in themselves, are not to be distinguished. For if we look entirely away from the *world as idea*, there remains nothing but the *world as will*. The will is the “in-itself” of the Platonic Idea, which fully objectifies it; it is also the “in-itself” of the particular thing and of the individual that knows it, which objectify it incompletely. As will, outside the idea and all its forms, it is one and the same in the object contemplated and in the individual, who soars aloft in this contemplation, and becomes conscious of himself as pure subject. These two are, therefore, in themselves not different, for in themselves they are will, which here knows itself...¹⁶

So the meaning behind, and justification for, the identity that Schopenhauer sees between subject and object in the pure act of knowing lies in this, that these two are ultimately one in the thing-in-itself, the will, the ultimate reality behind everything. But this identity, because it is achieved only in the aesthetic contemplation of artistic genius, is confined to

¹⁵ *WWV* vol. 1, p. 265; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 238-39.

¹⁶ *WWV* vol. 1, p. 259; *HK* vol. 1, p. 233.

the few. It is emphatically not the work of logic. For logic, in Schopenhauer's view, deals with the ordinary processes of reason operative in everyone, and these processes follow one of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason (namely the ground of knowing) and so cannot reach the level of the Platonic Idea for which that principle has no meaning.¹⁷

B) Wittgenstein

Passing now from Schopenhauer to Wittgenstein. The central or key tenet of the *Tractatus* is that propositions are significant by being pictures of the facts they are about. As part of this doctrine, Wittgenstein makes the claim that the truth or falsity of the propositions we make in speech can only be known by comparison with the reality that the propositions are supposed to be about or are supposed to be picturing. If things are the way they are said to be in the proposition, the proposition is true; if not, it is false. In other words a proposition by itself is not enough to determine its own truth or falsity. For that we need to go outside the proposition to the world. Consequently a proposition whose truth or falsehood could be known without comparing it with reality could not be a genuine proposition, or a genuine picture. A genuine proposition must be such that, when taken by itself, one cannot decide whether it is true or false. Genuine propositions must have both a true and a false pole, as Wittgenstein neatly puts it.¹⁸

So far so good. But what is peculiar to Wittgenstein is the way his understanding of these claims is determined by modern formal logic. In this logic there are propositions that do not have both a true and a false pole. These are tautologies and contradictions.

According to modern logic's truth functional analysis, which determines the truth of a

¹⁷ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 83-87, 245-46; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 57-60, 22. Cf. also *Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom sureichenden Grunde*, in *Werke* vol. 2, ch. 5.

¹⁸ *Notebooks*, Appendix 1, pp. 94, 98-99, 101-102.

proposition in terms of the truth of the constituent propositions, tautologies are understood as those propositions which are always true no matter what the truth value of the constituent propositions, and contradictions are understood as those that are always false no matter what the truth value of the constituent propositions.¹⁹ Consequently tautologies and contradictions are not genuine propositions. Modern logic is formal logic and it recognizes only formal necessities. This is particularly noticeable in the case of implication. The so-called paradoxes of implication (as for instance that any false proposition implies any true one) all arise because formal logic, unlike ordinary thinking, takes no account of the content of the propositions. If a proposition is necessary this can only be because of its form, not its content. It must therefore be a necessity that is evident from the symbolization alone. So formal logic only recognizes necessity in the case of tautologies, as in ‘ p or not p ’, and contradictions, as in ‘ p and not p ’. These are the only formal necessities. It is a consequence of this that all other propositions, since they are not formal necessities and accordingly are not such as to be always false or always true, must admit of both possibilities and must, therefore, all be contingent. These propositions will, according to Wittgenstein’s picture theory, be the only genuine propositions. They will be the only ones that actually say something about the world. Since they are all contingent, the world they picture must also be contingent. Nothing in the world can be necessary. It must all admit of being other than it is.

The decisive role that modern formal logic is playing in Wittgenstein’s thought here can be illustrated also by reference to his account of names and objects. This itself follows from modern logic’s theory of quantification (invented by Frege), and Russell’s theory of descriptions. In modern logic propositions containing ‘all’ and ‘some’, as in “all

¹⁹ This is made particularly evident by the truth tables for tautologies and contradictions.

cats have fur” and “some animals have tusks”, are analyzed as follows. “For all x, if x is a cat then x has fur”, and “there is an x such that x is an animal and x has tusks”. Russell’s theory of descriptions is a way of using this feature to explain such logically problematic expressions as “the present king of France is bald”. This becomes, for Russell, “there is a term c such that (1) ‘x is king of France’ is equivalent to ‘x is c’, (2) c is bald”.²⁰ The interesting point here is the introduction of the symbols ‘x’ and ‘c’. In Russell’s terminology these are logical names or variables for logical names and the function of logical names is simply to refer to an object, not to describe or say anything about it, Any term which does not just refer to something but also says something about it, that is to say any term which counts as a description (as in ‘the king of France’ or ‘a cat’), will always be found, on analysis, really to be a hidden proposition and to reduce to the combination of a logical name, ‘a’, and a predicate, ‘...is king of France’, ‘...is a cat’. Wittgenstein radicalized this element of modern logic and said that predicates too will be found, in the end, to be combinations of logical names. A proposition such as ‘a is ϕ ’ really says that a is in a certain combination with other names or other a’s.²¹ Logical names have no content; they are pure references and nothing else. So no place is left for any kind of necessity between names based on content. The only necessity there can be is formal necessity. We are back again with tautologies and contradictions as the only possible necessities.

It is because of this doctrine of names and of the contingency of the world that Wittgenstein develops his account of the identity of self and object in the act of knowing, or of the reduction of solipsism to realism. For it seems evident that the relationship

²⁰ Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1919), ch. 16.

²¹ *Tractatus* 4.22, 4.221. The fully analyzed proposition will have some such symbolic form as ‘aRb’ where a and b will be names.

between myself as knower and the world as known is not contingent but necessary. The world is only accessible to me in my acts of knowing it. The known world is necessarily my world. A world that I never knew, or any part of the world that I never knew, would simply not be a world, or part of the world, for me. This truth, which is what Wittgenstein is articulating in the 5.6's of the *Tractatus*, seems both obvious and, in itself, innocent. It entails nothing about solipsism or idealism. That only the world I can know is the only world I can know does not mean that the world I know exists only in my perception or my thinking.²² Nor does this obvious truth entail anything about the self. That in my knowing of the world I and the world are necessarily united in a knowing relationship, so that to take away this relationship is, as far as I am concerned, to take away the world, does not mean that the knowing 'I' cannot be an object in the world alongside other objects. For the knowing relationship need not exhaust either the being of the world or of the subject that knows the world.

However, the knowing subject cannot be part of the world if in the world there is left no place for the knowing relationship. And this is exactly what does happen for Wittgenstein, since for him there is place in the world only for simple objects in immediate and contingent combination. The knowing relationship cannot be such a combination. For, apart from its necessity, such a relationship is of a very special sort. To express it in ways common to both Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer,²³ knowing is to the object as a transparent medium which lets the object through so that it can become object

²² This is a fallacy that seems to lie behind one of Berkeley's arguments that *esse is percipi*; *Three Dialogues*, in *The Principles of Human Knowledge with Other Writings*, ed. Warnock (Collins, London, 1962), p. 183-84.

²³ *Tractatus* 5.511, 5.63, 6.13; *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 266, 396-97; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 240, 371.

for the knower. The knower is as it were a mirror for the known (the microcosm).²⁴

Whatever this relationship is, and however it is to be properly explained, it is not the kind of relationship which Wittgenstein's simple objects can enter into. The knowing subject is therefore not part of the world, or an object that can be met with in the world alongside the other objects in the world. The self is pure medium, pure mirror for the world; their limits coincide. The self is, in a sense, one with the world. It gives way to it. Solipsism collapses into realism.

C) Comment

It is evident from this brief exposition that the positions adopted by these two philosophers are strikingly different. They agree as to a certain claim, but not as to the reason for it. One may well wonder, as a result, if the similarity between them is more than superficial. For the difference in reasoning radically changes the sense, or the intelligible content, of the claim. Doubtless it would be too much to argue from this instance alone anything final about the reality of Schopenhauer's influence on the *Tractatus*, but it should make one alert to the possibility that that influence was not, after all, very great. Maybe we should reflect more on the differences between the two thinkers than on the similarities. To strengthen this supposition, I will offer this further, and final, consideration.

For Wittgenstein names are pure references; there is nothing one can say directly about the objects that are referred to. Taken by themselves objects lack intelligible content. To the extent we say anything intelligible about them we are simply saying what relations they enter into with other objects. Knowledge is not of objects but of the

²⁴ *Tractatus*, 5.63.

relations between objects.²⁵ Schopenhauer agrees with this account of objects, at least as far as science is concerned. Science deals with the how and the when, never with the what.²⁶ It is for this reason that science is low in Schopenhauer's estimation. But Schopenhauer does not say that the what of things is a blank as Wittgenstein does. On the contrary we can be very specific on this matter and say definitively that the what of things is will. For things have dynamism and energy; they operate and act. Will is Schopenhauer's name for dynamism.²⁷ But there is no room in Wittgenstein's philosophy for dynamism, just as there is no room for this in science either, according to Schopenhauer. For how could this fact be expressed? In Wittgenstein's theory what we come to in the last analysis in any statement is a series of names in immediate combination. But dynamism can never be understood in this way. Dynamism is not a relation that an object has to another object; it is an inner drive, an inner energy (as Schopenhauer correctly sees). Wittgenstein's theory systematically excludes dynamism. That is why, though he does speak of will, this will does not belong with the world. The world as will has no place in his philosophy.

In this respect must we not conclude that Schopenhauer is a more accurate thinker than Wittgenstein? Dynamism is a fact in our world and a theory of the world that allows no place for it must be false. That Wittgenstein allowed it no place can be put down to his preoccupation with modern formal logic. He understood this logic as a true mirror of the world. It was a view, admittedly, that he later abandoned, but it is interesting, nevertheless, that in the later *Philosophical Investigations* he never suggests that one of the faults of the *Tractatus* was its failure to account for dynamism. Though otherwise

²⁵ *Tractatus* 3.221.

²⁶ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 154-55, 255, 257; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 126-27, 229, 231. Clegg, *op. cit.*: 33.

²⁷ *WWV* vol. 1, pp. 164-65; *HK* vol. 1, pp. 136-37.

very different, the *Philosophical Investigations* shares with the *Tractatus* an overriding concern with language.²⁸ This is perhaps the most significant difference between Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer. Despite his idealism, Schopenhauer retained a concern for things, and so also for the dynamism they display; Wittgenstein did not. This difference is more telling than any similarities. And what it tells us especially, perhaps, is the limitations of a philosophy preoccupied with language.²⁹ It certainly tells us the limitations of treating formal logic as a mirror of the world.

²⁸ Cf. A. Wollter, 'The Unspeakable Philosophy of the Late Wittgenstein', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 34 (1960): 187; *Tractatus* 4.0031, 4.112.

²⁹ Cf. the rather different opinions expressed by M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Duckworth, London, 1981), ch. 19.