

WITTGENSTEIN: THE NOTION OF AN OBJECT

Gopal Paul

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati
Santiniketan, WB-731235, India
E mail: gopal7848@gmail.com

Submitted: 09.01.2020

Revised: 24.01.2020

Accepted: 17.02.2020

Abstract

One of the most discussed notions in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the notion of object. An 'object' is a technical term that is often used in modern philosophy in contrast to the term 'subject'. A subject is a being who has a unique consciousness or unique personal experiences, or an entity that has a relationship with other entity what exists outside itself called an object. A subject is an observer and an object is a observed thing like chair, table, book, etc. Generally, it seems to us that in Wittgensteinian philosophy the notion of an object is not distinct from the ordinary sense of an object. In this paper we will investigate Wittgenstein's Tractarian notion of an object.

Key words: object, property, state of affair, simple and complex, Wittgenstein

Detail account of the study

At first, we get the term 'object' in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in the statement of "a state of affairs is a combination of objects" (TLP 2.01). That means objects are the ultimate constituents of the world. According to him, the totality of facts is the world and "a fact is the existence of states of affairs" (TLP 2). Objects are constituents of state of affairs. As they combine to constitute state of affairs, so objects are the ultimate constituents of the world.

"objects are simple" (TLP 2.02). What does it mean to say that an object is simple? Wittgenstein seems to mean that it cannot be analyzed into other objects. This seems to indicate that if objects are simple, they cannot have any parts; for, if they did, they would be analyzable as a complex of those parts. It is not immediately obvious that there are objects which are simple in this sense. But Wittgenstein shows an argument for their existence here:

- a) "Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite" (TLP 2.021).
- b) "If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true" (TLP 2.0211).
- c) "In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false)" (TLP 2.0212).

Wittgenstein's idea here seems to be that without their existing a class of simple objects, it would be impossible to picture the world- that is, to represent it. But we can represent the world; so, there must be such a class of objects. Now the question is why does the possibility of representation require the existence of objects which are simple in Wittgenstein's sense? To answer of this question, we need to consider about simple names which Wittgenstein clearly stated in the *Tractatus*. He says "a name means an object. The object is its meaning" (TLP 3.203).

Suppose that every object is complex, then every name would stand for a complex object. A name is meaningful only if the object it purports to refer to exists. This means that a proposition containing the name will be meaningful only if the object the name purports to refer to exist. But the existence of a complex object depends upon its parts being arranged in a certain way; and its parts will be arranged in a that way only if some proposition, which says that they are arranged that way, is true. So, if all objects were complex, then propositions would be meaningful only if other propositions were true. But propositions represent the possibility of truth (possible truth). Thus, object and possible combinations provide for states of affairs. Objects have to occur in states of affairs.

Objects are not only simple, but also, in a certain sense, unchangeable. After saying that objects are the substance of the world, Wittgenstein says "substance is what subsists independently of what is the case" (TLP 2.024) and later says "objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable" (TLP 2.0271). Here the idea is that objects do not themselves change. Change is a matter of state of affairs coming into and going out of existence and states of affairs are produced by arrangements of objects. The configuration of objects produces state of affairs.

Object exist only in configurations. It is of their nature to be confined with other objects. Objects cannot remain in isolation. Objects are always related with each other. In this context, Wittgenstein says that "just as we are quite unable to imagine spatial objects outside space or temporal objects outside time, so too there is no object that we can imagine excluded from the possibility of combining with others" (TLP 2.0121).

He also added that space and time are forms of objects. Any spoken 'object' must be somewhere at some time. In the same way, being colored is a form of visual objects. A visual 'object' must have some color. If we look upon *Tractatus*, then a contradiction may arise in our mind when he says "in a manner of speaking, objects are colorless" (*TLP* 2.0232) because before saying this he says that color is a form of object. What sense can be made from Wittgenstein's remark that objects are colorless? Our interpretation also gives an immediate answer to this question. He actually wants to mean that an object in itself has no color. An object has a color only when configured with other objects; but in itself, that is to say in isolation from other objects, it has no color, is colorless. We ordinarily apply the term 'colorless' to something that might have a color. But when Wittgenstein says that objects are colorless, he is not using that term in this ordinary sense; for objects, in themselves, do not just happen to lack a color, as clear water does- rather, it is unthinkable that apart from a configuration with other objects, an object can have a color.

"If all objects are given, then thereby are all possible atomic facts also given" (*TLP* 2.0124). That means the limits of logical possibility is determined by the objects. The objects contain the possibility of all states of affairs. "Empirical reality is limited by the totality of object" (*TLP* 5.5561). Since an atomic fact is a configuration of objects, when all objects are given, all possible configurations are also given. So, when we know what objects there are, we know what is possible but not yet what is actual.

Wittgenstein goes on to say in *Tractatus* that the objects are form and content (*TLP* 2.025). Now the question is that form and content of what? The answer is objects are form and content of the world. The form of the world consists of the possible configurations of objects and the content of the world consists of the actual configurations of objects.

As objects are colorless, so they have no qualities. Although objects have no qualities, they do have properties, where 'property' is used in a broad sense that covers relations. An object having a property is a matter of being related or configured with other objects in certain way to form states of affairs. One can only think of an object as a constituent of states of affairs. An object has two properties, such as- external and internal properties. These are also called material and formal properties respectively. An object having internal or formal properties is the possibility of its being configured with other objects, that is, the possibility of its occurring in states of affairs. In this regard, Wittgenstein says "if I am acquainted with an object, then I am also acquainted with all the possibilities of its occurrence in atomic facts" (*TLP* 2.0123). An object's having material properties is its actually being so configured, its actually occurring in existent states of affairs. Material properties are, according to Wittgenstein, "first formed by configuration of the object" (*TLP* 2.0231). Therefore, in order to be acquainted with an object, "I must be acquainted not with its external but all its internal properties" (*TLP* 2.01231).

Relation, property and particular are traditional metaphysical categories. Now the question is which of these traditional categories corresponds most closely to Wittgenstein's object? First of all, objects are not relations because all objects are represented by names, whereas relations are represented not by names, but by relations. So, objects and relations are distinct.

Secondly, objects are not properties. We have already seen that "objects are simple" (*TLP* 2.02), they cannot be compound. But some properties are definitely compound. That means some properties are simple. Therefore, one may claim that some properties are objects. But symbols that appear to be names of the simplest properties cannot occur in elementary propositions. Now what shall we say of two propositions, one asserting a given point in the visual field to be red, the other asserting it to be blue? If any properties are simple, specific colors ought to be counted among the simplest. If objects are simple, and elementary propositions consist of names of objects, then the two propositions mentioned must be elementary propositions. But can they both be true? Wittgenstein's answer is unequivocal. For two colors, e.g. to be at one place in the visual field, is impossible, logically impossible, for it is excluded by the logical structure of color. It is clear that the logical product of two elementary propositions can neither be tautology nor a contradiction. The assertion that a point in the visual field has two different colors at the same time, is a contradiction. It follows that color predications are not elementary propositions, and the implication seems clear that objects are not properties. One more decisive evidence we can mention for objects are not properties. When Wittgenstein says 'it is possible to imagine a world in which the axiom of reducibility is not valid', it implies that properties are not the same in all imagine worlds as in the real world because in imagine world and in real world objects remain same but only change their configuration. And we know according to him, an object having property is a matter of being configured with other objects in a certain way.

Since objects are neither relations nor properties, if they correspond to any of the traditional categories, they must be particulars. For Wittgenstein, objects are simple permanent particulars. But can we say any more about them? What is an example of such an object? In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Russell says that "the whole question of what particulars you actually find in the real world is a purely empirical one which does not interest the logician as such" (*Logic and Knowledge*, p.199). Wittgenstein also considered the question of which things are objects to be an empirical one and that's why he, as a logician, was not concerned with this. We know it from Malcolm's report. His report quoted below:

“I asked Wittgenstein whether, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, he had ever decided upon anything as an example of a ‘simple object’. His reply was that at that time his thought had been that he was a logician; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely empirical matter! It was clear that he recognized his former opinion as absurd” (*Memoir*, p.86).

As we generally know that there are two types of things, such as observable things like chair, table and non-observable things like God, number 5 etc. from the above discussion one may claim that whether Wittgenstein’s objects observables or not? To give this answer is very difficult. When we acquainted with the statement of “in order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality” (*TLP* 2.223). That means his (Wittgenstein) picture theory of propositions claims him to the view that at least states of affairs are observable. As states of affairs are observable, so it seems to us that objects, which construct the states of affairs, are also observable. But when we look upon it deeply, one question come arises that what we actually observe? We observe qualities such as redness, squareness, heaviness and relations such as ‘*a* is between *b* and *c* in place’, ‘*a* is taller than *b*’ and so on. But according to Wittgenstein, objects are neither qualities nor relations. That’s why we cannot observe object itself, we can only observe the configuration of objects which constitute a state of affairs. I think in his *Tractatus* he treats his subject matter quite abstractly. Lastly, we can say that Wittgenstein strongly opposes to metaphysics, but he himself steps into that trap when he means by ‘object’ the ultimate ontological simple entities out of which the real world in itself made.

References

1. Ludwig, Wittgenstein. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F.Pears and B.F.McGuinness, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. : London.
2. Russell, Bertrand. (1956). *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901-1950*, ed. Robert Charles Marsh, Routledge: London and New York
3. Malcolm, Norman. (1958). *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Clarendon Press: Oxford
4. Copi, I.M. and Beard, R.W.(ed.). (1966). *Essays on Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. : London
5. Pitcher, George. (1985). *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Prentice-Hall of India Private Ltd.: New Delhi.
6. Anscombe, G.E.M. (1959). *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Hutchinson University Library: London.
7. Stenius, E. (1960). *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*. Cornell University Press: New York.