REFERENCE, SIMPLICITY AND NECESSARY EXISTENCE IN THE *TRACTATUS*[*]
José L. Zalabardo

1. Introduction

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2001), Wittgenstein puts forward the

following account of the motivation of those who treat the word "this" as a name:

> §39 But why does it occur to one to want to make precisely this word
> into a name, when it is evidently *not* a name?—That is just the reason.
> For one is tempted to make an objection against what is ordinarily called
> a name. It may be put like this: *a name ought really to signify a simple*.
> And for this one might perhaps give the following reasons: The word
> "Excalibur", say, is a proper name in the ordinary sense. The sword
> Excalibur consists of parts combined in a particular way. If they are
> combined differently Excalibur does not exist. But it is clear that the
> sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" makes *sense* whether Excalibur is
> still whole or is broken up. But if "Excalibur" is the name of an object,
> this object no longer exists when Excalibur is broken in pieces; and as no
> object would then correspond to the name it would have no meaning. But
> then the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" would contain a word
> that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense. But it
> does make sense; so there must be something corresponding to the words
> of which it consists. So the word "Excalibur" must disappear when the
> sense is analysed and its place be taken by words which name simples. It
> will be reasonable to call these words the real names.

This passage contains an argument for the conclusion that there have to be simple objects, and

propositional constituents that refer to them. I shall refer to it as the *Empty-Name Argument*,

as it is based on the unacceptable consequences of the possibility that the referent of a name

goes out of existence.

This passage occurs in the sections of the *Investigations* in which Wittgenstein is generally

engaged in criticising the *Augustinian picture* of meaning, and he unquestionably saw his own

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus[1] as an instance of the Augustinian picture. Indeed many

leading interpreters of the *Tractatus* accept that the book advances a version of the Empty-

Name Argument.[2] More specifically, the following sections of the *Tractatus* (call them the

substance passage) are widely read as expressing a version of the argument:

> 2.0211   If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had
> sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

> 2.0212   In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true
> or false).

This paper has two goals. One is to argue that there is no good reason for thinking that the

Tractatus puts forward a version of the Empty-Name Argument, and, in particular, that the

substance passage should not be read in this way. The second is to provide an alternative

reading of the substance passage. As we shall see, the two goals are closely related, as the

availability of an alternative reading of this passage removes the most compelling reason for

thinking that the *Tractatus* puts forward the Empty-Name Argument.

2. <u>The sense of propositions and the reference of names</u>

In order to consider how the Empty-Name Argument might fit in the overall argumentative

structure of the *Tractatus*, we need to provide a sketch of the tractarian account of how

propositions obtain their senses. The sense of a proposition, according to the *Tractatus*, is "its

agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of

affairs" (4.2). It arises, through truth-functional combination, from the senses of elementary

propositions.[3] These result, in turn, from pairing each elementary proposition with a unique

---

[1] (Wittgenstein 2000). I follow this translation, quoting by section number.
[2] See (Anscombe 1971: 46-50; Black 1964: 61-62; Fogelin 1987: 14-15; Griffin 1964: 66-67; Kenny 1973: 77-78; Pears 1987: vol. I, 70-78; Proops 2004: passim). The reading is already adumbrated in Russell's introduction to the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 2000: xiii).
[3] Cf. *Tractatus* 5.2341: "The sense of a truth-function of p is a function of the sense of p."

state of affairs, with whose existence the proposition agrees and with whose non-existence the proposition disagrees:

> 4.21   The simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition, asserts the existence of a state of affairs.

> 4.25   If an elementary proposition is true, the state of affairs exists: if an elementary proposition is false, the state of affairs does not exist.

A state of affairs is a combination of objects, and an elementary proposition is a combination of names. On a very natural interpretation of the *Tractatus*, each elementary proposition is paired with the state of affairs that determines its sense as a result of a mapping between names and objects.[4] An elementary proposition is paired with the state of affairs in which the images under the mapping of the names of the proposition are combined with one another in the same way in which the names are combined in the proposition. I shall refer to the mapping of names onto constituents of states of affairs that plays this role as the *proxy mapping*.[5]

---

[4] The claim that name-object pairings are prior to proposition-state of affairs pairings has been called into question by some interpreters of the *Tractatus*. See (Ishiguro 1969) and (McGuinness 1981). I won't be concerned with their views in this paper, although it seems to me that their approach makes the attribution of the Empty-Name Argument to the *Tractatus* considerably less plausible.

[5] On what I am calling proxy mapping, see 4.0312:
> The possibility of propositions is based on the principle that objects have signs as their representatives.

The preceding section illustrates how a pairing of propositions with states of affairs is supposed to arise from the proxy mapping:
> One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group—like a tableau vivant—presents a state of affairs. (4.0311).

The view is introduced for pictures in the 2.1's:
> 2.13   In a picture objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them.
> 2.131 In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects.

And later on for propositions:
> 3.22   In a proposition, a name is the representative of an object.

Wittgenstein uses the term *Vertretung* for the mapping. Pears and McGuiness translate *A vertritt B* as *A is a representative of B*, and Anscombe, in her translation of the *Notebooks*, as *A goes proxy for B* (Wittgenstein 1979).

It will be useful to have a concise formulation of this account of how the proxy mapping determines the sense of an elementary proposition:

> *Proxy Principle*: The sense of an elementary proposition *p* is constituted by the state of affairs in which the values of the names of *p* under the proxy mapping are combined in the same way in which the names are combined in *p*.[6]

3. The empty-name argument

If the *Tractatus* advances the Empty-Name Argument, it is reasonable to suppose that its role is to support a claim concerning the values that names can receive under the proxy mapping— that these have to be simple, indivisible constituents of states of affairs.[7] We can formulate the claim in the following way:

> *Simplicity Thesis*: The values under the proxy mapping of the names of an elementary proposition are simple, indivisible constituents of the state of affairs that determines its sense.

Now we can formulate a version of the Empty-Name Argument that yields the Simplicity Thesis as its conclusion:

---

[6] This is the principle that Pears calls *Principle of Representation* (Pears 1987: vol. I, 74). He identifies it as a premise of the version of the Empty-Name Argument that he finds in the *Tractatus*.

[7] Notice that formulating the claim in these terms doesn't do justice to the way in which names are actually introduced in the *Tractatus*, as the elements of the propositional sign that correspond to the objects of the thought, and consequently to the objects of the corresponding state of affairs, in completely analysed propositions (see *Tractatus* 3.2-3.203. See also (Wittgenstein 1971: 3.14)). On this construal of names, the claim that names refer to simples is analytic: if there were no simples there would be no names. Here I am taken names to be the arguments that the proxy mapping takes in an elementary proposition in order to determine its sense in accordance with the Proxy Principle.

1. If the value that a name of a proposition actually receives under the proxy mapping didn't exist, then the proposition wouldn't have the sense that it actually has. (Premise)

2. Hence, if a name of a proposition received a contingently existing value under the proxy mapping, the proposition would have the sense that is has only contingently. (From 1)

3. But propositions can't have senses contingently. (Premise)

4. Therefore the names of a proposition with sense have to receive necessarily existent values under the proxy mapping. (From 2 and 3)

5. But complexes exist only contingently. (Premise)

6. Therefore the names of a proposition with sense have to receive simple values under the proxy mapping. (From 4 and 5)

My main goal in the next three sections is to argue that there is no good reason for thinking that the *Tractatus* advances this argument. I am going to concentrate on the derivation of 4 from 1 and 3. I am going to argue that the version of each of 1 and 3 that can be justifiably attributed to the *Tractatus* would only yield 4 when combined with a version of the other premise that cannot be attributed to the *Tractatus*. There are no versions of 1 and 3 that can be justifiably attributed to Wittgenstein and that jointly entail 4.

4. Contingent senses

Let's start with 1. It is clear that on a straightforward reading of this premise, it is a direct consequence of the Proxy Principle. If a proposition obtains its sense by being paired with a state of affairs, and this pairing results from the names of the proposition receiving the constituents of the state of affairs as their images under the proxy mapping, then if the names

of the proposition fail to receive those images under the proxy mapping the proposition will fail to be paired with that state of affairs, and it will fail to have that sense.

It is also clear that 1, on this reading, entails an equally straightforward reading of 2. Suppose that the names of p receive the constituents of S as their images under the proxy mapping, and that the constituents of S exist only contingently. It follows that there are possible worlds in which the constituents of S don't exist.[8] But clearly, in those worlds the names of p don't receive from the proxy mapping the images that they receive in the actual world. Hence, if the constituents of S didn't exist, p wouldn't have the sense that it actually has. Therefore, from the assumption that the names of p receive contingently existing images under the proxy mapping it follows that p has the sense it has only contingently, as 2 dictates.

Now, we can get from 2, on this reading, to 4, with a no less straightforward reading of 3. On the requisite reading, 3 says that if a proposition has a sense, then it has this sense necessarily. Does the *Tractatus* endorse this view? The answer depends on what we take propositions to be.

Some passages suggest a conception of propositions according to which they include, not only the combination of signs, but also the pairings of these with their images under the proxy mapping. The point is made first for pictures in general:

> 2.1513 So a picture, conceived in this way, also includes the pictorial relationship, which makes it into a picture.

> 2.1514 The pictorial relationship consists of the correlations of the picture's elements with things.

And later for propositions in particular:

> 3.12 I call the sign with which we express a thought a propositional sign.—And a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.

3.13   A proposition includes all that the projection includes, but not
        what is projected. […]

Clearly, on this conception of propositions, they have their senses necessarily, since changing the image that a propositional element receives under the proxy mapping would produce a different proposition. Notice, however, that the claim that propositions, thus construed, have their senses necessarily is of no use in trying to derive 4. For if we read 2 as referring to this construal of propositions, it is obviously false. In the counterfactual situations in which the images of the names of p under the proxy mapping don't exist, p, thus construed, doesn't exist either. There are no situations in which p exists but it fails to have the sense it has.

This means that in order to obtain 4 from 2 and 3, we need to take 3 to refer to propositions in abstraction from the images that their names receive under the proxy mapping. It needs to refer to the fact—the combination of names—in which the proposition consists. But does the *Tractatus* propound the view that propositions, thus construed, have their senses necessarily? I think there is ample justification for answering this question in the negative. The *Tractatus* says very little about the nature of the proxy mapping, but what it does say seems to suggest that it results from *arbitrary determinations*. I want to adduce two passages in support of this claim. In the first, Wittgenstein is discussing the familiar process of replacing propositional constituents with variables:

3.315   If we turn a constituent of a proposition into a variable, there is
        a class of propositions all of which are values of the resulting
        variable proposition. In general, this class too will be dependent
        on *the meaning that our arbitrary conventions have given to
        parts of the original proposition*. But if all the signs in it that
        have *arbitrarily determined meanings* are turned into variables,
        we shall still get a class of this kind.[9]

In the second he is explaining the circumstances that result in a proposition that lacks sense:

5.473   Logic must look after itself.
        If a sign is *possible*, then it is also capable of signifying.

---

[9] My italics.

> Whatever is possible in logic is also permitted. (The reason why
> 'Socrates is identical' means nothing is that there is no property
> called 'identical'. *The proposition is nonsensical because we*
> *have failed to make an arbitrary determination*, and not because
> the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate.)[10]

What these passages suggest is that the pairings of propositional constituents with their images under the proxy mapping result from our arbitrary stipulations.[11] But this would seem to entail that propositional constituents might have been paired with other images, and in that case the proposition would have had a different sense. In sum, if the pairings of propositional constituents with their images under the proxy mapping result from arbitrary stipulations, propositions will have their senses contingently, contrary to what 3 seems to assert.

I have argued in this section that, on the most straightforward reading of 1, it is a thesis that Wittgenstein would subscribe. But the thesis that 3 would need to express in order to combine with this reading of 1 to yield 4 is a thesis that cannot be plausibly attributed to Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus* cannot be read as advancing the version of the Empty-Name Argument that results from these readings of 1 and 3.

5. Exhaustive senses

Our first attempt to ascribe the Empty-Name Argument to the *Tractatus* has foundered because it requires reading 3 as expressing a claim that the *Tractatus* does not endorse. If we want to overcome this obstacle, it is reasonable to start by identifying a reading of 3 under

---

[10] My italics. In the *Notebooks* he also speaks of "The arbitrary correlation of thing and thing signified which is a condition of the possibility of the propositions […]" (Wittgenstein 1979: 25)

[11] Notice that this claim doesn't entail that the stipulations concern in the first instance what names are paired with. More likely, the stipulations would concern complex signs and yield as consequences the pairings of names with their images under the proxy mapping. See, in this connection, *Tractatus* 4.002:

> Man possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing
> every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or
> what its meaning is—just as people speak without knowing how the
> individual sounds are produced.

which the *Tractatus* can be plausibly claimed to endorse it, and try to build a version of the Empty-Name Argument around this reading.

There is a claim that 3 might be taken to express that the *Tractatus* does seem to endorse. It is the claim that the sense of a proposition must determine, for every possible combination of states of affairs, whether the proposition agrees or disagrees with it—whether the combination would make the proposition true or false. We can formulate the thesis in the following terms:

3*.   If a proposition has sense, then there is no possible situation that would fail to make the proposition either true or false.[12]

I think that the attribution of this claim to the *Tractatus* can receive substantial textual support. The passage usually adduced in this connection is the first paragraph of 4.023: "A proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no".[13] In any case, I am not going to question here this attribution. I am going to assume that the *Tractatus* endorses 3* and consider whether we can argue on these grounds that the book puts forward a version of the Empty-Name Argument.

In order to obtain 4 with the version of the Empty-Name Argument that results from replacing 3 with 3*, we would need to revise 2 accordingly. We would need to replace it with the following claim:

---

[12] For the attribution of this claim the *Tractatus*, see (Proops 2004: § 5).

[13] Additional support can be obtained from some passages in the *Notebooks* concerning vague propositions, although there are clear tensions in Wittgenstein's discussion of this issue. See, e.g., the following entry from 20 June 1915:

> If the proposition "The book is on the table" has a clear sense, then I must, whatever *is the case*, be able to say whether the proposition is true or false. There could, however, very well occur *cases* in which I should not be able to say straight off whether the book is still to be called 'lying on the table'. Then—? (Wittgenstein 1979: 67).

2*.   If the names of a proposition receive contingently existing values under the proxy mapping, then there will be possible situations that make the proposition neither true nor false.

Notice that, in spite of the superficial similarity, 2* is very different in content from 2, as we have been reading it. The consequent of 2 will be true just in case there are possible situations in which the proposition in question does not have the sense that it has in actuality. The consequent of 2*, by contrast, is not concerned with what sense, if any, the proposition would have in non-actual situations. What it is concerned with is whether there are possible situations from which the proposition, with the sense it has in actuality, would not receive a truth value. Whether a possible situation fits this description is entirely independent of what sense, if any, the proposition would have in that situation.[14]

A consequence of this difference in content between 2 and 2* is that, unlike 2, 2* doesn't follow from 1. For the purposes of the truth value of 2*, it is irrelevant what sense, if any, a proposition would have in possible situations in which the value that a name of a proposition actually receives under the proxy mapping doesn't exist. Even if in those situations the proposition wouldn't have the sense it actually has, nothing follows about whether these situations would bestow a truth value on the proposition, with the sense it actually has. 1 is perfectly compatible with the negation of 2*.

What 2* would follow from is a claim to the effect that in possible situations in which the values actually paired with the names of a proposition by the proxy mapping don't exist, the

---

[14] See, in this connection, Kripke's discussion of the distinction between what a name, as used in our language, would designate in counterfactual situations and what the name would designate as used in languages that people might speak, instead of ours, in counterfactual situations (Kripke 1980: 77-78). Proops invokes at this point David Kaplan's contrast between contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation. See (Proops 2004: 114-16).

proposition, with the sense it actually has, doesn't receive a truth value. The claim can be formulated as follows:

1*.   If the value that a name of a proposition actually receives under the proxy mapping didn't exist, then the proposition, with the sense it actually has, wouldn't receive a truth value.

Hence our new attempt to attribute to the *Tractatus* a version of the Empty-Name Argument turns on whether it is possible to defend the claim that the book endorses 1*. This is the question to which I now turn.

When trying to determine whether the *Tractatus* is committed to 1*, the first point to notice is that 1*, unlike 1, does not follow from the Proxy Principle. The Proxy Principle specifies how an elementary proposition is paired with the state of affairs that determines its sense. Hence it has consequences concerning whether a proposition would have in non-actual situations the sense that it actually has. But the principle has no direct consequences concerning how the pairing of a proposition with a state of affairs determines the truth conditions of the proposition. On this point there are two relevant alternatives. According to the first, call it the *gappy* account, the proposition is made true by possible situations in which the state of affairs obtains, false by situations in which the constituents of the state of affairs exist but are not combined in the requisite way, and neither true nor false by situations in which the constituents of the state of affairs don't exist. According to the second, call it the *gapless* account, the proposition is made true by possible situations in which the state of affairs obtains and false by all situations in which it doesn't obtain—by situations in which its constituents don't exist as well as by situations in which they exist but they are not combined

in the right way.[15] The gappy account corresponds to 1*, but the Proxy Principle is perfectly neutral between the two accounts. The claim that the *Tractatus* is committed to the Proxy Principle cannot be invoked in support of the attribution of 1*.

Does the *Tractatus* take sides on the contest between the gappy account and the gapless account? It is undeniable that the *Tractatus* endorses a view that is strongly reminiscent of the gapless account. It is the view that he expresses at 3.24: "A proposition that mentions a complex will not be nonsensical, if the complex does not exist, but simply false."[16]

I say that this view is 'strongly reminiscent' of the gapless account because 3.24 doesn't mention explicitly the case in which the proposition is elementary and the complex is the image under the proxy mapping of one of its names. Clearly, if 3.24 applied to these cases as well, the *Tractatus* would be committed to the gapless account and hence opposed to 1*. Therefore, saving the attribution of 1* to the *Tractatus* requires arguing that 3.24 is not meant to apply to cases in which the proposition is elementary and the complex is the image under the proxy mapping of one of its names, and that the book is committed to treating these cases along the lines of the gappy account.

---

[15] Se in this connection Proops' distinction between gappy and gap-free modal profiles (Proops 2004: 116).

[16] This view might also follow from 2.0201:

> Every statement about complexes can be resolved into a statement about their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely.

In the version of this passage that occurs in the *Notes on Logic*, the truth of the propositions that describe a complex completely is explicitly connected with the existence of the complex:

> Every proposition which seems to be about a complex can be analysed into a proposition about its constituents and [about] the proposition which describes the complex perfectly; i.e., that proposition which is equivalent to saying the complex exists. ((Wittgenstein 1979: 93))

Hence, if "can be resolved" (*läßt sich zerlegen*), in 2.0201, can be read as entailing *is logically equivalent to*, the passage would also entail that a proposition about a complex receives the value *false* when the complex doesn't exist.

This is the line explicitly adopted by some of the leading proponents of the attribution of the Empty-Name Argument to the *Tractatus*.[17] Defending this strategy would require providing support for the claim that Wittgenstein actually endorsed the gappy account, and for the corresponding limitation on the scope of 3.24. The crucial point here is that the requisite support cannot be supplied by Wittgenstein's commitment to the Proxy Principle. The Proxy Principle is as irrelevant to the scope of 3.24 as to the truth of 1*. A different line of argument is needed. Ian Proops has invoked at this point some implausible consequences of the view that elementary propositions with empty referential expressions are false, but even if his argument lends support to the truth of 1*, it doesn't bear in any direct way on whether the *Tractatus* is committed to it.[18]

I think that the attribution of 1* to the *Tractatus*, and the corresponding limitation of the scope of 3.24, can only receive significant support from an indirect argument concerning the interpretation of the substance passage (2.0211-2). The argument would go as follows. Suppose that the substance passage puts forward the Empty-Name Argument. It follows that the *Tractatus* is committed to a version of the argument. But the *Tractatus* is not committed to the version generated by 1 and 3, since it doesn't endorse 3. Hence it has to be committed to the version generated by 1* and 3*. Therefore the *Tractatus* is committed to 1*, and to the limitation of the scope of 3.24 that follows from it.

This argument would have considerable force if its premises were plausible. And some of its premises are indeed plausible. As I have argued, the *Tractatus* cannot be committed to the version of the Empty-Name Argument generated by 1 and 3, and the version generated by 1* and 3* is the only obvious alternative. Hence, if we could defend the claim that the *Tractatus* advances some version of the Empty-Name Argument, this would lend support to the view

---

[17] The strategy is due to David Pears. See (Pears 1987: vol. I, 76-78). Proops, crediting Pears, adopts the same strategy. See (Proops 2004: 117).
[18] See (Proops 2004: 125, fn. 41).

that the book is committed to 1*. The line of reasoning under consideration supports the claim that the *Tractatus* advances a version of the Empty-Name Argument with the contention that this is the best way to interpret the substance passage. This exegetical claim is endorsed by many interpreters, and no serious alternative has been put forward.[19] My next goal is to argue that this reading is incorrect.

6.   The empty-name reading of the substance passage

Let me start by considering how the substance passage would have to be read in order to make it put forward the Empty-Name Argument. As a first approximation, we can say that it would have to be read along the following lines:

A.   If the world contained no simple/necessarily existent items, then an elementary proposition would not have sense in every possible situation (it would lack sense in situations in which the images of its names under the proxy mapping didn't exist). (2.0211)

B.   If an elementary proposition didn't have sense in every possible situation, then the proposition wouldn't have sense. (2.0212)

Thus, on this reading, by "the world has substance" Wittgenstein meant that the world contains simple/necessarily existent items. And the proposition on whose truth the sense of an elementary proposition p would depend in the absence of substance is a proposition asserting the existence of the values of the names of p under the proxy mapping.[20]

---

[19] A recent exception is (Morris 2008: 39-50).

[20] The propositions best suited for this job are "the propositions that describe the complexes completely" mentioned in 2.0201. See fn. 16, above. Another relevant passage in this connection is an entry in the *Notebooks*, dated 5 September 1914: "$\phi(a) . \phi(b) . aRb = \text{Def} \, \phi[aRb]$" (Wittgenstein 1979: 4).

One problem with this reading is that we can only expect someone to endorse B if they are committed to 3. But we have seen that the *Tractatus* rejects 3. The *Tractatus* does seem to endorse 3*, so a reading of 2.0212 that made it follow from 3* would be much more plausible. The following reading would fit the bill:

B*.   If an elementary proposition (with the sense it actually has) didn't receive a truth value from every possible situation, then the proposition wouldn't have sense.

B* is a direct consequence of 3*. Hence, since the *Tractatus* is committed to 3*, reading 2.0212 in this way would have the virtue of making the proposition express a view that its author seems to have endorsed. But reading 2.0212 in this way forces us to modify our reading of 2.0211 accordingly. It would have to be read as expressing the following view:

A*.   If the world contained no simple/necessarily existent items, then an elementary proposition (with the sense it actually has) wouldn't receive a truth value from every possible situation (it would receive no truth value from situations in which the images of its names under the proxy mapping didn't exist).

But the only obvious explanation of why someone might hold A* is that they are committed to 1*.

We can now formulate in some more detail the argument that I am considering for the view that the *Tractatus* is committed to 1*. Suppose that the substance passage expresses a version of the Empty-Name Argument. Then 2.0212 has to be read as B*, and 2.0211 has to be read as A*. But if the *Tractatus* supports A* it also supports 1*. Therefore the *Tractatus* supports 1* and the corresponding limitation on the scope of 3.24.

It is important to appreciate the precise character of the exegetical question that we need to pose in order to assess this line of reasoning. We are not supposed to *assume* that the *Tractatus* endorses the Empty-Name Argument and then ask, on this assumption, whether the

15

substance passage should be read as giving expression to it. We have reached a situation in which we have no independent reason for claiming that the *Tractatus* endorses the Empty-Name Argument. This claim will be unsupported unless we can establish that the best way to read the substance passage is as advancing the Empty-Name Argument. I am going to argue that this isn't the case. I shall contend that there is a more plausible interpretation of the substance passage on which it is largely unrelated to the Empty-Name Argument.

7. Sense and truth

One crucial key to interpreting the substance passage is to understand which phenomenon Wittgenstein is referring to by "whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true". The empty-name reading of the passage is based on reading this phrase as concerning the dependence of whether a proposition has sense on whether the referential expressions that figure in it actually refer. If this is the right reading of the phrase, the claim that the substance passage puts forward the Empty-Name Argument will have some plausibility. But what evidence can be adduced in support of this reading? I think that the only available textual evidence is the following passage from the *Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore in Norway* that Pears cites in this connection:

> The question whether a proposition has sense (*Sinn*) can never depend on
> the *truth* of another proposition about a constituent of the first.
> (Wittgenstein 1979: 117)

Notice that all that we might be able to conclude from this passage is that the proposition on whose truth the sense of a proposition p depends is a proposition *about a constituent of p*.[21] There is no suggestion in this passage that this proposition about a constituent of p is the proposition that its referent exists. For this latter claim there is, I think, no extant textual

---

[21] In determining how much weight we put on the phrase "about a constituent of the first", we cannot ignore the fact that these are dictated notes, but I shall not press this point here.

evidence. In fact one could argue that we have substantial indirect textual evidence from the *Notebooks* against this claim. In the period between May and June 1915, when simples are among Wittgenstein's main preoccupations, he raises repeatedly the question of what would be wrong with thinking that a name signifies a complex.[22] He puts forward a variety of tentative answers to this question, but nowhere does he consider an answer to the question in terms of the consequences of the complex going out of existence. Hence, while we have extensive textual evidence of the kinds of difficulties that Wittgenstein saw with treating names as referring to complexes, we have no evidence that the possibility of complexes going out of existence was one of them. It is reasonable to take this circumstance as providing indirect evidence for the conclusion that the possibility of complexes going out of existence was not one of his concerns.

But if the dependence of sense on truth is not about referents going out of existence, what is it about? I think that we can find the key to the alternative answer that I want to put forward in the following passage from the *Notebooks*, dated 21 October 1914:

> I thought that the possibility of the truth of the proposition φa was tied up with the fact (∃x,φ).φx. But it is impossible to see why φa should only be possible if there is another proposition of the same form. φa surely does not need any precedent. (For suppose there existed only the two elementary propositions "φa" and "ψa" and that "φa" were false: Why should this proposition make sense only if "ψa" is true?) (Wittgenstein 1979: 17)

The potential relevance of this passage for the interpretation of the argument for substance is clearly flagged by its mention of the possibility that whether a proposition has sense depends on whether another proposition is true.[23] I am going to argue that this is not a coincidence: the

---

[22] See (Wittgenstein 1979: 45-71).

[23] In their critical edition of the *Tractatus*, Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte identify the passage from the *Notes Dictated to Moore* quoted above as a pre-tractarian text relevant to the interpretation of 2.0211, but they don't accord the same treatment to the passage from the *Notebooks* I've just quoted (Wittgenstein 1989: 9). I think that this decision can only be justified by their acceptance of the empty-name reading of the substance passage.

substance passage should be interpreted in connection with the range of issues addressed in this passage from the *Notebooks*.

The context in which the *Notebooks* passage should be understood is now familiar, thanks mainly to David Pears' pioneering work (Pears 1977; Pears 1979). Here I shall only provide a brief outline. Since the *Principles of Mathematics*, of 1903, Russell put forward a succession of proposals concerning the analysis of judgment. In the *Principles* he proposed to analyse it as a dual relation between the judging subject and a proposition (Russell 1903: ch. 4). In 1910 (Russell 1910) and 1912 (Russell 1912: ch. 12) he put forward an alternative analysis, according to which judgment is a multiple relation connecting the subject and the constituents of the complex on whose existence the truth value of the judgment would depend. Thus, e.g., Othello's judgment that Desdemona loves Cassio would be analysed, on this account, as a complex relating Othello, Desdemona, love and Cassio.

By 1913, Russell had convinced himself that this analysis would have to be modified, and he presented a revised proposal, as an analysis of understanding, in several chapters of a book manuscript that he was writing that year. The main innovation was the introduction of logical forms as constituents of the understanding complex:

> […] if we call the subject S, and the relating relation (of which "understanding" is the one presupposed by all the others) U, and the objects x, R, y (taking the case of a proposition asserting a dual relation for the sake of illustration), and γ the form of dual complexes, the total complex which occurs when the subject has the relation U to the objects in question may be symbolized by
>
> U(S, x, R, y, γ).

(Russell 1984: 115)

In the 1913 manuscript, Russell also made a proposal as to the nature of logical forms. His idea was to take as the form

> […] the fact that there are entities that make up complexes having the form in question. […] For example, the form of all subject-predicate complexes will be the fact "something has some predicate"; the form of

all dual complexes will be "something has some relation to something".
(Russell 1984: 114)

Concerning logical forms, thus construed, Russell made two related claims. The first is that logical forms are simple: "[…] 'something has some relation to something' contains no constituent at all. […] In a sense, it is simple, since it cannot be analyzed" (Russell 1984: 114). And again: "[…] although 'something has some relation to something' is a proposition, and is true, it is nevertheless simple" (Russell 1984: 130). The second is that they are necessarily true:

> The importance of the understanding of pure form lies in its relation to the self-evidence of logical truth. For since understanding is here a direct relation of the subject to a single object, the possibility of untruth does not arise […].(Russell 1984: 132)

> The dualism of true and false, with all its attendant distinctions, presupposes propositions, and does not arise so long as we confine ourselves to acquaintance, except, possibly, in the case of abstract logical forms; and even here there is no proper dualism, since falsehood is logically impossible in these cases. (Russell 1984: 141)

Wittgenstein's engagement with these ideas is well documented in pre-tractarian writings. It is first manifested in the *Notes on Logic*, of 1913, and it continues in the *Notebooks*, especially in a series of entries dated from 13 October to 1 November 1914 (Wittgenstein 1979: 11-23).

In these texts Wittgenstein gives the impression of agreeing with Russell about the need to postulate logical forms, and in construing these as fully existentially generalized propositions. However, he seems to regard Russell's claims about them—their simplicity and their necessary truth—as highly problematic. His main worry seems to be how logical forms can play their role, once we accept, as we must, that they are complex and contingent.

The contingency of the logical form of subject-predicate propositions, $(\exists x,\phi).\phi x$, is the subject matter of the entry of 21 October 1914 quoted above.[24] Wittgenstein is concerned with the following problem. According to Russell's analysis, subject S understanding the proposition Pa is the complex $U[S, P, a, (\exists x,\phi).\phi x]$. Thus, insofar as it makes sense to speak of the proposition that S understands,[25] it follows that $(\exists x,\phi).\phi x$ is one of its constituents. Hence the proposition would have sense (possibility of truth) only if the complex $(\exists x,\phi).\phi x$ existed. But this complex will exist only if there is a predicate Q and an object b such that Qb is true. In this way, whether Pa has sense depends on whether another proposition (Qb, or any other proposition of that form) is true.[26] The point is underscored by the situation that Wittgenstein envisages in the bracketed passage at the end of the quote. If Pa and Qb were the only subject-predicate propositions, and Pa were false, then since Pa would have sense only if $(\exists x,\phi).\phi x$ existed, Pa would have sense only if Qb were true.

My proposal is that the dependence of the sense of a proposition on the truth of another, as it figures in 2.0211, has to be understood as making reference to this phenomenon. 2.0211 can then be paraphrased along the following lines: if the world had no substance, then an account of representation would have to take Russellian logical forms as constituents of representational states. But these won't exist unless some of their substitution instances obtain. Hence the meaningfulness of a representational state S will depend on the truth of

---

[24] For their simplicity, see *Tractatus* 5.5261: "A fully generalized proposition, like every other proposition, is composite. (This is shown by the fact that in '$(\exists x, \phi) . \phi x$' we have to mention '$\phi$' and '$x$' separately. They both, independently, stand in signifying relations to the world, just as is the case in ungeneralized propositions.)"

[25] In Russell's 1913 theory, propositions are not genuine components of understanding complexes. Cf. (Russell 1984: 109).

[26] The complex $(\exists x,\phi).\phi x$ would also exist if Pa was true, but if a proposition acquired sense in this way, it would be incapable of being false. This point can be used to address the second of the objections that Michael Morris has raised against my reading (Morris 2008: 362). Morris is discussing a version of this material that I presented in 2007. It differs in some respect from the present version.

proposition expressing a substitution instance of the Russellian logical form that is a constituent of S.

8. Russellian logical forms and the possibility of representation

The reading of the dependence of sense on truth presented in the preceding section provides only a partial elucidation of 2.0211. We still don't know what it is for the world to have substance or how the substance of the world would enable us to dispense with Russellian logical forms in our account of representation. But before I turn to these questions, I'd like to consider 2.0212, which has to be read now as the claim that representation would be rendered impossible by the dependence of the sense of a proposition on the truth of another generated by treating Russellian propositions as constituents of representational states.

In order to understand this claim we need to look at Wittgenstein's reasons for thinking that Russell's appeal to logical forms would not work. We find a clear presentation of Wittgenstein worries in the *Notebooks*, in an entry of 20 November 1914:

> The reality that corresponds to the sense of the proposition can surely be nothing but its component parts, since we are surely *ignorant* of *everything* else.
>
> If the reality consists in anything else as well, this can at any rate neither be denoted nor expressed; for in the first case it would be a further component, in the second the expression would be a proposition, for which the same problem would exist in turn as for the original one. (Wittgenstein 1979: 31)

I want to suggest that this passage should be read as arguing against the inclusion in 'the reality that corresponds to the sense of the proposition' of a specific candidate, namely Russellian logical forms. I want to concentrate on the argument presented in the second paragraph. Read as concerning logical forms, the passage contains a reductio argument against their inclusion in our account of representation. If we assume, towards a contradiction,

that logical forms are involved in understanding, then they would have to be 'denoted' or 'expressed', but both horns of this dilemma are unsatisfactory.

I want to suggest that this dilemma should be understood in connection with Russell's ideas concerning how the mind relates to the world. According to Russell, mind-world relations fall in two categories—acquaintance and understanding. Acquaintance is a two-place relation between a mind and an item in the world, in which the mind becomes aware of the worldly item. Understanding produces representations that can be true or false, and its nature is explained by the multiple-relation theory. My suggestion is that the denotation/expression dilemma that Wittgenstein presents corresponds to this Russellian dichotomy. To say that they can be denoted is to say that we can be acquainted with them. To say that they can be expressed is to say that we can apprehend them in episodes of understanding.

The first horn was Russell's preferred option. He thought that logical forms cold be objects of acquaintance (Russell 1984: 98-101). But Wittgenstein had long been opposed to this view. It is already rejected in the *Notes on Logic*:

> There is no thing which is the form of a proposition, and no name which
> is the name of a form. Accordingly we can also not say that a relation
> which in certain cases holds between things holds sometimes between
> forms and things. This goes against Russell's theory of judgment.
> (Wittgenstein 1979: 105)

We can't bear to forms the relations that we bear to things. Denotation and acquaintance would be ruled out by this thought.

In the 20 November 1914 notebook entry that we are considering the first horn is rejected on the grounds that it amounts to treating the logical form as an additional component of the representational complex. Wittgenstein doesn't tell us what might be wrong with this, but Russell himself regards this outcome as problematic:

> [...] the form is not a "thing", not another constituent along with the
> objects that were previously related in that form. Take, for example, "x is
> α" [...]. It might be thought that "is", here, is a constant constituent. But
> this would be a mistake [...] "is" represents merely the way in which the

constituents are put together. This cannot be a new constituent, for if it were, there would have to be a new way in which it and the two other constituents are put together, and if we take this way as again a constituent, we find ourselves embarked on an endless regress. (Russell 1984: 98)

I think it wouldn't be far-fetched to suppose that this regress is what Wittgenstein sees as the main obstacle for the first horn.

The 20 November 1914 notebook entry that we are considering gives a more explicit characterisation of the difficulty that blocks the second horn. Here the problem arises from the threat of a regress. According to the position under attack, understanding requires apprehending a logical form. But if this apprehension is itself a piece of understanding, as the second horn dictates, it will also involve a logical form, which will also have to be apprehended in an episode of understanding. A regress looms. Since Wittgenstein had ruled out the first horn by 1913 I surmise that the problem he had in mind when he wrote 2.0212 was this infinite regress. This would then be what makes representation impossible if the world has no substance and Russellian logical forms have to be invoked.[27]

9. Logical forms and falsehood

Let's go back now to 2.0211. It follows from what I have already said that, for Wittgensgtein, the fact that the world has substance is what enables us to avoid treating Russellian logical forms as constituents of representational states. This suggests that, according to Wittgenstein, the fact that the world has substance opens the possibility of an alternative solution to the

---

[27] Michael Morris has complained that my reading "cannot account for Wittgenstein's decision to explain the point of 2.0212 in terms of the notion of a picture: he could just as easily have made the point just in terms of a proposition's having no sense" (Morris 2008: 363). I'm not sure how much weight we should attach to Wittgenstein's choice of words here. However, I want to suggest that my reading has the resources for accommodating Morris' point. All that's needed is to take "In that case" ("Dann" in the original) as it occurs in 2.0212, to refer, not to the consequent of 2.0211, but to its antecedent. On my reading of what it means for the world to have substance, the problem raised by the hypothesis that the world has no substance is, precisely, that picturing becomes impossible.

problem that Russell had tried to solve by appealing to logical forms. What was this problem?

This question has received several plausible answers. Here I'm going to restrict myself to

presenting what I regard as the correct view, without trying to compare its merits with those

of other alternatives.

My proposal is that Russell introduces logical forms in his account of understanding in

order to make room for the possibility of falsehood—of representing the world as being a

certain way when the world is not actually like that. Falsehood comes under threat as a result

of the reflection that understanding requires that the mind combines into a unit the items that

we are representing as combined. The problem is to explain how the mind can effect this

combination without bringing about the state of affairs that would make the representation

true. Here is Russell's presentation of the problem:

> Suppose we wish to understand "A and B are similar". It is essential that
> our thought should, as is said, "unite" or "synthesize" the two terms and
> the relation; but we cannot *actually* "unite" them, since either A and B
> are similar, in which case they are already united, or they are dissimilar,
> in which case no amount of thinking can force them to become united.
> (Russell 1984: 116)

Russell's solution to the problem is to add logical forms to the combinations that the mind

produces in episodes of understanding. The passage continues:

> The process of "uniting" which we *can* effect in thought is the process of
> bringing them [the two terms and the relation] into relation with the
> general form of dual complexes. The form being "something and
> something have a certain relation", our understanding of the proposition
> might be expressed in the words "something, namely A, and something,
> namely B, have a certain relation, namely similarity". (Russell 1984:
> 116)

But how would the difficulty be solved by adding this extra constituent to the combinations

formed in understanding? The answer is clearly given in the continuation of the passage:

> In an actual complex, the general form is not presupposed; but when we
> are concerned with a proposition which may be false, and where,
> therefore, the actual complex is not given, we have only, as it were, the
> "idea" or "suggestion" of the terms being united in such a complex; and

this, evidently, requires that the general form of the merely supposed complex should be given. (Russell 1984: 116)

What makes understanding of falsehoods possible, on this account, is that the combination that is formed by an episode of understanding is different from the combination in the world that would make it a true representation. The two combinations are different because the former, but not the latter, has a logical form among its constituents. This, I submit, is the main role that logical forms play in Russell's 1913 system.[28] The purpose of logical forms is to make room for falsehood. Hence, if the substance of the world enables us to avoid postulating logical forms, it has to ground Wittgenstein's alternative explanation of the possibility of falsehood.

10. Form and substance

The final clue that I want to employ for the interpretation of the substance passage is the connection between substance and form. 2.025 tells us that substance is form and content, but there can be no question that form is the leading partner.[29] According to 2.022, every imagined world must have a form in common with the real world. Objects constitute this form (2.023)[30] as well as making up the substance of the world (2.021). The identification of

---

[28] This account of the role of logical forms in Russell's theory is in line with Peter Hylton's reading (Hylton 1990: 345-46). See also (Candlish 1996) and Colin Johnston's paper in the present volume.

[29] Content plays no further role in the passages that we are trying to interpret. I think that the tendency to interpret substance as content (what is there independently of what is the case), rather than form (possibilities of combination, see below) receives spurious support from Pears and McGuinness' translation of "besteht" as "subsists" in 2.04 (and of "das Beshtehende" as "the subsistent" at 2.027 and 2.0271). One problem with this is that it hides the connection with "das Bestehen von Sachverhalten" at 2 and similar phrases at 2.05, 2.06 and 2.062, which they render with "existence" and its cognates (Ogden uses cognates of "existence" in both contexts, see (Wittgenstein 1922)). McGuinness has referred, in this connection, to two different senses of "bestehen" (McGuinness 1981). A similar point applies to their translation of "fest" as "unalterable" at 2.023, 2.026, 2.027 and 2.0271. Again, Ogden's "fixed" is more neutral.

[30] See also 2.026.

substance and form is reinforced by 2.0231: "The substance of the world *can* only determine a form […]". If we knew what form is, we would know what it means for the world to have substance. And if we knew what form does, we would know why the world has to have substance.

Wittgenstein tells us what form is in the 2.03s, the set of sections immediately after the 2.02s. Form, according to 2.033, is the possibility of structure, and structure, according to 2.032, is the determinate way in which objects are connected in a state of affairs. If substance is form, then the claim that the world has substance can be formulated in the following terms:

FORM: The way in which certain objects are combined in an actually obtaining state of affairs can be a possible mode of combination for other objects, which may or may not actually be combined with one another in this way.

Let's consider next the role that FORM plays in the tractarian system. I want to suggest that FORM is the foundation on which the picture theory is built. We can see this if we look at Wittgenstein's characterisation of how pictorial representation works:

> 2.15   The fact that the elements of a picture are related to one another
>   in a determinate way represents that things are related to one
>   another in the same way.

Pictorial representation, thus understood, is possible because the way in which the elements of a picture are actually combined is a possible mode of combination for the things that are being represented as being a certain way. And this wouldn't be so unless FORM were true of the combination of objects playing the role of a picture. Pictorial representation is possible only if FORM is true. Hence if, as I am suggesting, FORM is the content of the claim that the world

has substance, then if the world didn't have substance pictorial representation wouldn't be possible.[31]

Let's consider now how we can connect these thoughts with what we have already said about the interpretation of 2.0211. I've argued that the fact that the world has substance is being presented as what enables us to make room for false representation without invoking Russellian logical forms. Hence, if FORM is what it means for the world to have substance, FORM would have to enable us to make room for false representation. Does FORM play this role? I want to argue that this is precisely what Wittgenstein presents as the most important consequence of FORM.

Notice that FORM, when restricted to the states of affairs that play the role of pictures, is the claim that there is *pictorial form*, i.e. "the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture" (2.151). Now, in the 2.1s, and especially in the 2.2s, the point is repeatedly made that pictorial (representational) form is what enables representations to be true or false, correct or incorrect, i.e. *not only* true or correct, but *also* false or incorrect.[32] Two sections provide particularly explicit presentations of the point:

> 2.173   A picture represents its subject from a position outside it. (Its standpoint is its representational form.) That is why a picture represents its subject correctly or incorrectly.

> 2.22   What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form.

False pictures are possible because a picture doesn't require that objects in the world are combined in a certain way. A combination is required, as Russell thought, for representation

---

[31] 2.022 is clearly presenting a consequence of the picture theory. We represent the world in thought as being a certain way by representing objects as combined in ways in which other objects—the components of pictures—are *actually* combined ('imagined' is Pears and McGuinness' translation of 'gedachte'). Pictorial representation doesn't allow us to represent things as combined with one another in ways other than those in which things are actually combined in the world.

[32] The point is already hinted at in the parenthetical remark of 2.0212.

to take place, but this is not a combination of the objects that the picture represents as being a certain way, but of the picture constituents that go proxy for these. The objects in the world may or may not be combined with one another in the way in which the constituents of the picture are actually combined. That's why the picture can be false as well as true.

We can now provide a full interpretation of the substance passage. On my reading, 2.0211-2 are presenting the following argument:

AZ. If FORM were false, then making room for false representations would require invoking Russellian logical forms. But then the meaningfulness of a representation R would depend on the truth of another, i.e. a substitution instance of the existentially generalised proposition representing the logical form of R. (2.0211)[33]

BZ. But we cannot provide a satisfactory account of falsehood by appeal to Russellian logical forms, as the strategy generates an infinite regress: the particular fact that would make the logical form exist would have to be understood, and for this another logical form would be required, etc. (2.0212)

In a nutshell, what the substance passage tells us is that FORM follows from the possibility of false representation.

11. Objects

Our next item of business is to explain why substance, as I have construed the notion, is constituted by objects (2.021). This task doesn't pose serious difficulties. If, as I have suggested, the claim that the world has substance is FORM, then the substance of the world consists of the possibilities that objects are combined with one another in ways in which other

---

[33] AZ presupposes that the picture theory is the only alternative to Russell's proposal. Morris sees this as a problem for the reading (Morris 2008: 362), but it seems perfectly plausible to me to ascribe this assumption to Wittgenstein.

objects are actually combined in the world. But where do these possibilities of combination

reside? To this question the 2.01s give an unambiguous answer:

> 2.011   It is essential to things that they should be possible constituents
> of states of affairs.

> […] if a thing *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of
> affairs must be written into the thing itself. (2.012)

> If things can occur in states of affairs, this possibility must be in them
> from the beginning. (2.0121)[34]

> 2.0123   If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in
> states of affairs.
> (Every one of these possibilities must be part of the nature of
> the object.)
> A new possibility cannot be discovered later.

> 2.0124   If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states
> of affairs are also given.

> 2.014   Objects contain the possibility of all situations.

If substance is form, and form consists in possibilities of combination, then only objects can

provide substance, as possibilities of combination are contained in them. If substance is what I

say it is, then only objects can contribute it. I take this connection to offer additional support

for my reading. Wittgenstein tells us in the 2.02s that the substance of the world is constituted

by objects. But the main message of the 2.01s is that possibilities of combination are inherent

in objects. This lends plausibility to my claim that substance consists in possibilities of

combination. The point can also be established through the connection between substance and

form. Objects constitute the unalterable form of the world (2.023, 2.026). Objects can do this

because they have form. And what is the form of an object?

> 2.0141   The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of
> an object.

This is the last proposition before the 2.02's.[35]

---

[34] See (Griffin 1964: 40-41), on the interpretation of these passages. I think that a more
perspicuous rendition of 2.011 would be "It is essential to a thing that it should be a possible
constituent of a state of affairs".

12. <u>Simplicity</u>

The main remaining challenge for my reading is to explain the connection between substance and simplicity:

> 2.021 Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

It is clear that for Wittgenstein the role that objects play as purveyors of substance is incompatible with complexity. As we've seen, the empty-name reading has a plausible explanation of this claim, on the assumption that the existence of a composite object is always contingent. But it is not obvious why complexity is incompatible with the job of constituting the substance of the world, on my account of what this involves.

I want to present a hypothesis concerning the source of the incompatibility. My proposal is that the reason why the items that constitute the substance of the world have to be simple is that playing this role prevents them from satisfying a necessary condition for complexity. This necessary condition is given in the preceding section of the *Tractatus*:

> 2.0201 Every statement about complexes can be resolved into a statement about their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely.[36]

According to this passage, an object is not complex unless every statement about it satisfies a certain condition—being resolvable into a statement about its constituents and into the propositions that describe it completely. In other words, the impossibility of this resolution is being presented as a sufficient condition for simplicity. Hence, if statements about the items that constitute substance couldn't be resolved in this way we would have to conclude that these items are simple. My proposal is that this is what Wittgenstein is presenting as the

---

[35] One point on which the reading I am recommending is superior to the empty-name reading is that it doesn't treat the claim that the world has substance as synonymous with the claim that there are objects. Objects can constitute the substance of the world only because they encode form.

[36] In (Zalabardo 2010) I have attributed to Wittgenstein a different argument for simple objects based on the thought expressed by this section.

reason why objects have to be simple: if an item encodes possibilities of combination, then it will not be possible to resolve a statement about it into a statement about its constituents and into the propositions that describe it completely, and it follows from this, according to 2.0201, that the item has to be simple.

Why would it not be possible to resolve in this way statements about the purveyors of substance? I think that within the framework of the picture theory we can give a plausible answer. If it's going to be possible to resolve a statement about item A into a statement about its constituents and into the propositions that describe it completely, it will have to be possible to make statements about the constituents of A. Now, according to the picture theory, making these statements would involve representing pictorially the relevant states of affairs. This requires, in turn, that the constituents of A have form—that ways in which certain items (the picture's constituents) are actually combined with one another are ways in which it is possible for the constituents of A to be combined with other items. Hence, if A couldn't have constituents with form, A would satisfy our sufficient condition for simplicity. Therefore, in order to show that the items that constitute the substance of the world are simple, it would suffice to show that they cannot have constituents with form. My hypothesis is that this is the line of reasoning that connects substance with simplicity. The argument has the following structure:

1.   If an item has constituents, then it has to be possible to make statements about them.

2.   Making a statement about an item requires that the item has form.

3.   If an item constitutes the substance of the world, then it cannot have constituents with form.

Therefore

4.   The items that constitute the substance of the world are simple.

Can this argument be plausibly attributed to Wittgenstein? His commitment to the first two premises is unquestionable. Premise 1 follows directly from 2.0201, whose relevance for the connection between substance and simplicity is clearly signalled by its location. And premise 2 is an immediate consequence of the picture theory. Premise 3 is more problematic. It is the claim that if an item encodes possibilities of combination it cannot have constituents with possibilities of combination. I don't think we can find textual support for the attribution of this claim to Wittgenstein. All we can do is provide an informal argument that might have made the claim seem plausible in Wittgenstein's eyes.

I think that premise 3 is fairly plausible on the assumption that the items that encode possibilities of combination are not related to one another by the *…is a constituent of…* relation, i.e. that if X and Y are two of the items that encode possibilities of combination, then X is not a constituent of Y, or a constituent of a constituent of Y, etc. Call this the *Independence Constraint*. In the presence of this constraint, we can ague as follows. Let A be one of the objects that encode possibilities of combination, and let B be a constituent of A. Notice that the statements about B that we need to be able to make, according to premise 1, are not statements about complexes in which B figures as a constituent, but statements about B itself. Hence the possibilities of combination that we need in order to make the requisite statements involve combinations in which B figures independently. But which items could encode these possibilities? A and other items in which B may figure as a constituent clearly can't encode these possibilities of independent combination. The only remaining options are B itself and the constituents of B, but both options are ruled out by the Independence Constraint, on the assumption that A is one of the items that encode possibilities of combination. Therefore B doesn't have form, as required by premise 3.

The only obvious way of resisting this argument for premise 3 would be to reject the Independence Constraint, but the constraint can be motivated by the need to avoid the ensuing

overdetermination of possibilities. If the blade of Excalibur contains its possibilities of combination, it also contains the possibilities of combination of the sword of which it is a component part. And if the sword contains its possibilities of combination it also contains some of the possibilities of combination of its blade.[37] This situation may in principle give rise to conflicts between the possibilities of combination encoded in the blade and the possibilities of combination encoded in the sword. Unless we can provide a plausible explanation of how these conflicts can be ruled out, the Independence Constraint will have to be upheld.[38]

This completes my proposal as to how to interpret the substance pages and related sections of the *Tractatus*. Let me close this section by outlining how the availability of this alternative to the Empty-Name Reading affects the question, whether the *Tractatus* endorses the Empty-Name Argument. I have contended that the only version of the Empty-Name Argument that the *Tractatus* might endorse is the version generated by 1* and 3*. But there is no evidence outside the substance passage for attributing 1* to the *Tractatus*, and 3.24 will entail that the *Tractatus* rejects 1* unless it is read as not applying to cases in which the complex mentioned by the proposition is the image under the proxy mapping of a name of the proposition. Hence the attribution of the Empty-Name Argument would be unsupported unless it could be argued that the most plausible reading of the substance passage is to take it as advancing the Empty-Name Argument. But I have argued that there is a more plausible reading of the substance passage. If this is correct, we will have to conclude that the attribution of the Empty-Name Argument to the *Tractatus* is unsupported.

---

[37] The same can be said for the constituents of the blade, if any.
[38] This argument presupposes that if B is a constituent of A, the combinations with A as a constituent can also be said to have B as a constituent, i.e. that the constituents of the constituents of a complex are also constituents of this complex.

13. The later Wittgenstein

What are we to make then of the passages from Wittgenstein's later period that seem to

suggest that he once endorsed the Empty-Name Argument? §39 doesn't pose a special

problem. Many aspects of the Augustinian picture are certainly not in the *Tractatus*. The

Tractatus, after all, does not treat the word 'this' as a name. And on most interpretations it

doesn't assign any role to ostensive definitions, a fundamental ingredient of the Augustinian

picture.

Other passages from the later period pose a more formidable challenge to my

interpretation. Overcoming this challenge lies beyond the scope of this paper. Hence my

conclusion should be qualified as the claim that the attribution of the Empty-Name Argument

to the *Tractatus* receives no support from the *Tractatus* itself or from pre-tractarian writings.

Nevertheless, I'd like to close by tentatively suggesting a strategy that one might deploy to

defend my reading from the contrary evidence that Wittgenstein's later work seems to

provide.

I shall concentrate on a passage from the *Philosophical Remarks* in which Wittgenstein is

clearly attributing the Empty-Name Argument to his former self:

> What I once called 'objects', simples, were simply what I could refer to
> without running the risk of their possible non-existence; i.e. that for
> which there is neither existence nor non-existence, and that means: what
> we can speak about *no matter what may be the case*. (Wittgenstein 1975:
> 72)[39]

The extent to which this passage can lend support to the attribution of the Empty-Name

Argument to the *Tractatus* depends on whether it should be taken as reporting a line of

reasoning that he remembers rehearsing in his earlier period or as an explanation, only

formulated at the time of writing, of an earlier conviction. If taken in the second way, as

---

[39] See also (Wittgenstein 2001: §46).

retrospective explanation, this passage would not provide evidence for reading the *Tractatus* as a whole, or any specific section in it, as advancing the argument.

I want to suggest that it would be perfectly natural to take Wittgenstein's later ascription of the Empty-Name Argument to his earlier self as retrospective explanation. The *Notebooks* give the distinct impression that Wittgenstein didn't arrive *through arguments* at the thought that the sense of propositions is to be explained in terms of an immediate correlation between propositional constituents and simple objects. Rather, the thought seems to have the character of a fundamental philosophical insight that he is struggling to support with arguments. The following entry, dated 23 May 1915, conveys the tone of his reflection on these ideas:

> The feeling of the simple relation which always comes before our mind
> as the main ground for the assumption of "simple objects"—haven't we
> got this very same feeling when we think of the relation between name
> and complex object? (Wittgenstein 1979: 49-50)[40]

The point that I am making is that, from the very beginning, Wittgenstein's reflection on why complexes can't be referents takes the form of trying to find arguments in support of a pre-existing conviction. My suggestion is that this exercise continued after the conviction had disappeared, and that the passages from his later work in which he ascribes the Empty-Name Argument to his former self should be read as offering an explanation he had come up with *only then* of why he once thought that only simples could be referents, not as a record of which arguments he endorsed in his early period in support of this view.

---

[40] At times he appears to accept that the view that only simples can be referents might be mistaken:
> When I say "'x' has reference" do I have the feeling: "it is impossible
> that "x" should stand for, say, this knife or this letter"? Not at all. On the
> contrary. (Wittgenstein 1979: 49)

REFERENCES

Anscombe, G.E.M. 1971: *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. London: Hutchinson.

Black, Max 1964: *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Candlish, Stewart 1996: 'The Unity of the Proposition and Russell's Theories of Judgment'. In *Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. Monk, Ray and Palmer, Anthony (eds) Bristol: Thoemmes Press pp. 103-35.

Fogelin, Robert J. 1987: *Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Griffin, James 1964: *Wittgenstein's Logical Atomism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hylton, Peter 1990: *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Ishiguro, Hidé 1969: 'Use and Reference of Names'. In *Studies in the philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Winch, Peter Guy (ed) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul pp. 20-50.

Kenny, Anthony John Patrick 1973: *Wittgenstein*. London: Allen Lane.

Kripke, Saul 1980: *Naming and Necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

McGuinness, B. F. 1981: 'The So-Called Realism of the Tractatus'. In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Block, Irving (ed) Oxford: Blackwell.

Morris, Michael 2008: *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.

Pears, David 1977: 'The Relation between Wittgenstein's Picture Theory of Propositions and Russell's Theories of Judgment'. *Philosophical Review*, 86, pp. 177-96.

Pears, David 1979: 'Wittgenstein's Picture Theory and Russell's *Theory of Knowledge*'. In *Wittgenstein: the Vienna Circle and Critical rationalism; Proceedings of the Third International Wittgenstein Symposium, 13th to 19th August, 1978*. Berghel, Hal, Hübner, Adolf and Köhler, Eckehart (eds) Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky pp. 101-07.

Pears, David 1987: *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Proops, Ian 2004: 'Wittgenstein on the Substance of the World'. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 12, pp. 106-26.

Russell, Bertrand 1903: *The Principles of Mathematics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, Bertrand 1910: 'On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood'. In *Philosophical essays*. London: Longmans, Green pp. 147-59.

Russell, Bertrand 1912: *The Problems of Philosophy*. London: Williams & Norgate.

Russell, Bertrand 1984: 'Theory of Knowledge: the 1913 Manuscript'. In *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell. Vol 7*. Eames, Elizabeth Ramsden and Blackwell, Kenneth (eds) London: Allen & Unwin.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1922: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1971: *Prototractatus. An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1975: *Philosophical Remarks*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1979: *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1989: *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Kritische Edition*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2000: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2001: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Zalabardo, José L. 2010: 'The *Tractatus* on Logical Consequence'. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 18, pp. 425-42.