

# *Truth, Reality and Temporality: Tractarian Visions*

## I) *Introduction*

The reality or unreality of the past, and in general the nature of time, has always represented a serious challenge to philosophical reflection. Needless to say, the most diverse stances have been advocated, from the most varied points of view. The past, for instance, has been understood as something real, that is, as an essential feature of reality, but also as rather a characteristic of the human way of perceiving the world and, therefore, as something subjective or even illusory. My main aim in this essay is to consider, specifically, the issue of the nature and reality of the past, but it is evident that what I'll have to say will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the future as well. Although it is none of my goals to carry out any kind of exegesis, I must say that some of its main ideas get, as I'll try to make it clear, a strong support from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Accordingly, what I intend to achieve is to offer some clarifications without being committed with specific philosophical theses. In this sense, my view is inspired or guided not so much by specific views but rather by the general outlook of the so-called 'later Wittgenstein'. The issue I'll be dealing with here is the reality or non-reality of the past, the latter understood not from the perspective of any scientific theory but from the point of view of the subject of experiences.

As M. Dummett has shown, the question of the reality of the past requires us to have a particular approach, a method for the treatment of the subject. For my part, since I approach my subject from the point of view of analytical philosophy, I'll start off by some considerations which fall within what may more or less loosely be called 'philosophy of language'. And so, I'll begin my excursion into this *prima facie* obscure theme with some reflections concerning the notion of truth.

## II) *Truth*

I tend to think that philosophy, as well as shoes and shirts, is affected by fashions. The latter concern, basically, themes and concepts. With respect to concepts, it could hardly be denied that the fashionable concept nowadays, the concept which functions as an axis in the sense that many discussions turn around it or depend upon what is being held about it, is the concept of truth. The thinkers who have contributed the most to conform this philosophical scenario are well known. No doubt we should count among them Frege, Wittgenstein, Tarski, Davidson and

Dummett. Let us quickly recall some of the results and the stances got at by these thinkers.

As is well known, truth confronts us with different sorts of difficulties and with a variety of views having wide and deep ramifications, with different possibilities of combination and development. There are, first, philosophers like Frege who consider that the concept of truth cannot be defined and that we apprehend it when we learn to speak, that is, to say truths, whereas there are thinkers, like Tarski, who are convinced that a formally correct and materially adequate definition can be furnished. On the other hand, we are faced with the problem of determining of what, in the first place, it can be said that it is a truth-bearer. What do we qualify as true or false? There are at least four candidates. For Frege, truth is a property of propositions, whereas Tarski was convinced that it is attached rather to sentences; for the Russell truth is above all a feature of beliefs. For Dummett (as for Strawson, it is property of statements. Finally, there is the issue of determining how fundamental is the concept of truth, that is, which place it occupies in our conceptual scheme or map. Contrary to Davidson, for who it is truth (understood in Tarski's style) what enables us to construct a theory of meaning for a given language, for Frege sense (or meaning) is logically previous to truth.

Let us quickly consider the Tarskian stance, known as the semantic conception of truth. The core of his position is relatively simple: taking for granted the idea of a hierarchy of languages and, accordingly, the use and mention, object language and meta-language distinctions (and, therefore, the quotations and disquotation technique), Tarski elaborates a formulae which is a truth scheme for any sentence *S*, the famous "Convention T", according to which, for any given *S*:

‘*S*’ is true if and only if *S*

To illustrate, the sentence ‘all bears eat salmon’ is true if and only if all bears eat salmon. Obviously, what holds for this particular sentence holds for **any** other one, regardless of its content or of the area of discourse it belongs to (theology, science, literature and so on).

The implications of this simple and at first sight trivial scheme are indeed surprising. Davidson, for instance, builds up a theory of meaning in terms of truth conditions for statements. The idea is simply that if one knows the truth conditions of a sentence, then one does understand its meaning. In other words, we say of someone that he understands or grasps the meaning or the sense of any sentence *S* whatsoever if he knows when or under what circumstances it is true or false. The sense of a sentence consists in its truth-conditions *o*, what amounts to the same thing, is given through them.

It is somewhat curious that being a logician, Tarski called “his” theory “semantic”, since before he gave it its canonical formulation it had already been presented, partially and without the required logical formalization, in the *Tractatus*. While outlining his so called Picture theory, Wittgenstein was led to state the logic of the concept of truth, that is, to describe its **logical** behaviour. The *Tractatus* itself is nothing else than a philosophical treatise which takes logic as its basis, it is, if it is meaningful to describe it in this way, the clarification of all the subjects it is concerned with (language, reality, mathematics, science, ethics, etc.) from the point of view of logic. Thus, for instance, Wittgenstein reminds us that “A picture either fits or not with reality; it is correct or incorrect” and immediately after that he points out that “It is the accordance or non accordance of its sense with reality that consists its truth or falsity”.

What should be emphasized here is simply that to assert, as Wittgenstein does, that it is in its accordance or non accordance of a picture with reality, with a particular situation, what the truth or falsity of a picture or of a proposition consists in is tantamount with saying what Tarski advocates, for what we are being told is simply that the picture ‘*fa*’ (an atomic proposition) is true if it does coincide with the simple or atomic fact **fa**. That is, Wittgenstein is in fact stating the Tarskian truth clause but only for elementary propositions. So I think that it should be admitted that Tarski’s truth is already implicit in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. To acknowledge this has an important consequence for the labeling of the theory, for it enables us to understand that Tarski in speaking of “semantic” he turned his own positions ambiguous. He should had labeled his theory as the **logical** conception of truth, for it is essentially the same as the *Tractatus* contains and of which it is a generalization and it is pretty obvious that what Wittgenstein aims at doing is to give us the logic of our concept (“reality”, “representation”, “thought”, “probability”, and so forth.). This simple change would have in the end been less misleading than the actual one, as I’ll presently try to make clear.

The significance of changing the name of the theory lies in that it becomes clear that what is achieved by the theory of truth understood *à la Wittgenstein* is to provide a purely formal mechanism, valid for absolutely any grammatical construction which could be recognized as a sentence, so that its “semantic” functioning may be exhibited, although in a purely abstract or formal way. This is decisive and there should be no misunderstandings about it. Just as from a logical point of view the meaning of a name is an object, so the truth of a sentence consists in its agreement or disagreement with what it states. But equally just as to say that the meaning of a name is an object is not to say a lot, to say that truth consists in the agreement or disagreement of a sentence with what it represents does not amount so far to say anything concrete, but merely to state the logical condition of its functioning *qua* sentence. We can, if we wish to, go on operating in a purely formal plane and to extract as many conclusions as we like, but in doing that we do not

make any progress in our understanding of the nature of truth. The only thing we shall have got and described will be the logical, that is, the necessary features of sentences. It is necessary for the sentence 'The wolf ate the grand-mother' to be true that the wolf indeed ate the grand-mother or for the thought 'God created the world' that God indeed created the world; for 'the sun is 8 light minutes far from the Earth' is true if and only if the sun is 8 light minutes from the Earth, and so *ad infinitum*. But to say that is nothing but to state the necessary condition for the sentence in question to be true, *i.e.*, a condition which is common to **all** sentences. It should be obvious, however, that to provide such condition isn't yet to elucidate what truth is, just as to say that the meaning of a name is an object is not yet to say what objects there are.

As I said, we can go on exploring the formal approach and actually I think that the logical outcome of such a policy is precisely Davidson's philosophy. The trouble is that such a development has limits which can be established *a priori*, fixed beforehand: the formal approach, regardless of its impact, just can't go beyond purely formal considerations, that is, it is logically prevented from telling us any substantial thing about any subject whatsoever. That's why all these discussions about disquotation, semantic ascent, etc., will always leave us unsatisfied. In other words, it is obvious that in speaking of truth at some stage we'll be willing to say something substantial about it, that is, something concerning its real *modus operandi*, in contrast to its purely formal functioning, a subject exhausted now. And for that the semantic or logical theory of truth is simply unfit. We can state the point as follows: the fact that the semantic or logic theory of truth is necessary doesn't make it interesting *per se* and the fact that it is trivial doesn't make it redundant. It is on it as a basis that the different theories of truth we need should emerge. It is not that as a theory of truth it is wrong, but just as it is it is incomplete.

If I'm not wholly wrong in what I've been saying, it follows that if what we are interested in is truth, then sooner or later we shall have to leave behind us considerations about its logical skeleton and to tackle issues with a content. With respect to this kind of issues, I'd like to make some clarifications.

It would seem that just as we can speak in philosophy of fashions we can also speak of competence and struggles to occupy the first places. Conceptual struggle is in my view a weakness of the usual way of seeing things. Philosophers appear to be concerned with questions as which concept is the most important, from which concept we can derive the rest of them and so on. The case of the controversy around truth and meaning seems to be a good example of this absurd kind of struggle. Nevertheless, I would admit that the emphasis on establishing hierarchies is, at worst, a question of style and at best a proposal to impose a particular order among our concepts. The trouble with this is that it easily makes us lose sight of the interrelated character of our "conceptual apparatus". That's why in my opinion an

approach by means of which the connections and the mutual dependence relations among our concepts are stated is much more fruitful. And what I assert here holds not only for concepts as “body”, “matter”, “space”, “movement”, “extension”, “person”, etc., but also for concepts as “truth”.

I think it is very useful to see our concepts as constituting families, regardless of their potential hierarchies. Now to which family of concepts does the concept of truth belong to? Naturally, it is none of my goals to try to elaborate an exhaustive or complete list and this mainly because this is not something established *a priori*. Nevertheless, I think we can assert that at least the following concepts belong to such family: “knowledge”, “belief”, “sentence”, “fact”, “proposition”, “argument”, “verification”, “refutation”, “refutation”, “language”, “application”, “utility”, “coherence” and “probability”, to mention just those which most evidently are connected to “truth”. That is to say, once we have left behind the strictly formal approach, automatically the concept of truth offers us a landscape conformed by the above mentioned concepts and probably by many others which I didn’t mention. The explanation of what truth is, therefore, entails our considering the relevant concepts, which will be different depending upon the context and the sort of discourse we’ll be engaged in, without of course forgetting that in all possible cases the so-called Convention T holds.

Once we have mastered and overcome the logical aspect of truth, we automatically go on to elaborate or construct substantial **theories** of truth. It should be evident that just as there is only one logical theory, valid for or in all cases, there just can’t be a single substantial theory valid for all sorts of assertions. How “truth” will function is something that will depend upon the linguistic context we’ll find ourselves. Taking as a basis the same logical (semantic) theory of truth, different conceptions of truth can be built up. After all there must be a sense in which we should be able to speak of scientific truth in contradistinction to religious truth, historical truth, literary truth, personal truth, and so forth. The advantage of the Tarskian theory of truth is that it provided us in a transparent way with the foundations for any complete theory of truth, in any conceptual and theoretical area whatever, something that was missing in traditional theories (correspondence, coherence, pragmatist, etc.), but that neither means nor implies that it is in itself a complete theory. Seen in this light, the concept of truth turns out to be and not to be a family resemblance concept: it isn’t in as much as any theory of truth has to comply with convention *T*, but it is such a concept in as much as there’ll be different theories of truth depending upon the linguistic or symbolic context we’ll be dealing with.

### III) *Reality*

I think the first thing that should be pointed out is that just as the *Tractatus* gives us (the foundations) of the logical theory of truth, it gives us as well the general outline of what would be called the ‘logical theory of reality’. We know *a priori* that there must be simple facts or situations and that the world is precisely such a totality. More specifically, “The world is the totality of facts, not of things”. The problem we face here is similar to the one we met when we focused on the concept of truth: we are speaking here of the logical features or conditions of reality, not of its substantial aspects. To speak of the “totality of facts” is like talking about the totality of true propositions: we aren’t yet in a position to discriminate classes of truths, modalities of truth. The same happens here: surely the “totality of facts” include the facts of history, of biology, of chemistry, etc., as well as those of imagination, present as well as past or future facts. All of them taken together constitute the world or reality. But one thing is to recognize that there are, for instance, past facts, and a completely different one the elucidation of its *status*. To say that there are past facts is the same as to say that there are true past-tense propositions. But this amounts to a restatement of the problem, not to an explanation or clarification of the modality of reality which belongs to the past. Hence the *Tractatus’ dictum* about the world’s being a totality of facts is compatible both with the idea that the past is as real as the present and that it is no more than a reconstruction in the present of what happened earlier. To put it in other words, we can opt for the idea that to speak of the past is to speak **from** the present of something different from it but nevertheless real, or we can incline ourselves rather in favour of the idea that to speak about the past is to speak **in** the present of something which was real, but which no longer is. The *Tractatus’* purely formal and abstract approach is, therefore, impartial *vis à vis* these and other possibilities. So part of our task will consist in trying to say something which will go beyond the purely logical framework of Wittgenstein’s book.

I should perhaps start off by saying that the discourse about “reality”, in abstract, is a typical case of metaphysical discourse, a kind of discourse we would like to get rid of. However, for different sorts of reasons, it is a quite useful concept, so I’ll allow myself to have recourse to it having always in mind that we should always be capable of paraphrasing what we say in terms of situations, facts, states of affairs, etc. Incidentally, it is worth observing that exactly the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, with “truth”, which doesn’t prevent us from pronouncing ourselves about it. So if we can have a “theory of truth” without doing metaphysics at all, we should be able to achieve the same with reality.

From this cautious perspective, the concept of reality turns out to be fundamental, as a matter of fact as fundamental as the concept of truth, and so what is crucial is to clarify the relations that hold between them. To begin with, it is obvious that they are related with each other in such a way that to try to understand

reality without having recourse to truth, or the other way around, is an effort bound to fail. Traditionally, the connection between a proposition (thought, sentence, etc.) and fact (state of affairs, situation, etc.) was such that it could be asserted that a proposition is true or false in virtue of or depending upon the obtaining or not obtaining of the relevant fact. Unfortunately, the quite useful notion of fact was subject to a strong criticism and there has been a tendency to replace it by the idea of “semantic ascent”. One argument put forward against it is simply that the notion of a fact is just redundant: to say that it is a fact that Napoleon was born in Corsica is just another way of saying that the sentence or the proposition ‘Napoleon was born in Corsica’ is true. Thus it would seem that to say that it is in virtue of a past fact that such proposition is true not only adds nothing to what we already knew nor clarifies the issue at all, but commits us to unintelligible “entities”, as facts are, and to explanations about their nature that will leave us wholly unsatisfied. Thus, the allusion to facts is an unnecessarily misleading recourse.

Nevertheless and in spite of these and other objections which can be raised against facts, it remains true that it is just impossible to get rid of the idea of something like “chunks of reality”, that is, something truth is contrasted with. The concept of truth is used to connect up “entities”, it is a link-concept and, therefore, any explanation of it which will keep us inside a purely logical or linguistic universe will unavoidably be insufficient. We can admit that there are no pure or naked, unconceptualized or prelinguistic, etc., realities, but about there being such thing as reality or the world, something one doesn’t control, something external to us, etc., about that there can be no doubts (unless one should wish to play the old fashioned sceptical game, or the solipsistic one, which is not something which would represent a threat to us), just as we cannot put into question that that, whatever it is, is relevant to the application of the concept of truth. In fact, the attempt to replace the notion of reality by means of the Quinean notion of “semantic ascent” is nothing but a subtle way of eluding the traditional way of speaking, for the very same problematic idea is still being used: to say that when we say that ‘*S*’ is true if and only if *S* a “semantic ascent” is produced is just another way of saying that there is something in virtue of which ‘*S*’ is true. Thus, regardless of how one tries to hide it, the idea of something thanks to which or in virtue of which a sentence or a thought are true seems to impossible to renounce to. It follows that it makes no sense whatsoever to try to speak of truth without alluding to reality, and the other way around. To speak of reality is to speak of true propositions, since it is the latter which present us with chunks of reality, even if it is true that such chunks should first have been categorized in one way or another. Anyway, it is the totality of what is described by the totality of true propositions what is the world or reality, regardless of verbal tenses. Accordingly, our view of reality will derive from the classes or sorts of propositions we acknowledge as true.

Let us then concentrate on reality or, rather, on the application conditions of the concept of reality. The use of such concept presupposes that certain conditions are fulfilled. To begin with, the connection between the concept of reality and the concept of change has to be established. Tautologically, change is nothing but the transition from one state of the world at a given moment to a different state at the next moment. Now, what matters about it is that change is the world is permanent (some would say 'eternal'). In other words, the idea of a static, immutable reality is just unintelligible. We simply can't speak in a sensible way about the world without *eo ipso* introducing the idea of change. On the other hand, change is not discrete, but continuous. Now to understand change itself, *i.e.*, the evolution of the world, we have to introduce the idea of time. In other words, it is through the idea of change that the world faces us as having the feature of temporality.

The *Tractarian* view of the world as the totality of facts has many edges and has implications impossible to guess or foresee. For example, it is now true that I live in Mexico just as it is now true that Napoleon was a Corsican. We can determine both claims. But how can it be known whether or not the proposition 'life on the planet will die out within 500 years? Whether that proposition is true or false is something that cannot be established now and, for obvious reason, that couldn't possibly be established. But this seems to have as a consequence the idea that the future doesn't belong to reality or, alternatively, that if the future is as real as the present or as the past, then reality is not intrinsically knowable. At first sight, it would be more sensible to hold that given that it is at least logically possible to determine the truth-value of all past-tense propositions but not future-tense ones, then reality includes only present and past (that is, present and past facts). The idea would be that to the extent that the future isn't yet even adumbrated, the future cannot be real the way the past and the present are. But the trouble in this case is that we would be introducing a radical asymmetry in the very core of reality and temporality. Of course, this in itself is no argument, but it certainly introduces a discordance which is deeply troubling.

On the other hand, the already mentioned *Tractarian* idea of the world as the totality of facts seems to imply also the idea that the world is that totality right **now**. In other words, the world is always in the present. From this perspective, surely temporal classifications are useful conventions, but nonetheless metaphysically irrelevant. The thought behind this pronouncement of Wittgenstein seems to be that, although analyzable reality is not divisible but is given as a whole, as a totality. It is here and now that the world is such and such. Distinctions like "past-present-future" have to do with human beings, with their language and their peculiar way of knowing and putting forward explanations, not with reality itself. If we adopt the idea that the world is whatever it **is**, that is to say, what is always present, and we interpret it metaphysically, then we can't prevent the past from becoming paler and



paler and to vanish into unreality. I think that we can avoid this conclusion without abandoning the *Tractatus* stance.

It is important to make here a couple of remarks concerning the present. The crucial idea is that the present, our present, real present, so to speak, is not the present which emerges out of the application to experience of a mathematical scheme. What such a scheme leads to is the idea of specious present, but it is quite evident that the specious present is **not** what we call 'present'. Our experience is fluid and it is only some particular theoretical goals that we speak of unities of experience, unities of time, world unities and so on. Our lived present contains more than the mathematically computed present, that is, as something which corresponds to a time unity (a second, an instant, a moment). However, it is clear that our experience is not a mere sum or accumulation of specious presents. Rather, the very idea of a specious present is an abstraction got at from the application to experience of a mathematical scheme.

So understood, it is undeniable that there is a sense in which the *Tractatus* effort to build up a faithful picture of reality by giving us its logical structure necessarily fails. The reason is obvious: the world of the *Tractatus* is a static, fixed one, a world lacking both movement and change. But why? Because the idea of the world implicit in the *Tractatus* is linked to the idea of description and what necessarily descriptions do is to fix reality, just leaving out change. The abstract representation of the world contained in the book necessarily fixes up the world at a given moment. It's like a photograph of reality: it is of that particular stage. So the *Tractatus* is just unable to give an account of the transitions from one state to the next one. This, however, is not mysterious at all: it's the logic of language which leads us to see the world as composed out of atoms, discrete situations, put together along an infinite sequence. Having recourse to the image Wittgenstein himself uses in his *Philosophical Remarks*, we can say that with the *Tractatus* we get all and every pictures of the film, but what we don't get is the moving film itself

To sum up: the notions of truth and reality are internally connected with each other. Therefore, they are not independent of each other. A sector of reality is picked up by a true proposition. However, reality, regardless of how it is, is always actual, is always present. This would seem to commit us to deny the reality of the past and also the reality of the future. My own point of view is that expressed in that way that is simply false. I'll try to convey my view in the next and last section.

#### IV) *Temporality*

In my essay "Wittgensteinian considerations about Time" I tried to show that from Wittgenstein's perspective the concept of time is not a concept of experience, but a

concept which has above all a functional or organizational character. With respect to this, the *Tractatus* is quite explicit: “We cannot compare a process with the “passing of time” – there is no such thing - but only with some other process (like the functioning of a chronometer).

Hence the description of temporal processes is only possible if we recur to some other process”.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, temporality simply is **not** a feature of reality itself. Reality doesn’t divide itself in temporal segments, that is, is not a totality divided according to times (past, present and future), but something which although changes but is nonetheless permanently actual from and for ever.

We should proceed with respect to the ideas of world and time as we did with respect to truth. That is, just as we should be able to pass from a purely formal theory of truth to substantial theories of truth (factual truth, mathematical truth, etc.), we should be able to from a general or abstract theory of reality to a clarification of what as a matter of fact are different forms of reality. Roughly speaking, reality is simply what is described by true propositions. The past, for instance, is real first of all in the sense that there are true past-tense propositions. What has to be observed, however, is that to say just that is not to clarify anything, for that just amounts to stating the logical condition for the truth of past-tense statements. However, the insight that so far has guided us is that because of there being different ways of confirming or disconfirming propositions enables us to speak of different kinds of truths and this in turn enables us to maintain that we speak of reality in a variety of senses. With respect to temporality, the peculiar connection that holds between verification, truth and the present turns out to be philosophically decisive. Let’s see why.

Needless to say that the verifying of propositions changes according to the propositional tense. Let us consider the past. Nobody confirms or disconfirms a proposition about Napoleon the way he does with a proposition about what is going on in the present or another about what will happen within a year. So here the mistake to avoid consists in adopting the view that just because we have true propositions. Then they all have to be true **in the same sense**, regardless of the tenses and of their corresponding ways of being confirmed. This is precisely the sort of mistake the purely logical or semantic conception of truth leads to. One way of showing that it is indeed a mistake is going beyond the purely formal approach to, so to speak, infuse blood into the relevant notions. From this perspective, propositions are not all true in the same sense, for the very simple reason that they are verified (refuted, confirmed, etc.) in widely different ways. The great mistake, therefore, consists in aiming at contrasting or comparing the specific reality of the past with that of the present on the frail basis that in both cases we are dealing with true propositions. The logical and linguistic connections do not guarantee any

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<sup>1</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 6.3611.

factual or ontological continuity. In other words, the fact that ‘Napoleon is in Paris’ was true in 1804 implies that it is true that in 1804 Napoleon was in Paris; but it doesn’t follow that the fact in virtue of which that proposition was true in 1804 goes on being real in 2005 as when it was stated in present tense only that (so to speak) diluted, watered down. To try to visualize the facts of the past as if they were present or actual facts, only paler or vaguer, is an attempt bound to fail and the image it gives rise to totally misleading. There is just one homogeneous and complete reality, although there is a variety of true propositions.

It is at this stage that the different lines of argument we have been laying all along converge. To begin with we can admit that what is stated or described by a true proposition belongs to reality. However, the paradigm of true propositions are present-tense propositions. Nobody ever learnt to speak first in the past tense and only later on in the present tense. The technique of the past tense verbs is a highly elaborated one which requires the mastery of lots of subtle and complex lines of behaviour which do not belong to the background of someone who is being initiated in language. Therefore, how what is stated by true past tense propositions is integrated into reality is something to be elucidated yet. To make clear the peculiar nature of past tense propositions it proves useful to start off from considerations about present tense propositions. So let us raise the question: what is the truth modality of present tense propositions? We’ve got here to appeal to notions we have already mentioned, since what as a matter of fact we are asking is: how are present tense propositions verified or refuted?

It is plain, I suppose, that the verification of present tense propositions is got at mainly through observation. Naturally, in this respect we have to allow for some elasticity. We don’t straightforwardly observe, for instance, that China has today 1,200 million people, but we do confirm directly in experience (in books, journals, etc.) that this is so. Ultimately, it is logically possible for me to go to China and to carry out and actually count all the people living there and in this sense I would be determining directly how many inhabitants she has. On the other hand, what is logically impossible for me to do is to do exactly the same thing with propositions concerning past facts. There’s no way to travel towards them or to bring them to the present. This difference raises a problem of understanding. Actually, this is what the problem consists in, namely, that we can speak of truth without being forced to speak of observation (in the sense of direct observation). There’s an essential connection between the concepts of truth, the present and observation or experience which simply doesn’t hold with past tense propositions.

What is important about this reminder is that the contrast between the ways in which present and past tense propositions are confirmed or refuted enables us to infer ontological differences which had been hidden by the logical concept of truth. Thus, we face a *prima facie* difficulty to accept conjunction: we have to accept that

there are true past tense propositions and, therefore, that there are real past facts, but that their reality is **not** as the reality of present or actual facts. But if so: what sort of reality have past facts?

I think the answer can only come in terms of two things:

- a) the specific way we determine the truth of past tense propositions, and
- b) the peculiar usefulness those propositions have **in the present**.

Let us first consider the way past tense propositions are confirmed. Of course, observation and in general experience are in one way or another relevant. Since in last analysis their verifications takes place in the present. So the peculiar form past tense propositions have of being verified is precisely that **it is never direct**. We don't witness directly the battle of Marengo in order to determine the truth of the proposition according to which Napoleon won that battle. The study of the past is therefore always indirect. So we are now in a better position to understand the somewhat intriguing idea put forward in the *Notebooks* as follows: "What does history matter to me? Mine is the first and only world".<sup>2</sup> As can easily be assessed, Wittgenstein's solipsistic temptations forcefully showed up during his first philosophical phase. For us, who have learnt how to elude solipsist traps, the question we should raise is a different one, namely, why do we need the past or, to put it in other words, why are past tense propositions useful to us, if in the sense in which it matters to us the only real thing is just the present?

It is evident that the concept of the past must in one way or another be practically useful to us. It is precisely that utility we should be able to grasp and describe properly. So let us consider one case: in what sense or how it is here and now useful to me to know that Napoleon won the battle of Eylau? I think that part of our interest in the past consists in our being able to group together propositions in such a way that the better they are structured and organized the better we can do or achieve things **in the present**. Who knows a lot about Napoleon's life may teach, impress, joke, etc., better than someone who ignore the facts in question; who knows truths about his own past understand himself better than someone who doesn't, may behave in more successfully than others, and so on. Who ignores or adopts false past tense propositions may be laughed at, is described as a simpleton or as a fool, loses credibility, fails on many occasion, etc. Truth, either present or past, is not a purely rhetoric or aesthetic issue, but a practical business and fulfils its function because it is logically founded, and we know how. Thus, the reality of the past is what is conveyed through true past tense propositions and which become a part of or propositional blocks, both collective and personal). It is in this way that the past

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<sup>2</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 82.e

becomes real. The concept of the past is similar to the concept of space, that is, it is an open concept in the following sense: we are always ready to say that, even if we can say nothing about it, there is an objective past which is there, awaiting to be discovered. Although misleading, this form of words is not incorrect. At any rate, the only thing we can be sure of is that if someone tries to speak of the reality of the past as he speaks about the way the present is real, that person must be seriously confused.

#### V) *Time, World and Life*

In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes an astonishing statement. “World and life”, he tells us, “are one and the same”.<sup>3</sup> And immediately after that he says: “I am my world (The microcosmos)”.<sup>4</sup> There are profound thoughts which demand to be pondered carefully.

It is pretty obvious that what Wittgenstein asserts can only be understood if one has correctly grasped the global perspective of the work. In other essays I’ve tried to show that the *Tractatus* has two fundamental features: it takes as a platform Russell’s logic and it incorporates the solipsist stance without explicitly stating solipsist theses. What the solipsist wants to say is correct, but it cannot be put into words. Now isn’t it Wittgenstein himself who establishes the limits of solipsism when he asserts that he is the microcosmos? I think he is, for in speaking of the “microcosmos” what he means or implies is that any “self” or “I” reflects what happens in the others: logic is the same for everyone, thought adapts itself to the same conditions in each case, the content of my visual field is the same for all of us, we share a language (at least to a certain, extreme point), and so on. So although there are things that I would like to be able to say or express, as for instance my special or unique position in the world, and I’m just unable to do it, all the same I know that the same happens to everybody else. In this sense, the *Tractatus* is an optimistic book: according to him, justice can be done to solipsism and at the same time we can communicate with others, for all of us look for the same and think and act in what is basically the same way

The *Tractarian* insight that solipsism is the other side of realism has as a correspondent distinction the pair <life-world>. It is because my experience can only be of the objects of the world, which I have a direct access to, that I can identify my life with the world. Taking such “identification” as a basis, what we preach about life we automatically preach about the world as well. It is things, objects themselves, we included, who are the subject of change, not reality: roses

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<sup>3</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.621.

<sup>4</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 5.63

fade away, we get old, stars are born, volcanoes get extinct, fishes reproduce themselves, and thus with everything. But the fact that objects change neither means nor implies that the world carries with it the past or that it, in some strange sense, contains it. Things change in a world which is permanently present. In **this** sense, the past is not real. One way to show this is the case is that we can long for something, miss someone, feel melancholic, etc., not with respect to what exists but with respect precisely to what is no longer real. If the past were real, the loss of a dear one shouldn't affect us at all. We could always say: he's there. But obviously that is just a fallacious illusion. The past seems real to us because through memory it is subjectively retained. Naturally, how much is remembered is something that will change from person to person. Anyway, I think that with what we have been saying a new possibility to retrieve, in a more actual form, the Augustinian conception of time is open to us, just as we would have more solid grounds to reject once and for all the Bergsonian (and the Newtonian) views of time. But, coming back to the *Tractatus*, it seems to me that we can affirm that the conception implied by it is, as I said, the view of an eternally actual world of things subject to change. Thus we are in a better position to understand Wittgenstein's pronouncement to effect that "If by eternity we mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then lives eternally who lives in the present.

Our life is as endless as our visual field lacks borders".<sup>5</sup> Reality as a whole and as a totality is timeless. The concept of time just doesn't apply to it. The world is always there and there's nothing else to say. When change ceases, the world ends. "Thus, with death the world doesn't change, but comes to an end".<sup>6</sup> It then makes no sense whatsoever to speak of temporality which, just as spatiality itself, becomes so to speak abolished.

## VI) *Conclusions*

If what I've been saying is not wholly misguided, a global conclusion we can extract is that temporality is not a feature of the world considered as a whole, *in toto*, but only (if at all) of the things which inhabit it. Temporality is a characteristic we ascribe to whatever is **in** the world, not to the world as a whole. Things are world aren't the same. The totality of things is not the world. It is taking as a basis such *tractarian* distinctions, that the vision of reality I've been trying to outline here emerges. Why do I speak of visions at all? Because I've made an effort to express myself without trespassing the limits of meaningfulness. It is not metaphysics that I wanted to do, but rather to provide conceptual clarifications. What I'm not sure of is to have escaped from it.

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<sup>5</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 5.4311 (b) (c).

<sup>6</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 6.431.