Simplicity and Analysis in Early Wittgenstein

Peter M. Sullivan

I. Introduction

This paper addresses a puzzlement naturally engendered by the following passage from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* for June 21, 1915:

> But logic as it stands, e.g. in *Principia Mathematica*, can quite well be applied to our ordinary propositions; e.g. from 'All men are mortal' and 'Socrates is a man' there follows according to this logic 'Socrates is mortal', which is obviously correct, even though I equally obviously do not know what structure is possessed by the thing Socrates or the property of mortality. Here they just function as simple objects. (NB 69)

The inference, Wittgenstein claims, is 'obviously correct'; his ignorance about its full structure is, he admits, 'equally obvious'. How is this combination of certainty and ignorance possible?

The puzzle has to do with the relation between the form on which the validity or invalidity of an argument ultimately turns and the relatively superficial patterns by reference to which we endorse or reject it. It concerns, in the first instance, a possible tension in Wittgenstein's thought. He seems to be committed to a project of analysing everyday propositions as truth-functional compounds of elementary propositions, in which reference is made only to what is ultimately, intrinsically simple. At the same time, he admits complete ignorance of how, in any particular case, this analysis would work out. So we are led to ask, first, and specifically,

1. How can he know in advance that analysis would vindicate a particular inference?

And secondly, more generally,

2. Just what does Wittgenstein suppose is going on when logical principles are applied to ordinary propositions *as if* the expressions occurring in them were simple?

If we are to find Wittgenstein's position intelligible, we need answers to both of these questions. The answers should make plain what it means to say, and with

---

European Journal of Philosophy 11:1 ISSN 0966-8373 pp. 72–88 © Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003. 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

what right it could be said, that in a given piece of reasoning admittedly complex things 'just function as simple objects'.

My approach will suggest, however, that the puzzle is not only one of interpretation, but one that arises naturally from aspects of our own practice in, and beliefs about, applying logical principles to ordinary reasoning. To take one very obvious aspect, consider our attitude to putative 'counterexamples' to established patterns of inference, such as the following spurious 'syllogisms in Barbara' (owed respectively to Lewis Carroll and Timothy Smiley):

> Men over ten feet tall are over five feet tall.
> Men over five feet tall are numerous.
> So, men over ten feet tall are numerous.
>
> Everyone who heard X's paper heard X's voice.
> Everyone who heard X's voice liked it.
> So, everyone who heard X's paper liked it.

The challenge we take such 'counterexamples' to pose is not to the validity of the forms they apparently exemplify, but rather a challenge to us to explain how exactly they fail to exemplify those valid forms. Meeting such a challenge will typically involve attributing to the argument some non-obvious complexity of structure. While that sometimes calls for more ingenuity than in the trivial cases given above, there is in general nothing very puzzling about how we should explain the invalidity of a given invalid argument. Nor is it in itself puzzling that such explanations should sometimes be available: as Frege said, we do not speak a language designed to meet the special needs of an exact science; in particular, we do not speak a language over which any purely grammatical criterion of correct inference could ever be sound. But what *is* puzzling, I think, is that we can sometimes be certain, without any obviously adequate grounds, that such an invalidating explanation is *not* available.

Unless we could, on occasion, be certain of this, deductive inference would be a less impressive epistemic instrument than it is. To know that one may be as certain of the conclusion of an inference of a given form as one is of its premises would be of relatively little use if *whether* an inference *is* of that form were always a matter of doubtful speculation. That, we trust, is not how things stand. But 'counterexamples' like those given illustrate that complexity can undermine the impression that an inference exemplifies the valid form it appears to exemplify. And complexity isn't always easy to see. Indeed, once philosophers get hold of the idea that complexity can be hidden, they start finding it everywhere. Whether they are right in any given case, or what general standards might be applied in settling any particular case, have proved to be resolutely contentious issues. But, still, some arguments strike us – justifiably, we hope – as unquestionably valid. Some of our most mundane thoughts about ordinary arguments in this way seem to manifest the same combination of certainty and ignorance that we found in Wittgenstein: we very often seem to have a legitimate certainty, regarding an acknowledged condition of which we have no very developed or settled view. If the combination of attitudes poses an interpretative puzzle about Wittgenstein, will it not also pose a non-interpretative puzzle for us?

This may well seem too quick. The problem arises for Wittgenstein as a result of his atomism and his commitment to the programme of analysis, commitments that seem to open a huge distance between superficial and real form. We, on the other hand, are not committed to any such programme. Quite the opposite. Contemporary opinion is closer to Putnam's view, that the only analyses with a chance of being right are of notions, like that of a fortnight, which no philosopher every thought interesting enough to analyse. We admit that grammatical appearances may sometimes be misleading, but not impenetrably so.

II. Wittgenstein's Problem, or Ours?

So far as it goes, and to what has so far been said, that reaction is in the right: the first, specifically epistemic question may well be specific to Wittgenstein. But his response to it, which I'll present in the final part of Section III, can be understood only in the setting of a response to the broader, second question. In this section I will present two further considerations designed to give more substance to that second question, which is so far only a vague worry. These considerations will suggest that the broader question is one that arises also for us. Both of them have to do with the kinds of things we say in explaining logic at a very elementary level.

1. The Maxim of Minimum Mutilation and Unique Analyses

The first has to do with what Quine called his 'maxim of minimum mutilation'. In applying logical principles to actual arguments we make a virtue of not pushing analysis too far. In recommending that as a maxim we presume that, in another sense, one cannot push analysis too far: that is, we presume that, by delving deeper into the structure of an argument than is necessary to establish its validity, one wouldn't undercut the results of the relatively superficial analysis.

The same presumption is evident when we explain to beginning students that, while any argument of a valid form is valid, it is not true that any argument of an invalid form is invalid. The appearance of invalidity, we explain, may result from no more than the crudity of the analytical devices applied, or a failure of ingenuity in applying them. Yet we know full well that the appearance of validity, too, may have either of these sources. What makes us think it allowable not to enter this otherwise important qualification is the conviction that, in such a case, an argument's merely apparent validity is to be traced to its merely mimicking a valid form. If more sophisticated analytical resources, or more sophistication in applying the ones we have, were to dispel the impression of validity, they would *thereby,* we take it, expose a case of mimicry.

Supporting these quite mundane thoughts is a picture according to which the various forms which an argument can be properly represented as having fall into an order along which validity is hereditary. (Several qualifications would be needed to make that remark precise, but they are all piffling, so I won't make them.) We imagine arguments, and their constituent propositions, as constituting a rationally governed domain, in which county boundaries have to trace district boundaries, with district boundaries in turn tracing parish boundaries. The picture allows that coarse-grained forms of an argument may be incomparable by the superficial to deep ordering (as, for instance, when one of them carves up only the first conjunct of a conjunction while the other carves only the second). But this picture is committed, barring infinite logical divisibility, to a single ultimate articulation. Unless that were true, deep analyses couldn't be taken to expose mimicry at a more superficial level, in just the same way that, unless the division of England into parishes were unique, one could not cite a particular parish boundary to show that a putative county boundary is spurious. Without relying on the metaphor, the commitment carried by our mundane explanations is this: if an argument *really* has a certain form, then *the real form* of the argument is a substitution instance of that form.

That commitment might well be described as a form of atomism. But for anything said so far, the atoms implicated in it need not be so very remote from words (provided that certain inflexions and such like are counted by courtesy as words). So it might be possible to own up to the commitment without fear of what went with it – in this case, an inscrutable gap between the real form of an argument and the surface patterns by reference to which we endorse it. If so, the problem would still be Wittgenstein's rather than ours.

Another passage of the *Notebooks* indicates, however, that we cannot hope for quite such a neat resolution as that.

> Or can we deal with a proposition like 'The watch is on the table' without further ado according to the rules of logic? No, here we say, for example, that no date is given in the proposition, that the proposition is only apparently… etc. etc.
> So before we can deal with it we must, so it seems, transform it in a particular way. (NB 66)

A simple example from Quine illustrates the kind of thing Wittgenstein has in mind.

> Fred saw Stromboli and it was erupting. Ginger saw Stromboli.
> So, Ginger saw Stromboli and it was erupting.

To represent this conclusion as following according to the form '$P\&Q, R \vdash P\&R$' would be an elementary mistake. And a natural way of pointing out the mistake would be to represent the argument as having instead the invalid form '$\exists t(Ft\&Et), \exists tGt \vdash \exists t(Gt\&Et)$': the first premise of the argument, we might say, is *really* an existential quantification (over times). When we say things like that, the atoms of our atomism have moved rather further away from being mere words; but not so far, I admit, as to make the distance inscrutable. So I still need to bring in the second consideration.

2. The Intuitive Explanation of Validity and the Notion of a Possible Situation

This second consideration again takes off from the very beginnings of a logic course, where we explain the notion of validity. An argument is valid, we say, if its premises *couldn't* be true without its conclusion also being true. Since this explanation is to apply to arguments in the vernacular, the modality involved in it is not to be explained syntactically. So it involves one version or another of the idea that, in any possible situation in which the premises are true, so is the conclusion. But now what notion of a possible situation is being used in this explanation? Here two considerations push in the same direction. First, we will at some point want to introduce, and preferably with an innocent face, a semantic explanation of validity as truth-preservation in all interpretations. So the notion of a possible situation initially used with meaningful arguments should equate pretty well with the notion of a possible interpretation of those same arguments read schematically. (We want to be able to say, that is, something along the following lines: it makes no difference whether we assess the truth of sentences of fixed meaning across varying situations or sentences of variable interpretation against a fixed situation.) Secondly, the initial explanation we give of validity will convey absolutely nothing unless it appeals to more than a blank and unarticulated relation of 'being true in' supposed to hold between sentences and situations. The notion of validity can be elucidated in the kind of way imagined only by appeal to implicit understanding of how the semantic complexity of a sentence *engages with* a situation, so that the sentence gets to be true or false, in a manner determined by its structured meaning, by virtue of how things are there. For both of these reasons, then, although the initial explanation of validity we give is not a syntactic one, it necessarily implicates the semantic complexity of sentences. Thus what the explanation means is something along these lines: an argument is valid if it *displays how* any situation that confers truth on all of its premises will do the same for its conclusion.

But now, if that is anything like right, we have to ask whether this explanation, which talks of 'any situation', can really mean *any* situation. The requirement for the language in which the argument is cast to 'engage with' a situation, which then confers truth or falsity on its constituent sentences, must shape or constrain the notion of a possible situation that is used here. But we also know that the significance of this language itself rests on certain contingencies. As well as the ways things might have been that render a sentence true, and those that render it false, there are ways that undermine its significance, in the sense that, had things been that way, the sentence could not have made the claim that it does, truly or falsely. That last kind of situation, it is natural to think, is not one that a sentence will 'engage with' in the way supposed by our explanation. And, if that natural thought is right, then, when the initial explanation talks of 'any situation', it must mean any situation of the first two kinds. These two together might be called, as Roger White once called them, 'the possibilities envisaged by the language'.[1]

An immediate and obvious objection here is that the above line of thought betrays a straightforward confusion – the kind of confusion there would be in maintaining that, if New York had been called 'Vienna', then Vienna would have been in the United States. According to this objection, then, all we need to do to avoid the conclusion just reached is to distinguish clearly between the truth or falsity of a sentence *as spoken in* a possible situation and its truth or falsity when assessed *with respect to* a possible situation. The fact that some parts of our language would not be significant unless such-and-such were the case does not prevent us from using that language to formulate the possibility that such-and-such should not be the case. Crudely put, certain possibilities *would have* undermined the significance of language; but since they didn't come about, they *haven't* done; and that's why we can use the language to say so. So, for instance, we can accept that, not only the fact that 'Socrates' means what it does, but also the possibility of any term meaning what that term does, depends on Socrates' having lived; and yet still point out truly that Socrates might never have lived.

This point is right as far as it goes; but I don't think it goes very far. The distinction it appeals to, while real enough, can carry less weight than is sometimes supposed. In taking account of it, we will have to be more careful in formulating the line of thought just sketched, but need not give up on it altogether. Why this is so is clearer, I think, in the case of predicates than names, so I will switch examples. On a convincing externalist view of the meaning of a kind-predicate like 'tiger', if evolution had worked out slightly differently, so that there had been no tigers, there would also have been no such thing as *being a tiger*.[2] One can accept that without immediately inferring that this minor evolutionary diversion from the actual world is a possible situation with which an argument about tigers will not 'engage', in the sense I meant above. For example, the sentence 'All tigers are ferocious' will be rendered true with respect to that situation provided that any sentence saying of an appropriate thing (in that situation) that it is a tiger but not ferocious is false (with respect to that situation); and, given the evolutionary twist we imagined, that will be so. But things might have been very much more different than that. Life might never have come out of the sludge; there might not have been anything that our chemistry could recognize as sludge; and so on, unimaginably. How is the evaluation of 'All tigers are ferocious' to proceed with respect to such a situation? In such a far-removed case, the evaluation of this sentence we just sketched would have it run, not through intelligibly false claims that Leo and Nellie and friends are tame tigers, but through the kind of nonsense involved in describing a table as bored or a lamp-post as devious. We can surely make nothing of that as an *evaluation*. If the notion of evaluation is not to reduce to that of a blank, unstructured assignment of truth-values to uninterpreted signs, the kind of possible situation in play when we raise the question of the validity of an argument about tigers must be one against which the evaluation of claims about tigers *makes sense*. Yet, at the same time, we acknowledge that those are not the only possible situations.

The immediate topics of these two considerations – covert complexity, and contingent presuppositions – are distinct, but connected in our ordinary logical thinking as much as in Wittgenstein's. Again, the connection can be made by examples familiar from introductory discussions, such as the time-worn 'Have you stopped beating your wife?'. That the presupposition of a positive answer is not cancelled by a negative answer is what led to their both being counted 'portmanteau' conjunctions. More generally, if a proposition and its apparent negation share a contingent presupposition, and so do not between them exhaust the possibilities, this is commonly taken to indicate that this apparent negation is not a true negation, and hence that the real form of the negated proposition is more complex than first appears.

I said in the Introduction that Wittgenstein faced two questions. Specifically, how can he know in any particular case that analysis would vindicate a superficially grounded judgement of validity? And more generally, just what is going on when, as he puts it, 'we apply logic, just as it stands, to ordinary propositions'? In the two parts of this section I have given reasons for thinking, first, that we also share commitments that generate the first problem, though in a more modest and tractable form; but secondly, that the second question is just as much a question for us as for Wittgenstein. That gives us some reason to try to understand the solutions Wittgenstein reached. Unfortunately, in the passages of the *Notebooks* in which Wittgenstein addressed these questions, his views are qualified, ambiguous and shifting. So the best approach is to canvas explanations independently, leaving until later the question whether any of them fits his text.

III. Four Responses to the Problem

Let us turn back, then, to what looks like the simplest kind of example. Suppose that we accept 'If Socrates was wise, then *Q*', and that we accept 'If Socrates was not wise, then $\perp$ (something-or-other false)', and that from these two we infer *Q*. In drawing that conclusion outright, rather than the weaker conclusion, '*Q*, if Socrates existed', we seem to be in some way discounting what we would acknowledge to be a possibility, that Socrates should never have lived. How can we do that? I will divide answers to this question into four. The first pair of answers insist that we can't; the second pair aim to offer different explanations of how and why we can.

1. A 'Generalized Free Logic'

According to the first of the first pair of answers, the argument I just mentioned *does* discount a real possibility, and for that reason it is invalid. I will say very little about this, for three reasons. First, it presents itself as explicitly revisionary, rather than a way of making sense of the application of logical principles that gives rise to our puzzle. Second, the kind of revision it recommends – some version or another of free logic – is too local: if the previous section was at all on the right lines, empirical predicates pose problems at least as serious as empty terms, yet there is, so far as I know, no correspondingly general notion of a free logic. The third reason is a suspicion generated by the question of what a generalized free logic would have to be like.

A free logic will not allow the inference that something is F from the premise that a is F without some additional premise, perhaps $a = a$, conventionally taken as assurance of a's existence. Now a claim that would relate to a predicate in the way that this supposedly missing premise of its referent's existence relates to a singular term would, I think, have to be tantamount to the claim that the predicate makes sense. But to make it a requirement on a valid argument that it should explicitly make this claim is disturbingly similar to other, acknowledged confusions. The general shape of these confusions is to insist that a statement of a condition without which an argument would be invalid has to be added to the premises of the argument if it is to be valid. The most familiar of these confusions is the one exposed by Lewis Carroll in his story of Achilles and the Tortoise,[3] which insists that the principle under which a conclusion is drawn must be explicitly endorsed before the conclusion can be validly drawn. A second is obliquely indicated in Wittgenstein's remark, ' "*A*" is the same sign as "*A*" ' (TLP 3.203). Given that equivocation invalidates an argument, one might imagine that validity requires us to add a premise to rule out equivocation; but if we *had* to do that, we *couldn't*, because the same question of equivocation would arise again between the new premise and what we already had – whether the '*A*' we now say in univocal is the same '*A*' as the '*A*' we used before. Similarly, if the significance of our words could not at some point be taken for granted without explicit assurance, then no additional premise could provide that assurance. These cases are not in all respects parallel; but the similarities are close enough to make me prefer to look elsewhere.

2. *The 'Official' Account of the Tractatus*

The second response is a different version of the answer that we cannot reason validly while discounting possibilities. It goes on to hold, in contrast to the first, that the argument I gave *is* valid, because it does *not* discount any possibility.

This is the view that Wittgenstein is generally reckoned to have advanced in the *Tractatus*. Against what I have so far admitted without question, this response denies that the significance of our language rests on contingencies. Or to be fussier, it allows this only in the relatively trivial guise that *which words* express a given sense is a contingent matter; it does not allow that there being any such sense to express is ever itself contingent. Correspondingly, then, it denies that any possibility would undercut the significance of what we say. Whatever the world had been like, our propositions would still engage with it, and be rendered true or false by it. David Pears has described this as the idea that our propositions have 'far-reaching' senses, which 'stretch out to the limits of the sayable', and determine a truth-value for those propositions however things might be.[4] It may not be apparent *how* they do this, but then 'the apparent form of a proposition need not be its real form', as Russell is said to have shown. Any expression which *appears* to impose a contingent presupposition on the significance of propositions in which it figures would be exposed, by some radical extension of the theory of descriptions, as not a simple expression at all.

Now I certainly do not want to deny that this picture is in the *Tractatus*. But there is surprisingly little sign of Wittgenstein's being drawn to accept it in the passages of the *Notebooks* that discuss these issues. This makes it at least worth trying out the idea that in presenting this picture of a fully articulated language, pre-equipped to cater to every possibility, Wittgenstein is doing something other than simply stating how he takes things to be with our language. So at this point I will not labour the very obvious and familiar criticisms to which this picture would be vulnerable if it were offered as a description; and I will have to wait until the other options are in to suggest that its role might be something quite different.

3. A Purely Epistemic Explanation

The second pair of answers are versions of the suggestion that we *can* discount possibilities in our reasoning: that we do so, and that we do so *with right*. The first tries to construe this right in solely epistemic terms. Any argument, it says, is presented against a background context of accepted beliefs. So a full assessment of the cogency of a piece of reasoning would have to take account, not merely of what is said in it, but of which claims belong to the unspoken background. Provided any possibility discounted in the explicit argumentation is ruled out by the background, the reasoning is, in that context, valid.

Something fairly sophisticated would have to be said to adapt this idea to hypothetical or explicitly counterfactual reasoning, but aside from that proviso it is a reasonable description of one aspect of the pragmatics of argument. As a response to the issue in hand, however, this suggestion is unstable. The important question to ask is, why background aspects of the argument should stay in the background. If it is imagined that they *could* be brought out of the shadows to figure in the explicit argumentation, then I think we have just a more concessively expressed version of the very first answer, that the argument actually presented is invalid and needs to be supplemented. But if, on the other hand, background elements *cannot* be explicitly incorporated into the argument, this merely epistemic line of thought gives us no explanation of why that should be so. It is tedious to say things that everybody knows, but perfectly practicable (a self-confirming remark).

4. A 'Relative' Notion of Simplicity

To search for an explanation of why background elements might be necessarily such, I need to shift to the last of the four responses. It is the result of extracting one strand – the best strand, I think – out of Wittgenstein's fluid and exploratory remarks on simplicity and complexity from the *Notebooks* for May and June 1915.

Paradoxically and incorrectly expressed, this last response is that complex things *are* simples, and that discounted possibilities are not possibilities. Before trying for a more accurate expression, which should remove the air of paradox, let me point to some passages in which I take this idea to be expressed.

> …complex spatial objects, for example, seem to me in some sense to be essentially things – I as it were see them as things. – And the designation of them by means of names seems to be more than a trick of language. Spatial complex objects – for example – really, so it seems, do appear as things. (NB 47, 13.5.15)

In several places Wittgenstein answers the obvious question, of what it is for them so to appear, by talking of a 'feeling' of simplicity.

> 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? (NB 49-50, 23.5.15)

Again:

> But how am I imagining the simple? Here all I can say is always ' "x" has meaning'. (NB 45, 6.5.15)
>
> What seems to be given us *a priori* is the concept: *This*. – Identical with the concept of the *object*. (NB 61, 16.6.15)

The gist of all these passages is that to be simple is to lie at the boundary where my language goes inarticulate. My meaning may be 'far-reaching', but still, it reaches just as far as it reaches. How far that is not assessed through measurement against any external standard, but is manifest in internal features of it. What most clearly indicates its limit is that, when asked to elucidate what I mean, I can do no better than to repeat it.[5] When asked, for instance, what I mean in claiming Socrates to be mortal, or equivalently what is involved in Socrates' being mortal, my only answer is: just *that* – that *Socrates* should be *mortal*. When that point is reached, even if it is reached in reference to what, from another point of view, are complex and contingent objects, I *am* dealing with simple objects, since from the perspective my language provides it will be true to say of them what Wittgenstein says of objects:

> Objects I can only *name*. Signs stand for them. I can only speak *of* them. I cannot *express* them. (TLP 3.221; also NB 51, 26-7.5.15)

So, part of the idea that is expressed in these passages is a familiar one, since it is clearly shared with the *Tractatus*. This is that the simple elements of language define a space of possibilities comprising everything that can be said in the language. What is added to this, and is apparently distinctive of the *Notebooks*, is that discounted possibilities are consigned to the background, as not figuring in this space. Or, to put it the other way round, what is missing from the *Notebooks* account, as against the picture of the *Tractatus*, is the notion of a single, all-inclusive space, generated by the intrinsically simple elements of a 'fully analysed' language.

It would be tempting, then, though it would be mistaken, to say that this view involves a merely relative notion of simplicity. Explaining why this would be a mistake will help to correct the original, paradoxical description of the proposal.

Consider, first, the suggestion that, by not appealing to the absolute anchor of a single, all-inclusive space of possibilities, the notion of validity becomes relative, so that an argument might be valid relative to one space of possibilities but invalid relative to another, wider space. Plainly that misrepresents the view we are considering. Since, on its account, the space of possibilities is fixed by the language in which the argument is formulated, one cannot bring to bear another standard of assessment without changing the object of assessment. So, in a given language, a valid argument is valid by the only standard that can be applied to it; and in that sense its assessment as valid is, not relative, but absolute.

The same kind of response is available to the inevitable follow-up objection, that this is a cheap kind of absoluteness. To be valid absolutely, this objection insists, is to be truth-preserving in *all* the possibilities there are, not just those our limited insight envisages. But again, on the view being discussed, the notions of *all* the possibilities, of *everything* that can be said, and thus of *the world*, are tied together and tied equally to the articulation of language. So the right way for the view we are considering to respond to this objection is simply to accept it. This is what Wittgenstein does in the following passage.

> It does not go against our feeling that *we* cannot analyse PROPOSITIONS so far as to mention the elements by name; no, we feel that the WORLD must consist of elements. And it appears as if that were identical with the proposition that the world must be what it is, it must be definite. Or in other words, what vacillates is our determinations, not the world. It looks as if to reject things were as much as to say that the world can, as it were, be indefinite in some such sense as that in which our knowledge is uncertain and indefinite.
>
> The world has a fixed structure. (NB 62, 17.6.15)

The objector imagined that the fixed structure of the world could be an external standard to set against the articulation of the facts as my language presents them. The response is that the limits of language and of the world are the same.[6] The statement that 'reality is limited by the totality of objects' (TLP 5.5561) is a statement of the internal relation between two formal concepts. It is not intended to provide an external, material specification of either.

In defending this position from the charge of relativism one naturally emphasizes the aspect of it that might be called its *internal absolutism*. What is not analysed, on this account, *is* simple, and for that reason *it* is not analysable. But in emphasizing that one can lose sight of its other aspect, which acknowledges that the significance of our language does indeed rest on certain contingencies, and therefore that to reason within a logical space grounded in the articulation of language is to discount certain possibilities. On the assumption I made before, that the proposition that Socrates is mortal is no more complex than it seems to be, so that what it is for that proposition to be true is precisely for *Socrates* to be *mortal*, this view presents Socrates as a fixed point in my reasoning – a fixed point in the possibilities as my language presents them. But now what does that amount to? It is not, surely, that I regard Socrates as a necessary being.

It had better not be that. If you asked me, 'Might Socrates not have existed?', I would reply in one of two ways. If I took you to be talking about what, counterfactually, might have been the case, I would straight off say 'Yes'. If, on the other hand, I took your question to be an epistemic one, suggesting that perhaps after all Socrates didn't exist, I would ask you to elaborate the doubt. The contrast between these two responses points to an important distinction. I can, as in the first response, *acknowledge* a possibility without articulating it. In that case, my way of acknowledging the possibility will exploit its not having been actual: it is only because Socrates did exist that I can acknowledge, in this non-articulating way, that he might not have done. It is this feature that logically consigns this possibility to the background of reasoning. By contrast if, for whatever reason, I am prompted to move past that bare acknowledgement, and to bring the possibility into play as one of those relevant to my reasoning, then I will need to articulate it. Further, as the second kind of response illustrates, there will be *no particular way,* set down in advance, in which I should do that. It is not, for instance, already buried in what I understand by the term 'Socrates' that the possibility of his not having existed should be articulated as the possibility of Xanthippe's having remained a spinster rather than as Plato's being still more inventive than he is credited as being. So articulating this hitherto unregarded possibility is extending my language, and in that sense involves a shift to a new language, rather than an unpacking of my already complex meaning; and so, finally, in making the move, I do not impugn the simplicity of the terms I have left behind.

The strongest support for this as a reading of Wittgenstein occurs at NB p. 63.

> In that case, then, what we mean by 'complex objects do not exist' is: It must be clear in the proposition how the object is composed, in so far as it is possible for us to speak of its complexity at all. – The sense of the proposition must appear in the proposition divided into its *simple* components –. And these parts are then actually indivisible, for further divided they would not be THESE. In other words, the proposition can then no longer be *replaced* by one that has more components, but any that has more components also does not have *this* sense.
>
> When the sense of the proposition is completely expressed in the proposition itself, the proposition is always divided into its simple

> components – no further division is possible and an apparent one is superfluous – and these are objects in the original sense.
>
> If the complexity of an object is definitive of the sense of the proposition, then it must be portrayed in the proposition to the extent that it does determine the sense. And to the extent that its composition is *not* definitive of *this* sense, to this extent the objects of the proposition are *simple*. THEY cannot be further divided. – (NB 63, 17-18.6.15)

The most important thing still to be noted about this passage is the way that its final sentence allows *a* sense in which one can talk of the composition of a simple object. An example we have already seen, and which Wittgenstein often returns to in this discussion, is that a logically simple object may still be *spatially* composite. Now since a spatially composite object exists only contingently on the cohesion of its parts, this clearly commits Wittgenstein to hold that a simple object may nonetheless be contingent.

It remains to spell out how this conception answers the two questions we began with.

The first, specifically epistemological question no longer arises in the threatening form we imagined. We distinguished (in Section II, 1) a modest and tractable version of the question, which faces us, from the sharp and intractable version to which Wittgenstein's atomistic commitments apparently give rise. That sharp version of the question depends on the assumption that the full complexity of 'the thing Socrates and the property of mortality', about which Wittgenstein confesses himself ignorant, already characterizes the sense of the proposition that Socrates is mortal, and hence stands as an ultimate determinant, but an inscrutable determinant, of the validity of arguments involving that proposition. The view described here rejects that assumption. The complexity of the thing Socrates is a determinant of the validity of arguments about him only 'to the extent [that it] is definitive of the sense' of the propositions involved, and that extent will be apparent in my grasp of, and in particular in my inferential use of, those propositions. 'All I want is only for *my meaning* to be completely analysed!' (NB 63, 17.6.15). What I remain ignorant of is 'composition [that] is *not* definitive of *this* sense', but pertains rather to any of the various ways circumstance might, by exposing to serious question the presuppositions of my present language, prompt me to articulate the situation. But what I am in that way ignorant of is not a determinant of the validity of my present reasoning, since to articulate things further in any of those ways would be to cease to reason as I do.

I have spoken only vaguely of the 'reasons' or 'circumstances' that might prompt such re-articulation, but it seems plain that these may include pressures of empirical theorizing and even straightforward empirical discoveries (e.g. that Xanthippe never married). This does not mean that the analysis of propositions ceases to be *a priori*, or becomes in any way beholden to empirical investigation of the phenomena they concern. Analysis clarifies and lays open to view the complexity of a *given* sense, and is guided only by the grasp of that sense as manifest in the use of a proposition expressing it. The 'old' non-articulating proposition in which Socrates functions as a simple, and the 'new' proposition by which I might be brought to replace it, are each of them suitable objects of analysis on that understanding. The relation between these two is the point on which empirical pressures might bear; but the relation between these two, not being a proposition at all, is not an object of analysis.

Even so, it seems fair to ask about that relation, and in particular whether the view we are discussing can accommodate any understanding of the 'old' and 'new' propositions' involving different articulations of the 'same' things or the 'same' situations. Wittgenstein's answer must be 'No'. To be a simple component of a sense is an internal feature of that component: if the components Socrates and mortality are not divided, 'then [they are] actually indivisible, for further divided they would not be THESE'. Correspondingly, to have just these components is an internal feature of the containing sense: 'no further division is possible and an apparent one is superfluous'. So it was not the hyperbole it might have seemed to describe an articulation of background possibilities that I might be brought to make as a shift to a 'new language'. What was said in the 'old' language, in which Socrates was simply named, cannot be said at all in the 'new'. The name 'Socrates' was dispensed with, not analysed. So nothing in the 'new' language expresses just that content which the name made expressible in the 'old', and no device of the 'new' language can speak at all of the *thing* Socrates. This is what is meant by 'complex objects do not exist'.[7]

But if this is right, if complex objects do not exist, how can one speak of *their* complexity? The incongruous pronoun, matched by a similarly incongruous use of 'its' in the last-quoted paragraph from NB 63 above, is an artefact of the purported stance of the discussion. Placing itself equally outside the 'old' and 'new' languages so as to compare them, and so not sharing in the articulation of reality embodied in either of them, it purports to represent what one language conceives as complex as simple by the lights of the other. The relative pronoun 'what' in the last sentence is still another example of the resulting incongruousness: it has no reference. That it has none is a consequence of the position it helps for formulate, according to which simplicity and complexity are internal, logical features of elements of representation, not external, metaphysical characterizations of what they represent. The initially paradoxical air of the summary account of this position given at the start of this section – that complex things *are* simples – also derives from that same purported stance. The stance is useful, I think, in conveying a sense of the shifting viewpoint of Wittgenstein's discussion, but it is no more than an expedient. In stating how his position responds to the second and more general of our opening questions – the question of how we should understand the application of logical principles to propositions *as if* the expressions figuring in them were simple – we should do without it, and adopt a plainer, more prosaic mode: for expressions to be such that logical principles may properly be applied to them 'as if' they were simple *is* for them to *be* simple.

IV. Conclusion

In this final section I want first to consider how this conception of simplicity helped to resolve some of the difficulties Wittgenstein was in at this stage of his work, and then to pose a question.

As an example of the first, consider this passage from NB 61:

> My difficulty surely consists in this: In all the propositions that occur to me there occur names, which, however, must disappear on further analysis. I know that such an analysis is possible, but am unable to carry it out completely. In spite of this I certainly seem to know that if the analysis were completely carried out, its result would have to be a proposition which once more contained names, relations, etc. In brief it looks as if in this way I knew a form without being acquainted with a single example of it.
> I know that the analysis can be carried further, and can, so to speak, not imagine its leading to anything different from the species of propositions I am familiar with. (NB 61, 16.6.15)

Paraphrased so as to heighten its seeming absurdity Wittgenstein's thought here runs: I know how *real* names must function, *viz*. precisely as those familiar expressions do function which are *not* real names. The problem is resolved by admitting that those familiar expressions are indeed real names, and the only model we have for what a name should be.

The second example concerns a much more central issue.

> We portray the thing, the relation, the property, by means of variables and so show that we do not derive these ideas from particular cases that occur to us, but possess them somehow *a priori*.
> For the question arises: If the individual forms are, so to speak, given me in experience, then I surely cannot make use of them in logic; and in that case I cannot write down an x or a φy. But this I surely cannot avoid at all.
> An incidental question: Does logic deal with certain classes of functions and the like? And if not, what is the import of Fx, φz, *and so on* in logic? *Then these must be signs of a more general import!*
> There doesn't after all seem to be any setting up of a kind of logical inventory as I formerly imagined it. (NB 66, 19.6.15)

> But if there are simple objects, is it correct to call both the signs for them and those other signs 'names'?
> Or is 'name' so to speak a *logical* concept? (NB 52, 30.5.15)

To the question, whether logic deals with 'certain classes of functions and the like', Wittgenstein needed to answer 'No', in opposition to Russell. Russell had taken propositions of logic to be generalizations; but first, he had given no coherent account of their range of generality; and secondly, he had given no account at all of how this squares with logic's *a priority*. For both reasons Wittgenstein repudiated Russell's understanding of the task of a logical philosophy as being to provide an inventory of the forms of the basic constituents of the world. But having abandoned that notion Wittgenstein was left with a dual task, both of explaining with what right logic can trade in forms that are not derived from examples, and of explaining away the attractiveness of the Russellian view. The conception I have been sketching allowed Wittgenstein to meet both of these demands at once: to hold that a *name* is a sign for a *simple*, but to regard both of these as logical rather than ontological concepts – that is, as concepts tied to patterns of inference rather than to classes of application.

A final question for discussion. If the understanding of simplicity which Wittgenstein arrived at in 1915 was such a good idea, why did he give it up in the *Tractatus*? A very tempting suggestion is that he didn't. So far as concerns the issues I have been talking about, what Wittgenstein says about the ultimately articulated language of the *Tractatus* is what, on the *Notebooks* account, holds of *any* language *in so far as it remains one's language*. The notion of an ultimately articulated language can thus serve the role of a heuristic limit, without any supposition that it is a limit that can be reached. This seems to me the right way to think about some of the central claims of the *Tractatus*. But I cannot maintain here that it can be more than part of the truth. There are other pressures on the notions of simplicity, complexity and analysis in the book, and it would make sense to talk confidently of a limit notion only if all of these pressures pushed in the same direction. The central example of a distinctively Tractarian doctrine that does not meet this condition is the demand that elementary propositions should be logically independent. So one question that our discussion poses very sharply is the question, why Wittgenstein should ever have accepted that demand.[8]

Peter M. Sullivan
Department of Philosophy
University of Stirling
FK9 4LA
Scotland
UK
p.m.sullivan@stir.ac.uk

NOTES

[1] White 1974: 25.

[2] Roughly, because there would be no such thing as being of the same kind as *these* animals actually called 'tigers'.

[3] Carroll 1977: 431–4.

[4] Pears 1987: 72–4.

[5] This is an idea that had a continuing influence in Wittgenstein's thought. Cf. Wittgenstein 1977: 27: 'The limit of language shows itself in the impossibility of describing

the fact that corresponds to a proposition (is its translation) without simply repeating the proposition. (Here we have to do with the Kantian solution to the problem of philosophy.)'

[6] It is, to say the least, hard to be sure whether it is more than coincidence that this theme (that of the resolution of the opposition between realism and idealism attempted at TLP 5.6) first appears in the *Notebooks* in the same month as the account of simplicity that we are considering. The connection Wittgenstein later drew with 'the Kantian solution to the problem of philosophy' (see note 5) suggests that it was no coincidence.

[7] The position described dictates no unique answer to the converse question, whether what is expressed in the 'new' language is expressible in the 'old'. It seems compatible with all that Wittgenstein says to imagine that the name 'Socrates' should be dispensed with in favour of a description already formulable within the 'old' language – 'Xanthippe's husband' – so that the 'new' language is strictly a restriction of the 'old'. But I think it is plain that the kind of shift Wittgenstein had principally in mind would involve an expansion of the language, and for simplicity I have conformed the body of the discussion to that model.

[8] Remote ancestors of this paper were given as talks some years ago at Cambridge University and at Trinity College Dublin. I am grateful for sceptical comments, especially those of Michael Potter and James Levine, which forced me to rethink various parts of the discussion. Thanks also to Ian Proops, for discussion of the questions whether, and how, analysis is responsive to empirical discovery. The paper was completed during research leave provided by the University of Stirling and the Arts and Humanities Research Board; my thanks to them both.

REFERENCES

Carroll, L. (1977), *Symbolic Logic*, ed. W.W. Bartley III (Brighton: Harvester).

Pears, D. (1987), *The False Prison*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

White, R. (1974), "Can whether one proposition makes sense depend on the truth of another? (*Tractatus* 2.0211)", in G. Vesey, ed., *Understanding Wittgenstein* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

Wittgenstein, L., NB = *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

Wittgenstein, L., TLP = *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933).

Wittgenstein, L., (1977), *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Oxford: Blackwell).