**Wittgensteinian Facts as Ultimate Items of Tractarian Ontology?**

According to JoséZalabardo’s reading, Wittgenstein in *TLP* solves the metaphysical problem of the unity of facts, i.e. the problem of how their unity arises from the manifold of their constituents, by holding that

(1) Facts ‘should not to be construed as compounds. They don’t arise from the combination of constituents. They are ultimate, indivisible units.’ (p. 14)

The fact that Pavarotti sings, for example, is not a compound. Consequently, Zalabardo holds, Pavarotti and the property of singing are not components:

(2) Objects (properties and relations) are ‘features of facts’ (p. 19),

they are common characteristic marks of classes of facts. Zalabardo moreover holds that, as a consequence

(3) ‘Facts are the only ultimate items of Tractarian ontology.’ (p. 17)

With his intriguing proposal, Zalabardo has both interpretative and theoretical aims and I will similarly discuss both aspects of Zalabardo’s Wittgenstein. Concerning the interpretation, while there is room for challenging that Wittgenstein endorsed theses (1) and (2) (see Horwich’s commentary), for the sake of argument I will grant that Zalabardo is right on this. I will instead argue that maybe (3) does not need to follow in Wittgenstein’s reasoning (§1). Regarding the theoretical import, Zalabardo holds that Wittgenstein’s proposals might not work in the end, but still ‘advance our understanding of the problems in important ways’ (p. 2). I will show that there is room to think that this is not really the case (§2).

1. **Are theses (1)-(3) a Wittgensteinian solution to the problem of unity?**

Wittgenstein talks about the world in two very different portions of *TLP*: in 1s, where the world is, as Zalabardo himself maintains, in the traditional fashion, the totality of facts (1.1), each independent from the others (1.21). As Black puts it, the world as a totality is a ‘mosaic of atomic facts, of which any selection might be imagined removed without detriment to the remainder’ (1971: 28). In 1s, the German for ‘totality’ is *die Gesamtheit* and die Gesamtheit does not pose a problem of unity: it is simply a collection, a list, a mere aggregate of all the facts. But Wittgenstein goes back to the world in 6.45:

**6.45** To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole—a limited whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The English translation, in using here a different word, ‘whole’ rather than ‘totality’, respects the German. For, as it has been noted (Cahill 2017: 102) we have in 6.45 a different German word for the world as a whole, *das Ganze*. The world as a whole is not a collection, but a unity, an *organic unity*, as Cahill maintains. It is not clear why the feeling of the world as a whole is mystical, but the key to understand this resides, according to Ramsey, in the ‘limited’, not in the idea that the whole as such is an illegitimate totality:

I do not think we can follow Mr. Russell in deducing from this that the totality of values of x is mystical … I think that “limited” gives the key to the sentence quoted above. The mystical feeling is the feeling that the world is not everything, that there is something outside it (1923: 478)

Now if there is a world as a whole to be distinguished from the world as a mere totality, then it is natural to think that also this whole, this unity, poses a problem of unity similar to the problem facts pose: how does the unity of the whole world arise from the manifold of its constituents?[[2]](#footnote-2)

One option at this point is to think that the world is simply a collection and the world as a whole is nothing real, the mere product of how we see the world, how we feel it mystically. But if this is the case, why not dissolve the problem for facts in the same way, by denying that there are facts beyond a collection of their components and facts as unities are merely the product of how we see them? If, with Zalabardo, we take Wittgenstein’s attempts to solve the problem of the unity of facts as a contribution to a legitimate enterprise, it then seems that there is the world as a whole to be felt mystically, to be viewed for what it is, just as there are facts. It then seems that we need to solve the problem of unity for the whole world, just as we need to solve the problem for facts.

We have then two further options: the second is to hold that the problem of unity for the whole world is to be solved in a way different from the way envisaged for facts, the third is to hold instead that the problem of unity is to be solved homogenously for the whole world and facts. Zalabardo does not touch upon all this, but the second of these options seems hard to defend: what would justify a different approach to the problem of unity for different unities?

If we embrace the third option, we are then to maintain that Wittgenstein solves the metaphysical problem of the unity of the whole world by holding, in line with thesis (1) above, that

(1\*) The whole world should not to be construed as a compound. It is an ultimate, indivisible unit.

Put differently, for Wittgenstein the world as an organic unity would have to be prior to its components, i.e. facts, as the propositions in 1s tell us, and then

(2\*) Facts are features of the whole world,

in the same way as objects are features of facts. We should note at this point that, as Zalabardo stresses, in *TLP* facts exist, they make up the world, they are part of the fundamental ontology. Then, even if the world as an organic unity is a fundamental unit, as in accordance with (1\*), still in Zalabardo’s interpretation we can speak about facts in our ontology, as shown by the propositions in 1s Zalabardo discusses, so that from (1\*) we do *not* obtain that according to Wittgenstein

(3\*) The whole world is the only ultimate item of Tractarian ontology.

Similarly, it seems, even though Zalabardo were right that Wittgenstein maintained (1) and (2), he could still hold that objects belong to the Tractarian ontology, contra thesis (3), but in accordance, as least prima facie, with a large number of propositions in *TLP*[[3]](#footnote-3): objects combine into facts (2.01),[[4]](#footnote-4) seem to be object of knowledge (2.0123), have a nature, internal properties (2.01231) and a form (2.0141), they make up the substance of the world (2.021), they are the subsistent (2.027).[[5]](#footnote-5) Stated differently, it seems that Wittgenstein can maintain, as in Zalabardo’s interpretation, that objects are features of facts, without having to also maintain that objects do not belong to the ultimate Tractarian ontology. Just to consider one possibility, maybe facts are prior to objects at one level of explanation, such as the level of truth, but this does not exclude that objects might be the ultimate itemsat another level of explanation, for example when it comes to the substance of the world, and the whole world ultimate for yet another level of explanation.

Thus, to restate, we have three options. The first is that there is nothing like the world as a whole. But then why are there facts? The second is that we should treat the problem of unity for different unities differently. But what justifies this disparity in approach? The third option is that the priority of the whole over its parts does not prevent the parts from being items in the Tractarian ontology, and then (3) does not need to follow from (1) and (2) in Wittgenstein’s reasoning. This does not mean that Zalabardo is wrong: while he traces the ideas back to *TLP*, he admits that he is not claiming that Wittgenstein unambiguously endorsed theses (1)-(3), he is only maintaining that *TLP* has these ideas present. Moreover, it is in general difficult, if at all possible, to square different portions of *TLP* and maybe they should be kept apart. Still, 6.45 seems to show that Zalabardo could hold that Wittgenstein claims theses (1) and (2) without having to explain away the various propositions that seem to show that Wittgenstein does not endorse (3).

1. **Do theses (1)-(3) advance our understanding of the problem of unity?**

Zalabardo maintains that the view he is attributing to Wittgenstein, i.e. the conjunction of theses (1)-(3), among others, is an appealing position, deserving further scrutiny, whether or not Wittgenstein endorsed it. He claims moreover that he does not think that it is ultimately successful, but still that some of Wittgenstein’s ideas advance our understanding of the problems in important ways. Now theses (1), (2) and (3) do solve the metaphysical problem of the unity of facts, simply because, as Zalabardo stresses, being that facts are already unities from the start, there is nothing left to unite. But are the problems all solved, or at least did we advance in our understanding of the problems? There is room to think that we still are exactly where we were.

What does thesis (3) mean, exactly, in particular what does ‘ultimate’ mean here? Zalabardo holds that according to Wittgenstein everything which is not a fact has to be ‘construed out’ (p. 17) of facts, so that objects are not self-standing items. This leaves it open that objects exist, although not at the ultimate level, but Zalabardo denies this, as he also maintains that objects, properties and relations, as features of facts as in accordance with thesis (2), are identified ‘in thought, not in reality’ (p. 19). Still, Zalabardo continues, relations of resemblance and similarity between facts constitute the ‘metaphysical reality’(p. 20) that underlies our talk of the objects. Thus in the metaphysical reality we have facts, indivisible basic unities, and relations of resemblance and similarity among these indivisible unities. Of course, given his purposes, Zalabardo could not go into the details of the notion of *resemblance* or *similarity*[[6]](#footnote-6) and neither can we here, but we seem to immediately incur a problem: while the traditional problem is what glue objects, properties and relations together in such a way that we get a fact, here we need to understand what allows us to start from an indivisible unity and, despite its indivisibility, to detect similarities and resemblance which are not based on what objects, properties and relations compose the relevant facts. For objects, properties and relations are not prior to facts. Similarly, objects are common features of classes of facts, but what allow us to group together these indivisible unities in classes, given, again, that we cannot rely on their components, as there are none? These problems do not seem any easier than the original one.

Zalabardo does have an answer to these questions: our faculty of grasping what is shown to us bring facts to consciousness and the very same faculty ‘enables us to discern similarities between the facts that we grasp’ (p. 20). We simply grasp[[7]](#footnote-7) facts and individuate common features, they are shown to us, they are given. If we were trying to solve the original problem of unity, this solution would be tantamount to holding that there are objects, properties and relations and that they glue together in a fact is simply shown to us, we simply grasp this. It is difficult to *grasp* how this solution constitutes advancement in our understanding of the problem of the unity of facts: if unity is simply shown to us, why did we have a problem in the first place?

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1. With Zalabardo, I use the Pears/McGuinness English translation for these propositions. Apart from a passage below, see footnote 5, for our purposes nothing relies on the translation we choose. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cahill maintains: ‘To speak of the world in the terms proper to being a totality, then, is to speak of it in terms of discreet, contingently related facts, events and entities, while to talk of feeling the world as a limited whole is to talk of a feeling where one imagines the world as an organic unity, in which everything has its place, where everything is as it should be, must be, necessarily … to view the world as a limited whole is to imagine there being no genuinely discrete events or entities in the first place’ (2017: 102). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is true that *object* is a pseudo-concept, but that is true of *fact* too (4.1272). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I avoid also introducing the notion of state of affairs, as nothing relies on that. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *das Bestehende*, *the existent* in the Ogden/Ramsey translation. For Zalabardo’s alternative explanation of these propositions, see his 2015, §4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on this, see Zalabardo 2015, §4.6; §4.9; §4.10. The point we are making in the text still stands, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on this, see Zalabardo 2015, §4.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)