

Essay

**THE SEMANTIC HORROR VACUI,
THE FIRST TWENTY FOUR HOURS**

UDC 811.111'37

Djordje Vidanović

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro

Abstract. *This short essay is an excerpt from a more comprehensive text dealing with the fundamental issues in semantics such as the relationship between language and reality and the degrees of truth that this relationship may achieve.*

2005-01-01 06:16

If the world is really the totality of facts, not of things, then one of my nightmares has become true. I've always been afraid of nothingness in the sense of there not being something tangible, something taking up space and occurring in time. I've always had nightmares about waking up and finding that all that I face should be only some flimsy textual environment, some dreamy and elusive framework that can be nourished merely by imagination and my faulty memory. Out there, in my lukewarm nightmares, I would have nothing to lean on, nothing to cling to and feel its physicality.

Only some moments ago, however, quite inanely, I decided to re-read the beginning of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and found out one more time, just as I dreaded, that the world *is* determined by facts, and facts alone. And I read, again to my utter frustration, that the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.

Even though I was quite aware that early Wittgensteinian philosophy expounded in the *Tractatus* could not be taken as a rule-of-thumb to help my orientation in the maze of meaning scattered around us, I still thought that Wittgenstein's insights would be a very good point of departure for a discussion on meaning begun from scratch.

2005-01-01 16:20

Thus, if the totality of facts determines what is the case and what is not the case, is there any reality apart from facts which are, in my book, only our *interpretations* of reality? (The answer to this question has been of utmost importance to me and lots of things in my life have been influenced in one way or another by what I thought to be the proper answer at the moment.) Of course, Wittgenstein goes on to say that what is the case--a fact--is the existence of states of affairs. And that states of affairs are nothing else but a set or combination of "objects".

Finally he mentions objects stating that there are objects in this world. But my question has always been concerned with the *relation of facts and objects*. Of course, I am aware that there is some connection between facts and objects. Otherwise we'd live in a chaotic world that has loose borders and no definite shape. This is so because a plausible definition of facts implies their intersubjective validation or our mutual agreement that facts somehow refer to objects, or things. This has to be so as it is next to impossible to imagine a normal day in which we speak about facts, while at the same time these facts refer only to non-existent entities (non-objects).

Of course, my anxiety is not alleviated much by Wittgenstein's reluctant mention of objects. I have in mind his tacit assumption that *facts* have to be objects, or things, *in ultima linea*. However, I have serious doubts as to the nature of this relation. I've always thought that the inevitable intersubjectivity of our great mutual (social) mind is populated by a giant parasite. We may dub this parasite *imagination, subjectivity, the self, individuality, personal case history*, or some other nickname. My doubt could even stem from the Tractatus where Wittgenstein says that we picture facts ourselves, and that *our subjective pictures are only a model of reality*.

2005-02-01 01:32

This picture of reality is laid against reality like a measure, Wittgenstein goes on to say. He hastily adds that a picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false, thus building much too perfect a world in which truth or falsehood will always be obvious. That is the exact point that has troubled me in the past: the black and white quality of Wittgensteinian world portrayed in the Tractatus.

Therefore, if the pictorial description of the Tractatus were correct there really would not be much sense in questioning our representations of reality and everything would appear as it is. Not infinite, but describable and offering only one of the senses of reality. Of course, it is only to be expected at this point to say that *a logical picture of facts is a thought*. The problem starts when I start to think about the necessity of *always* having *logical thoughts* because Wittgenstein insists that we cannot ever think of anything that is illogical as this would mean that we actually think in an illogical manner (something banned in the perfect world of the Tractatus?).

Do my problems make sense? Is my suspicion that we often think illogically founded in everyday life? Am I deluded when I think that our pictorial representations of the world are *not* sufficient to describe the fuzzy set making up the totality of objects that populate our world?

Such issues generate doubts in me. I cannot accept the picture of the world proposed by Wittgenstein in the Tractatus, nor can I accept any other theory that strives to establish

a correspondence between our verbal representation of reality and reality itself by breaking down propositions regarding reality (be they pictorial or verbal) to atomic elements that are by necessity true facts relating to different aspects of reality.

My dilemma remains as I still strongly believe that referential semantics (attempting to do exactly the above stated) *must* be part of meaning.

2005-02-01 21:20

This morning I emphasized that referential semantics must be part of meaning, not meaning itself. It would be much easier to understand and solve the problem of meaning in language and in life in general if the black and white world of the Tractatus actually existed. But, as this is not the case, and the descriptions have to be the way reality is, a kind of chiaroscuro, then we have to find a way to bridge the gap between the wishful oversimplifications in our descriptions (such as Wittgenstein's atomic propositions) and reality.

For the sake of clarity, let me outline the situation. On one hand we have our own perception of reality and our own ideas (interpretations) of what reality is for us (meaning humans in general, and our own selves in particular), while on the other hand there is one monolithic block that we, for lack of a better name, call 'reality'. In order to understand each other and communicate we have to relate to reality by way of language.

As we relate to the reality around us via language, then by definition our descriptions of reality cannot be veridical, and are thus deceitful. Alas, we allow ourselves the luxury of forgetting this simple fact. To make matters worse, we indulge in completely obliterating even the smallest shreds of doubt as to the impossibility of a truthful account of reality by way of language. As it is, and has always been, the humankind has been involved in a deception of colossal magnitude from times immemorial by nourishing and promoting truth as described above, instead of revealing that such truth is but a detriment to cognition and, in actuality, a negative and even a harmful memetic creation perpetuated blindly by the madding crowds of both the aristos and the non-aristos.

REFERENCES

1. Wittgenstein, L. (1974) Tractatus logico-Philosophicus, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

THE SEMANTIC *HORROR VACUI*, THE FIRST TWENTY FOUR HOURS

Djordje Vidanović

Ovaj esej deo je obimnijeg teksta koji se bavi fundamentalnim pitanjima u semantici kao što je, na primer, odnos između jezika i stvarnosti, kao i stepenom istine koji taj odnos može da ostvari.