

A NOTE ON THE INDISCERNIBILITY OF FACTS AND PROPOSITIONS

From morning to the next morning we incessantly spew sentences like,

1. that book is red,

and

2. this book is brown.

Early in life we get to know that these, and all those that are similar to these, are declarative sentences; and soon after our initiation to philosophy we are instructed that declarative sentences *express* propositions, and are *hooked* to facts. Further, those of us who are blessed to be better instructed are even indoctrinated that they express *propositions*, and are hooked to *facts*. These better instructed being modern Schoolmen deriving their inspiration from that anti-Semitic semanticist Frege and his ilk, their pupils being bewitched by their professional priggishness, started believing that the conjunction here could not possibly be idempotent. This belief, conjoined to their conviction that the Schoolmen clearly aim at semantic rigour, and cautiously refrain from sneaky rhetoric, sharpened their cognitive faculties to the extent of their being able to tell the tweedledom of facts from the tweedledee of propositions. The less literate Wittgenstein, of course, invariably took one for the other. My reading of the *Tractatus* to mean this — or, to make him mean this — may be due to my illiteracy, but it shows how for the not so well-tutored the indiscernible and the identical are indiscernible and identical. That apart, as *doing* philosophy — as distinct from *living* a philosophy — is to attempt at a conversion of others to one's point, what I am at here amounts to deschooling the Schoolmen and their students so that they may see things the way I see. The foregoing is my first point in that direction.

In order to talk about any entity we need to have an expression referring to that entity; this constitutes the

conditio sine qua non of minimum strength, for isolating that entity from other entities. Naming, thus, is as much a prologue to discourse as it is to hanging. Now, how do we refer to a fact or a proposition? The answer, obviously, is: by nominalising the sentence which is supposed to express that proposition, or hooked to that fact. Thus

3. *that this table is brown.*

is supposed to name the entity which (2) above is hooked to, and also the entity which it is supposed to express. Further, it is *not* the *token* in (3), but the (3)-*type* that is assumed to be discharging these *twin* functions. This is fair, for otherwise we will end up in a muddle; the reasons for such a prospect are obvious. At least this much is obvious that but for that assumption, we will be left with nothing to determine the role which a given inscription of (3) is supposed to perform. Anyhow, a muddle is evaded, all right — but only to end up with a dilemma. As there is just *one name type* and *two nominata*, all our talk about facts and propositions is multivocal, *or else* facts and propositions is multivocal, *or else* facts and propositions are one and the same. This however, is *not* a dilemma *for me*, (nor was it to Wittgenstein), as I (we) cheerfully accept the latter alternant; but it *is* one to all those to whose hearts the dual-role semantics is dear, and also to all those who want to run facts (things) parallel to propositions (concepts). *They* will have to find a way out; if not, they will have to *reconcile* themselves to ambiguous discourse. The latter, for them, is a foreclosed option — for, if they go for it, they will be indulging in a teleological contradiction. After all, their aim is to bring precision into discourse about language. Hence, they will have to opt for the former.

As a way out one might reconstrue the notion of naming so as to make it comprehend what are called *definite descriptions*. It is possible to spin expressions like

4. the fact to which the sentence 'this table is brown' is hooked,
and

5. the proposition which the sentence 'this table is brown' expresses.

The expressions (4) and (5) *are* different. True; they are not tokens of the same type, nor are they of the same type. And we may be able to spell-out their difference with the required accuracy. But the propositions characterising their difference do not neither individually or in conjunction — guarantee that they are *not* referring to the same entity, nor do they "entail" that they *do* refer to *two* distinct entities. Whence, reconstruing the notion of naming to hit at a solution to the problem at hand is no more than a futile exercise. Further, (4) and (5) have an unpleasant feature; they are *abstract descriptive phrases*. To clarify what these creatures are I offer a couple of definitions (which, I hope, need not be — in the present context — more rigorously formulated).

6. An expression is *normal* if, and only if, (a) it is a referring expression, and (b) each member of the set of the sub-expressions of that expression are *used*.
- 6.1 An expression is a *sub-expression* of another if, and only if, the former is a meaningful unit of speech, and both the expressions are meaningful units of speech in the same language.
7. A descriptive phrase is *concrete* if, and only if, there exists a *true identity sentence* in which the other half is composed of a normal expression, such that both the expressions, as well as the identity sentence, are expressions of the same language.

From this it should be evident that in order to defend our ability to do things satisfactorily with (4) and (5), we are *required* to have expressions the paucity of which led us to spin (4) and (5). If we can fill-in the schemata

8. (4) is ...

9. (5) is ...

by two distinct normal expressions with different referents, those expressions themselves would have been sufficient for the purpose to meet which (4) and (5) are construed. In addition to all this, (4) and (5) are question-begging, because to assign a truth-value to

10. (4) = (5)

we need to know *whether* facts and propositions are the same or different. Their difference is *not established* from the falsity of (10); on the contrary their difference is *assumed* to guarantee the falsity of (10).

An alternative way out might be based on *causal* explanations. It might be argued that the fact

that this table is brown

is caused — in a suitably specified sense of the term — by the carpenter who made it, whereas the proposition

that this table is brown

could not possibly be thought of being causally so conditioned by carpenters.¹ But — I fail to comprehend — why carpenters should not be causally efficacious on propositions too! Why should propositions, like the Platonic furniture, be beyond the reach of the mortal carpenter's adze, brush, and taste? True, the carpenter did choose to paint this table brown, and thereby caused the fact that this table is brown. But, then, he also chose to make the proposition that this table is brown true. This is to say that his choice is the cause of this true proposition, or — variantly — the truth of this proposition. It is not denied that he could have gone for green (or some other colour so that our friend Shah may not mistake it for black), whence it would not have been a fact that this table is brown; then he could have caused the fact that this table is green. Now, can it be denied that had he done so, the proposition that this table is brown would not have been true, or that the proposition that this table is green would have been true? Moreover, his causing the fact in question, and his causing the true proposition in question, are *not* two distinct acts; they are one and the

same. Which carpenter does double the work for the same wages!

At this stage my original position, I am afraid, stands in need of a revision. Earlier I maintained that facts and propositions are indiscernible; and what emerged from the scrutiny above is that true propositions are indiscernible from facts. Thus the need for a modification of my earlier position — but not to weaken it, only make it more precise. And in this attempt Wittgenstein's distinction between *facts* and *cases* comes handy.² The set of cases is a proper subset of the set of facts; and members of the former set, and the members of the latter set have actuality and possibility as their respective differentia. Isomorphically, the set of true propositions is a proper subset of the set of propositions. Here the parity is perfect. So my revised position can be formulated as: propositions are indiscernible from facts, and true propositions from cases.

Nobody should try to see my Achilles' ankle here (at least). I am explicitly cautioning, for it is tempting to rush to the conclusion that the preceding paragraph goes against the thesis which it is intended to extend. It might be argued that we speak of propositions being true (false), and we speak of facts being actual (possible); so here we have a pair of properties using which we can discern facts from propositions. I suggest that those who would rush with that — or a similar — argument may pause a while, and consider whether to say that a proposition is true is *different* from saying that the fact which is supposed to be the binary of that proposition is indeed actual. These could as well be alternative ways of doing the same, namely to make intelligible our linguistic behaviour of assenting and dissenting. Being equipowered, one of them ought to be sufficient for whatever purpose the other is wanted. If you owe me ten bucks, you can pay me in two fivers or in one tenor; not that I would decline your offer to pay in both — yet, I would suggest that you need not pay more than you need to pay. The minimum requirements of semantics need not be determined by the way in which semantic terms have been

used *conventionally*. Conventionally we have been using the binaries *true* (false), and *actual* (possible). But the nature of the issue at hand is such that only one of them is needed to handle it; the other is redundant. I am suggesting that we better go digital.

Even if all this convinces one, another may point out that though facts and propositions are indiscernible in the sense that their difference cannot be characterised, collapsing the distinction between them — as I did attempt to collapse — is a little unwarranted, and that it is unwarranted at least on two grounds. If my ability to anticipate is not poor, these would be: first, the sense in which I am taking discernibility — either in my sense of the term, or in a more inclusive sense — is not precisely characterisable, it is all the same *conceivable*. Contra these, I would like to point out that characterisability is not a strong requirement at all; indeed, it is the minimum that is required in order to be able to rationally believe that two entities are different. Thus, I am not taking discernibility in any exclusive sense. In fact, I have *not even* given a criterion by stipulating which we can tell whether they are discernible or indiscernible. All that I have been labouring at here is to point out that some such criterion is in order, and that whatever might be the criterion that one intends to tender, it certainly requires two distinct normal concrete expressions — one having its referent in the realm of facts, and the other in the abode of propositions. My point is that there is no way of having such expressions.

Characterisability is not one thing, and conceivability another. Non-characterisable conceivability is a trick — a trick with which too many philosophers for far too long have been cheating. While relaxing in my deck-chair I can conceive myself to be squaring circles; but what does that amount to! — not even that I too am capable of daydreaming, I suppose. The conceivable-but-not-characterisable is illusory, say like the skills of the unproductive.

The impasse involved in a characterisation of the (hypostatized) discernibility of facts and propositions induces

me to believe in their indiscernibility. And as the indiscernibles are identical (there are innumerable arguments convincing us of this, so I need not add another), I am tempted to take

facts are propositions

as a tautology. *If* this is true, then it has far reaching consequences, two of which I shall try to mention. First, we need to *rethink* about a whole range of topics in semantics; and in our rethinking we need to drop, once for all, the dual-role semantics (or semantic dualism). This may not appeal to many. For instance, the versatile Kelkar³ thinks that any single role semantics (or semantic monism) is bound to be a "hand-to-mouth" affair. Admitted, but *that* is all that we need; and wanting more than that, semantic dualists are — like capitalists — attempting to thrive on a continuous conversion of wants into needs.

I have barely stated my first argument towards fusing facts and propositions and thereby simplifying semantics. In *doing* philosophy to give all the arguments at a stretch is as undesirable as it is to field in a battle all the divisions at a time. If my first argument is destroyed, I will deploy the next two. Meanwhile I will be content with pointing out the second of the consequences that I said the fusion of facts and propositions has. And it is: a totality of facts is supposed to uniquely determine an ontology, and a totality of propositions an ideology. Now, two totalities are discernible if, and only if, their constituents are discernible. Then, it follows that ontology and ideology are indiscernible; thus, ontology *is* ideology. The credibility of this becomes obvious if those happen to be propositions of what are called social sciences. Otherwise it may remain there as a nebulous truism until its inherent dynamics turn into a dangerous cloud threatening our own being.

NOTES

1. In fact that was the point of Strawson — that *Guru and Govind* of several neophytes in the Indo-Gangetic plain. He made it in a conversation, and I do not know whether he would stick to it in the light of my objections here (and then), for the conversazione shifted to a different and totally unconnected topic.
2. See my: *A Survey of Wittgenstein's Theory of Meaning*, Calcutta, 1965.
3. He made that remark in the conversazione referred to in fn. 1.