Atomism in Philosophy

Logical Atomism and Wittgenstein

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Logical atomism and Wittgenstein

Annalisa Coliva

Notoriously, Wittgenstein endorsed a form of logical atomism in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Key to his defence of atomism was the idea that simple objects (T2.02) must exist in order for names to have meaning (T3.202, 3.21-3.22, 3.203, 4.0311). Names mean objects, which, in their turn, are related to one another to form states of affairs (T2.01, 2.0121, 2.0272-2.032). Propositions,[[1]](#endnote-1) in the *Tractatus*, are ultimately juxtapositions, or concatenations of names (T3.1432, 4.22), which manage to depict states of affairs (T4.01, 4.021). They do so thanks to the fact that their component parts stand for objects (T3.22, 4.0311) and that they share with reality the same logical form (T4.12-4.1211). That is to say, the combinatorial possibilities of objects among themselves, and of their names, match one another (T4.04). According to the *Tractatus*,the existence of simple objects is thus necessary to guarantee the possibility of propositions – that is, the possibility of there being *pictures* of states of affairs (T2.1-2.225) – whose truth or falsity can only be determined by comparing them with reality (T4.05-4.06). Hence, the existence of simple objects is required to guarantee the possibility of sense (*Sinn*) within the framework of the picture theory that Wittgenstein endorsed in the *Tractatus*. As he put it:

Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

In that case *we could not sketch any picture of the world* (true or false). (T 2.021-2.0212, emphasis added)

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That is, for Wittgenstein, logical atomism secured the possibility of their being propositions capable of representing reality, which could be made true or false by the latter. The opposite picture – that is, that propositions were not anchored to reality directly, but only to one another – was simply rejected as failing at objectivity and therefore at representationality.

While the existence of simple elements that could guarantee names’ meaning, and ultimately the very possibility of sense, was clearly required by the semantics of the *Tractatus*, their nature was left in the dark. That spurred a heated discussion among interpreters concerning their identity.[[2]](#endnote-2) Some scholars defended the idea that they were sense data,[[3]](#endnote-3) or objects of direct experience (thus likening Wittgenstein’s and Russell’s forms of atomism),[[4]](#endnote-4) while others defended the view that they were ultimately physical entities – if not mid-size physical objects, at least the building blocks of reality identified by physics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Still other scholars opted for the idea that the notion of object in the *Tractatus* is actually formal and hence that it escaped any ontological determination.[[6]](#endnote-6) Reaching no consensus, the controversy was later abandoned. Thus, scholars at least implicitly agreed with David Pears’ injunction to follow the ‘golden rule to treat as peripheral the questions that [Wittgenstein] himself treats as peripheral’.[[7]](#endnote-7) For all Wittgenstein cared about, in the *Tractatus*, was the overall function simple objects played with respect to the possibility of meaning, not the ontological issue of determining their identity.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein revisits the issue. This time, however, he is critical of atomism and of the key thought behind it in the *Tractatus*. In fact, he thinks that his early atomism was the outcome of a fatal mistake concerning the meaning of names. Namely, the identification of a name’s meaning with its bearer (T3.203), such that if the bearer did not exist, then the name would lack a meaning (and in fact would no longer be a symbol in the language but merely a sign).

Wittgenstein’s critique starts at *Philosophical Investigations* §38 and occupies about forty passages.[[9]](#endnote-9) He starts by actually criticizing Russell's idea that, logically speaking, the only real proper name is 'this'.[[10]](#endnote-10) Wittgenstein asks why we are tempted to think that only 'this' could be a genuine proper name, when in fact ‘we call very different things “names”; the word “name” is used to characterize many different kinds of use of a word, related to one another in many different ways; – but the kind of use that “this” has is not among them’ (PI §38).

Wittgenstein then continues by analysing the differences between 'this' and a name. They both occupy the same position in a sentence. However, only names are defined by means of the demonstrative expression ‘That is N’ or ‘That is called ”N”’. Still, we do not give definitions such as ‘That is called “this”’ or ‘This is called “this”’.

More importantly, we are tempted by the idea that ‘a name ought really to signify a simple’ (PI §39, cf. also §55). If it did not signify a simple, it could lose its meaning, if the complex object that constitutes its meaning was destroyed. Yet, in that case, the sentence ‘Excalibur has a sharp blade’ ‘would contain a word that would have no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense’ (ibid. Cf. PI §55). Since this is not the case, we are tempted to think that ‘there must always be something corresponding to the words of which it [i.e. the sentence] consists’ (ibid.). Thus, Wittgenstein concludes that when the sense of the word 'Excalibur' is analysed, the word must actually disappear and its place must be taken by words that name simples. This, in fact, is the conception of names that, as we briefly saw, Wittgenstein himself had proposed in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Russell too, in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, advanced a similar view and ended up proposing the idea that ordinary proper names do not refer to, but actually denote an object by means of some property that only that object should have.[[11]](#endnote-11)

But why should one think that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it? According to Wittgenstein, this idea depends on the confusion between the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name (PI §40). To expose the confusion, he famously quips ‘when Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceases to have meaning it would make no sense to say Mr. N. N. is dead’ (ibid. Cf. PI §55). Thus, the confusion between the meaning of a name and its bearer is at the origins of the mistake of thinking that only 'this' would be a genuine proper name.

Now, clearly, the early Wittgenstein or Russell would have been unmoved by such a remark. For they would have acknowledged that in ordinary language we have proper names that continue to have a meaning even if their bearers do not exist, or no longer do so. Indeed, as we just saw, Wittgenstein thought that ordinary propositions should be completely analysed in their constituent elements and only then would we encounter genuine names; and Russell too endorsed a similar idea, together with the further claim about the fact that ordinary proper names do not refer to but actually denote individuals through some of their characteristic properties. Thus, ‘N.N.’ would not have counted as a genuine or logically proper name for either of them.

What did change in the meanwhile to make Wittgenstein think that the example of N.N. being deceased, in *Philosophical Investigations* §40, could actually be a criticism of his earlier views? It seems safe to say that his overall perspective on language had changed. According to his new perspective, it is indeed our ordinary use of words in our real language games that has pride of place and that should be investigated to clarify the nature of language. Furthermore, instead of pursuing a quest into the essence of the world and meaning, Wittgenstein is now interested in providing a ‘perspicuous representation’ (PI §122) of linguistic use capable of dispelling philosophical problems or, in fact, misconceptions. Key to this new perspective onto language is the idea that words can have a multiplicity of functions (PI §§11-15, 23-24), varying from one context of their use to the next. Similarly, the representational function is only one function among many that words, and indeed propositions, can have. Moreover, our concepts, including central philosophical ones such as the concepts of name, meaning, truth and proposition, work by family resemblance (PI §§65-78): they resist definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions and do not pick out entities that share a common essence. It is only by keeping in mind this larger background that one can make sense of Wittgenstein’s remarks against logical atomism – let it be his own or Russell’s version of it. That is why, at the beginning, I have suggested that the criticism of logical atomism occupies about forty paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and does not stop at §64, as is more commonly held among interpreters. For, as I read it, it comprises the sections on family resemblance and culminates in PI §79 with the discussion of the proper name ‘Moses’.

Once it is clear that the meaning of a name is not its bearer but rather its use or function in the language game, as Wittgenstein famously states in *Philosophical Investigations* §43, then it may still be possible for the name to have meaning even if its bearer does not exist, or if it no longer exists. If it is possible for a name to retain meaning even if its bearer does not exist (any longer), then the temptation to think that only 'this' is, logically speaking, a genuine proper name vanishes.

That the criticism is of Russell's individuals and of the notion of object in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* becomes clear in *Philosophical Investigations* §46, where Wittgenstein discusses Socrates' conception of the primary elements in the *Theatetus* and connects his discussion to Russell and the *Tractatus*.

As Wittgenstein explains, while rehearsing his Tractarian theses, primary elements are what everything else consists of. They cannot be defined because any definition would make them composite. If I define red as ‘a primary color with such-and-such a wave length’, I would be decomposing red into some more fundamental elements such as wavelengths and it would no longer be a simple element but a complex one. Hence, on pain of contradiction, primary elements cannot be defined, but only named. Sentences, and therefore descriptions, are simply connections of names, in their turn.

The problem arises, however, of understanding what the simple constituent parts of which reality is composed are. This is a problem that, as we mentioned, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* had actually left open. For in it, Wittgenstein demonstrated that there must be simple objects for meaning to be possible at all (under the aegis of the picture theory of meaning), but he had not explicitly said what they are. Here he returns to the issue, but to show how in fact it cannot be resolved and therefore why the very *philosophical* question, whether this or that is a simple element of reality, is in fact nonsensical.

First, he asks whether the simple constituent parts of a chair are the bits of wood of which it is made, or the molecules or the atoms, and then he argues that there is no answer to that question (cf. also PI §59). For, he claims, the answer to that question depends on the language game we are playing. Furthermore, Wittgenstein holds that there are many different ways in which we can describe an entity, such that it can turn out to be simple or complex depending on the description we give of it. Writes Wittgenstein:

We use the word 'composite' (and therefore the word 'simple') in an enormous number of different and differently related ways. (Is the colour of a square on a chess board simple, or does it consist of pure white and pure yellow?) And is white simple or does it consist of the colours of the rainbow?[[12]](#endnote-12) Is this length of 2 cm simple, or does it consist of two parts each 1 cm long? But why not of one bit 3 cm long, and 1 bit 1 cm long measured in the opposite direction? To the *philosophical* question: ‘is the visual image of this tree composite and what are its component parts?’ the correct answer is: ‘That depends on what you understand by “composite”.’ (And that is of course not an answer but the rejection of the question). (*Philosophical Investigations* §47)

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Wittgenstein multiplies examples and presents a case in which there are primary colours arranged like in a chess board with names for each of them, such that, by juxtaposing one to the other, an instruction can be given to someone – for example, ‘Bring me 2 red squares, 1 black square, 3 green ones, and 2 white ones’. He then asks us to consider it as a series of simple objects with their names. Then he notices that ‘under other circumstances I should call a monochrome square “composite” consisting perhaps of two rectangles or of the elements colour and shape. But the concept of complexity might also be so extended that a smaller area was said to be “composed” of a greater area and another one subtracted from it’ (PI §48). The moral, once more, is that there is nothing which, in and of itself, is simple or complex. Rather, being simple and being complex are a function of the role these various elements play in our descriptions and language games.

It should be noted, however, that this is no rejection of the very idea that we can carve up reality in simple and complex elements. Rather, it is a rejection of the idea that this distinction is metaphysically grounded – that it carves nature at its joints, as it were. On the contrary, it is a function of our (partly arbitrary) descriptions. Thus, the distinction can still be drawn, but the ‘metaphysical’ status of simples (and complexes) must be clear: they are not the ultimate elements of reality itself but the ultimate elements of our descriptions of reality, from which complex entities are said to be composed of, within our descriptions.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In PI §60 Wittgenstein presents a different objection. Namely, that there is no need to analyse the sentence ‘My broom is in the corner’ to clarify or to understand what it means, as opposed to what he himself had maintained in the *Tractatus*. Indeed, substituting that sentence with ‘There is a broomstick and a brush in the corner’ (perhaps with the addition of a specification of their arrangement) could actually hinder our understanding. For, if we asked subjects whether this is what they meant or understood, they would probably say that they ‘had not thought specially of the broomstick or specially of the brush at all’ (ibid.). At any rate, the two sentences seem to belong to two different language games (PI §64), which may be related, and yet have different functions.

Once again, the author of the *Tractatus* would have been unmoved by such a consideration. For, in that work, the complete analysis of a proposition was never thought to be directly accessible to consciousness. It was rather a requirement imposed, as we saw, in order to guarantee the possibility for our ordinary language could play a representational function. Yet, this overall perspective on language has changed and now Wittgenstein thinks that it is only by paying attention to how we actually use words in our everyday interactions that we can make sense of their meaning and of what it means to understand them. Furthermore, it is only by paying attention to their actual use in our everyday interactions that we can dispel misguided philosophical attempts at determining the nature of meaning and understanding, including his own endeavours in the *Tractatus*.

Following the text once again, Wittgenstein then returns to the issue of whether the simple, according to the *Tractatus*, can be defined. He claims that it cannot, because definitions consist of parts and simples do not have any. Therefore, simples can only be named. In some limiting case, however, a complex that consists only of one element could be described by a name. Hence, whether a symbol is a name or a description also depends on the context of its use. Writes Wittgenstein: ‘This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of the sentence’ (PI §49).[[14]](#endnote-14)

Nor can existence be predicated of simple elements because non-existence cannot be predicted of them either. For non-existence would consist in the separation of elements, but simples have no elements. Hence, they cannot be destroyed, and therefore they cannot but exist. Yet, if their existence is necessary, it cannot be meaningfully predicated. For only bipolar propositions – that is, propositions that can be both true and false, and with respect to which, to know whether they are true or false, we need to compare them with reality – are meaningful, for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. This is indeed a point that Wittgenstein had made in the *Tractatus* too, where the existence of objects could not be said, but showed itself in the fact that there are meaningful sentences and therefore names endowed with meaning.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The metaphysical argument for the existence of simples, however, seems flawed. For why cannot something indivisible stop existing all at once? Why cannot something pop in and out of existence without depending on the prior existence of its component parts, or without being decomposed into its components? If simples were not actually identified with physical entities, for which the argument would go through, but with sense data, or other phenomenological entities such as after images, they could pop in and out of existence at once, without either ontologically depending on or being decomposed in more elementary elements. Whether this is an argument that would ultimately lead to the identification of the objects in the *Tractatus* with this kind of entities, rather than physical ones, is something we need not settle here. Yet, it speaks in favour of such an interpretation. The consequence, however, would then be that the *Tractatus* would be very close to Russell’s view, in *The* *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, that the only proper names, from a logical point of view, would be ‘this’ and ‘that’ as used to name sense data, at least as long as these entities exist.

Yet, the reason why this is ultimately irrelevant, in the context of the *Philosophical Investigations*, is that the master thought behind the whole quest of simple elements in the *Tractatus* has been exposed as flawed, due to the confusion between a name’s meaning and its bearer. That is, for Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, there is no need to identify simples, which could confer meaning to (logically proper or genuine) names, for the meaning of a name is not its bearer but the use we make of it in our language. Sometimes we explain the meaning of a name by indicating its bearer, but sometimes we do not, for instance, if the bearer does not exist, or does not exist any longer. As we noted, the interest of the author of the *Tractatus* has shifted and now the key intuition is that there is a multiplicity of functions words and names among them can play within language, while still be seeing as names (or as propositions, etc.). The master thought that occupies centre stage is now the idea that words function through family resemblance, as Wittgenstein insists between *Philosophical* *Investigations* §§66–76, before returning to the issue of the meaning of a proper name like ‘Moses’ in PI §79.

Of simples, Wittgenstein insists, we cannot predicate either their existence or their non-existence (PI §50). For they must exist for the words that would name them in the corresponding sentence to have a meaning. Thus, ‘x does not exist’ would be meaningless. If so, however, ‘x exists’ would be meaningless too, since it would have to be necessarily true and its negation impossible (for the reason just seen). Hence, of a simple we cannot meaningfully predicate either its existence or its non-existence.

Interestingly, this is what, by analogy, leads Wittgenstein to discuss the role of paradigms, like the standard metre in Paris. For of it, for Wittgenstein, it does not makes sense to say that it is one metre long or that it is not. Here is his argument: if that stick is what is used to ostensively define what ‘being one meter long’ means, then it cannot fail to be one metre long. But if it cannot meaningfully be said of that stick that it is not a metre long, then, because of bipolarity, it cannot meaningfully be said that it is one metre long either. We may be tempted to think otherwise if we were oblivious to the role that that stick (like a sample of colour (like sepia or red, respectively discussed in PI §50 and §57) or any other paradigm (PI§55), even a mental one (PI§56)) plays in our language. A similar confusion, by Wittgenstein’s lights, is what would later afflict Kripke’s reading of this example.[[16]](#endnote-16) For, on that reading, the stick would be used only to fix the reference of ‘being one meter long’ such that it could actually turn out to be the case that that very stick is not one metre long, after all. While this could obviously happen to the stick, which like any physical object may be subject to alternations and can therefore change its length, or a different stick could be taken as the standard metre, so that that stick would not be one metre long not even in this world, it could not happen to it *as used as the standard metre*. If used as such, whatever its physical length could be, across possible worlds, it would necessarily be one metre long.

Leaving aside this discussion, Wittgenstein points out that when we say ‘red exists’ and ‘red does not exist’, all we are actually trying to say is either ‘The word “red” has a meaning’ or ‘The word “red” does not have a meaning’ (PI §58). The sample is only what we sometimes use to ostensively define or explain the meaning of that word. The key thought, then, is that the bearer is something we use in connection with a name only in certain cases – to repeat, when we ostensively define or explain its meaning. Yet, there are many more ways in which we use names and explain their meaning, such that, even when there is no (longer a) bearer, a name can retain a meaning.

This is take-home message of Wittgenstein’s discussion of the name ‘Moses’ in PI §79. Before delving into it, however, it is crucial to recall Wittgenstein’s own defence of his new perspective onto language and philosophy, to which the remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* §§66-78 are devoted.

The defence is introduced after the objection, in PI §65, ‘You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language game, and hence of language, is.’ Wittgenstein acknowledges that he is not trying to define what language is, or to get at its essence, contrary to his previous project in the *Tractatus*. That project was deeply misguided – a vestige of a metaphysical way of looking at things, which Wittgenstein is completely rejecting in *Philosophical Investigations*. For there is no common essence shared by all entities called the same or subsumed under one word or concept. Famously, Wittgenstein exemplifies the idea with different games that share no common set of necessary and sufficient conditions, which could then be used to define the word ‘game’ or the very concept of a game. Rather, we subsume under that concept activities that resemble other ones, already comprised within it, in at least one varying respect (PI §66), like ‘the various resemblances between members of a family’ (PI §67) – whence the name of ‘family resemblance’ (ibid.) for the way in which Wittgenstein thinks of the workings of our concepts. For instance, in patience, like in tennis and unlike playing with dolls, there is winning and losing, but patience, unlike tennis, and like playing with dolls, can be played alone. Tennis and playing with dolls, then, do not have anything in common. Yet they are both games because they each resemble in at least one varying respect something else that is considered to be a game too. Nor can we say that they are all games because they share the disjunction (ibid.) of all these features. Of course we could close the frontiers of concepts in this way, if we needed to, but we typically don’t and that is why they have, to put it with Friedrich 13Waismann (1945), an ‘open texture’, which allows us to extend them to new and unforeseen cases (PI §68).[[17]](#endnote-17) *Pace* Frege, then, concepts can function perfectly well even if they have no rigid boundaries and even if, as it happens, they admit of vagueness (PI §§ 69-71, 76-77). The same is true of philosophical key concepts such as language, meaning, proposition, name and so on. In particular, as we saw, a name, for Wittgenstein, can have a meaning even if it has no (longer a) bearer. The discussion of the name ‘Moses’, just after the remarks on family resemblance, exemplifies his point.

In it, Wittgenstein notices that we do not use that name with a fixed meaning, for different definite descriptions can be used to explain its meaning. We use each of them in turn as ‘props . . . we lean on . . . if another should be taken’ away from us. Nor there is any prior decision made as to how many definite descriptions have to turn out to be false before saying that Moses did not exist or that ‘Moses’ does not have a meaning.

Now, clearly, the latter two claims are not on par. For fictional proper names, like ‘Santa Claus’, retain a meaning even if the definite descriptions we use to explain it are in fact empty – that is, even if they are not satisfied by any individual. Conversely, Moses – that is, the individual named thus – could have existed even if he actually did none of the things the Bible attributes to him. Maybe he was not saved from the Nile by the pharaoh’s daughter, or did not lead Israelites outside of Egypt, or any other thing the Bible says Moses did. Yet he did exist at some point in history. Again, the account Wittgenstein proposes of the meaning of proper names is not entirely plausible. For, as Kripke has shown in *Naming and Necessity*, it does not explain the modal behaviour of proper names. Moreover, as we have briefly mentioned, it does not seem plausible of fictional proper names either, since the falsity of the definite descriptions we use to explain their meaning, due to the non-existence of their alleged referents, does not prevent those names from having a meaning.[[18]](#endnote-18) Yet, it clearly marks the departure from his earlier views and is made possible by his new outlook onto language.

As Wittgenstein concludes in *Philosophical Investigations* §81, we use words in everyday language without a fixed meaning or ‘according to definite rules’. That, however, is perfectly all right, and we do not need to construct an ideal language to explain how ours works. That is what Wittgenstein himself did in the *Tractatus*, and that is what led him to embrace a form of logical atomism. That is what he is now rejecting as unnecessary and as driven by an entirely philosophical or even metaphysical way of looking at language, instead of looking at its actual use. Hence, by enjoining ‘Don’t think, but look!’ (PI §66), Wittgenstein is dismissing, at once, that outlook and one of its most notable consequences.

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1. Let them be the elementary propositions resulting from logical analysis or the ordinary propositions which we normally traffic in, as Pears (111987, 76) points out. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 3Copi (1958) is considered to be at the origin of the controversy. For an overview of this controversy, see 11Pears (1987), vol. I, chapter 4 and 5, and 4Dionigi (2001), chapter 3. The controversy has been taken to bear on the vexed issue of the realism of the *Tractatus*. That is, whether, for Wittgenstein, it is the nature of the object – its inherent combinatorial properties in states of affairs – that determines which uses of its name within a proposition make sense; or else, whether it is the meaningful use of the name within a proposition that determines the possible occurrence of the object in states of affairs. Notoriously, Pears has been the chief support of the realist interpretation and Ishiguro and McGuinness of the anti-realist (or constructivist) one. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 1Anscombe (1959). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Most notably, 6Hintikka and Hintikka (1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5Griffin (1964). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 7Ishiguro (1969) and 10McGuinness (1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 11Pears (1987, 89). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Indeed, he said to Malcolm (91958, 99–100) that this was none of his business, since it would ultimately be an empirical, not a logical, issue. Also, in the *Notebooks* 1914–1916, Wittgenstein claims that for his purposes it is actually expedient to consider ordinary proper names and their relations to the objects they name to exemplify and reflect on their function, even if at the end of the analysis they would be considered neither as names nor as simples (*Notebooks* 14.6.15, 21.6.15 and 30.5.15). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See in the following for the rationale of this claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 7Ishiguro 1969 denies that anything like Russell’s idea of logically proper names can be found in the *Tractatus*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This in turn originated a debate about the (in)determinacy and possible variability of names’ meaning which occupied philosophers of language till the late 1970s–early 1980s. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Here the reference is to the Newton–Goethe debate over the nature of white light. The issue was extremely important to Wittgenstein who grappled with it until the very end of his career (see his *Remarks on Color*, written during the last eighteen months of his life). For a discussion, see 2Coliva (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This indirectly could be evidence in favour of the realist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, which Pears endorsed. For here Wittgenstein seems to be criticizing his earlier views. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This, in contrast, could be indirect evidence in favour of the anti-realist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, championed by Ishiguro and McGuinness. For the passage occurs in the midst of the rehearsal of some of his earlier views and clearly echoes T3.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 6Hintikka and Hintikka (1986, 102) insist on the ineffability of the existence of objects. They think Russell too had a similar view and maintain that Wittgenstein’s objects in the *Tractatus* are phenomenological entities. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See 8Kripke (1980, 201–2). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Notice that some disjuncts would actually be contradictory and, if that finding could be extended to all potential disjuncts figuring in this alleged definition of the concept, the disjunction would end up being a tautology, which could not be used to tell games apart from non-games. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 4Dionigi (2001), chapter 4 defends the idea that Wittgenstein is interested only in the existence of objects within the discourse or the story, rather than in their worldly existence. Hence, within the story, Santa Claus would exist. For within it, it is true that one and no more than one individual has the properties typically attributed to Santa Claus. As a result, of distinguishing these two different notions of existence, it would also be possible to reconcile Wittgenstein and Kripke’s different accounts of proper names. For Moses could have existed even if none of the definite descriptions we can derive from the Bible were (uniquely) true of him. Consequently, in that case the name ‘Moses’ could still have a meaning and would behave, modally, as Kripke argues all proper names work. According to Dionigi, Wittgenstein would be merely objecting to the idea that names’ meaning is given by a definition – let it be ostensive or otherwise – and would not be putting forward an account of what their meaning *is* – let it be their bearer, or a (set of) definite description(s). Rather, their bearer or that (set of) definite description(s) is merely what we avail ourselves to explain their meaning. The discussion of this ingenious interpretation cannot be taken up here. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)