

## V.—DISCUSSION.

### PROPOSITIONS APPLICABLE TO THEMSELVES.

1. MR. L. WITTGENSTEIN in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (p. 57) remarks, what has often, of course, been said before, that no proposition can "say anything about itself" ("etwas ueber sich selbst aussagen"). There is a sense in which, I think, this is clearly true. But the statement is rather ambiguous, and requires further specification.

2. The proposition "Charles I. was crowned" is clearly about Charles I. It is only a definite proposition if it contains an exclusive description of the man—one which is true of nothing but him. But how about "all kings of England are mortal"? This cannot be said to be about Charles I. It can have a definite meaning for a person who knew no exclusive description of Charles I., or even for one who supposed that all kings of England were named Henry. Yet whatever is said of all kings of England is true of Charles I. I cannot tell from Mr. Wittgenstein's words whether he would say that this was or was not a proposition about Charles I. The terminology I propose to adopt is that the first proposition is *about* Charles I., while the second is not *about* him, but *applies* to him.

3. It is clear that no proposition can, in this sense, be about itself. Let us take an example. "The proposition which I am now asserting is known to God." (It is better to say "known to God" than "true" or "false," since the two last predicates have special relations to propositions which might raise a suspicion that they were not fair representatives of all other predicates.) Let us call this A. Now it is clear that this assertion depends for its meaning on the meaning of the proposition which I assert, and which is known to God. But to the question "what proposition am I asserting," the only answer is "it is the proposition 'the proposition which I am now asserting is known to God'". And this raises the same question, which can only receive the same answer, and so on to infinity. And this infinite will be vicious. No link in the chain can have any meaning until the chain is finished. And it never is finished. The original statement, then, is neither true nor false, and is not a proposition.

4. A proposition, then, cannot be about itself. But can it apply to itself? How about "all propositions asserted by me are known to God"? But "all" here is ambiguous. In the proposition "all Cambridge Colleges in 1922 had at least twenty members," the as-

sertion really is, as it professes to be, about each Cambridge College in 1922. And it depends on the truth of seventeen separate propositions, such as "Peterhouse in 1922 had at least twenty members". Any one of these seventeen could be true without the proposition about "all Cambridge Colleges," being true, but it cannot be true unless all the seventeen are true.

But then this proposition is not deducible from the nature of a Cambridge College in 1922. Something which had only ten members could have been such a College—only nothing was. But take the proposition "all Cambridge Colleges in 1922 have privileges under the Law of Mortmain". This is quite different. It is not dependent on propositions about each of the existent Colleges, nor even on the existence of any of them. If every Cambridge College had been abolished in 1921, and no more founded, it would still be true, unless the Law of Mortmain had been altered, that "all Cambridge Colleges in 1922 have privileges under the Law of Mortmain". And the explanation is that the proposition is incorrectly expressed. It is not an assertion about Cambridge Colleges in 1922, but about the *characteristics* "being a Cambridge College in 1922," and "having privileges under the Law of Mortmain". And it asserts that the possession of the first characteristic implies the possession of the second.

5. Now if the sentence "All propositions asserted by me are known to God" is taken in the first of these senses (let us call this B), then it, like A, has no meaning. For it is an assertion dependent on each of the propositions asserted by me, and its meaning depends on the meanings of each of them. But B itself, if it is a proposition at all, is a proposition asserted by me. Its meaning, therefore, will depend, *inter alia*, on its meaning. And when we ask what is the meaning of B on this second occurrence the answer will be that it, again, depends on the meaning of B. And this infinite series will be vicious, since the meaning of B could only be determined on the completion of the series, which never is completed. B, therefore, has no meaning, and is not a proposition.

6. But the case is very different if the words "all propositions asserted by me are known to God" are taken in the second sense mentioned in Section 4. (Let us call this C.) For C is not an assertion about a proposition, or about a number of propositions. It is an assertion that the possession of the characteristic "being a proposition asserted by me" implies the possession of the characteristic "being known to God". And this is a proposition about characteristics, not about one or more propositions. It is not, therefore, a proposition about itself, or about a number of propositions of which it itself is one. The determination of its meaning does not depend on the previous determination of its meaning. And therefore it can, and does, have a meaning. And it is a proposition.

But, of course, it applies to itself, since it is a proposition asserted by me. And so, from the fact that I assert the proposition

C, can be deduced the further proposition, D, "the proposition C is known to God". But this creates no difficulty, for neither proposition is about itself. C is about the implication of characteristics, and D is about C.

7. We may remark, in parenthesis, that, not only can a proposition apply to itself, but it can apply, in some cases, to itself alone. If the possession of the characteristic "being a proposition asserted by me" implies the possession of the characteristic "being known to God," then it is clear that the possession of the characteristic "being the last proposition asserted by me before my next death" implies the possession of the characteristic "being known to God". Now only one thing can possess the characteristic of being the last proposition asserted by me before my next death. And if I should assert this implication, and die before I asserted anything else, then the proposition would apply to itself, and to nothing else but itself. But it would not be about itself in the manner in which I have taken that phrase, and it would not be liable to the difficulties, mentioned in Section 3, which prevent A from being a proposition.

8. To return from this digression. It has often been pointed out that the complete scepticism which says that all propositions are false is self-contradictory, because it is itself a proposition, and therefore its truth would prove its falsity. To this I have heard the objection that a proposition cannot be about itself, and that therefore such a scepticism is not self-contradictory, but impossible.

Now, no doubt, if the words "all propositions are false" were taken in sense B, they would be unmeaning, for the reasons given in Section 5. But not even an absolute sceptic would have so much confidence in his own omniscience as to suppose that he had examined all propositions, and found each of them individually to be false, as each Cambridge College was found to have at least twenty members. If the words are ever used, they will be used in sense C—that the possession of the characteristic of being a proposition implies the possession of the characteristic of being false. Now this, for the reasons mentioned in Section 6, has a meaning, and is a proposition. But it is a self-contradictory proposition. For it applies to itself, and so the proposition, C, implies the further proposition, D, that C is false. Thus the truth of C implies its falsity.

In the same way the words "all propositions which are believed are false" have a meaning, and are the statement of a proposition. Here the proposition is not strictly speaking *self*-contradictory, but its truth, together with the truth of the assertion that the sceptic believes it, implies its falsity.

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