

# REJECTING WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITICISM AGAINST RUSSELL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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**Abstract.** In this paper I reject Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell's theory of knowledge. First, I present the historical context in which Russell formulated his theory and Wittgenstein his criticism. Then, I attempt to show that Russell's views had the potential to develop into an important conceptual scheme relating knowledge to mental phenomena. I argue that Wittgenstein's criticism was a decisive factor in Russell's decision not to pursue his line of enquiry. But this criticism was misdirected, as shown by the fact that Wittgenstein's later work in the *Tractatus* approached a range of problems different from those targeted by Russell's theory.

**Keywords:** history of analytic philosophy, theory of knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance.

## I. Introduction

One of the most important subjects discussed in early analytic philosophy was the problem of knowledge and the way in which this problem affected the philosophy of language and theories of logic. One of the authors who were especially interested with this topic was Bertrand Russell. His intention was to give an epistemic basis for the theory of language and to cover the theory of logic. He was so stimulated by this subject that he constructed an entire project with a lot of new notions, ideas and definitions, which would have been published as a book named *Theory of knowledge*, but Russell's enthusiasm was overthrown by his young pupil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, because of his harsh criticism.

In this paper I will argue that the criticisms raised by Wittgenstein against Russell's theory of knowledge were not only unclear, but more than that, not supported and not on point. My aim is to demonstrate that Russell's project was more important than that of Wittgenstein and that it is unfortunate that his project failed just because Wittgenstein didn't understand exactly all its implications. The ideas behind Wittgenstein's criticisms were very vague. Nevertheless, what Wittgenstein did in his *Tractatus* later on didn't follow the line of thought from Russell's view about knowledge. Wittgenstein's ideas could at most be considered a legitimate critique of Russell's project, certainly not a solution for the problem raised by Russell. I believe that Russell's intentions were more important for that time and that Wittgenstein's view consists only in some rampant ideas which attracted all contemporary analytic philosophers probably mainly through their originality. Of course that their originality and innovation don't automatically imply that they are the best solutions for a lot of problems present in the philosophy of language especially, as was believed by their contemporaries.

The first step of this paper is to shed some light on the historical facts so that it will facilitate the understanding of the reasons for which Russell's project could have been an important contribution for the entire analytic philosophy. Then, by analysing succinctly Wittgenstein's philosophy from *Tractatus*, I will offer reasons why this view is not on the same line with Russell's view. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss Russell's main argument for the importance of a theory of knowledge in the philosophy of language, along with the main problems presented in his theory, problems which could have been solved by Russell himself if he had continued and finished his project. After this, Wittgenstein's objections for Russell's theory will follow. We shall see that Wittgenstein himself meant the critique differently than it was received by Russell.

## II. Wittgenstein's criticism against Russell's theory of knowledge

For a better understanding of this problem, a brief presentation of the historical facts of this story is needed. In 1911, Russell decided to focus his attention on the theory of knowledge which also included what today is called the 'philosophy of science'. His plan was to write a 'big book' on the subject of epistemology. But, in 1912, Russell's philosophical activities were disturbed by his new student, Ludwig Wittgenstein. By the spring of 1913, Russell had almost finished his work on this project and, in May 1913, he showed his manuscript to Wittgenstein. However, Wittgenstein criticized the work harshly and reinforced Russell's fears that Wittgenstein would render all his philosophical work obsolete. After this, Russell published only the first half of the manuscript in *The Monist* in 1914 and 1915, but because he published the chapters under the form of some dissipated articles, they weren't put together properly for almost 55 years. (Lackey 1981, p. 126)

The point that I want to outline here is that Russell stopped his whole ambitious project only because he believed more in Wittgenstein's philosophical vision and potential than in his own. The problem is that even he was not convinced that Wittgenstein understood exactly the deepest implications of his work and the later contributions of Wittgenstein confirmed these suspicions. Wittgenstein was beside the subject and he was preoccupied more with his new ideas about language.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is a purified version of ideas that really originate with Russell, and a reading of Russell's 1913 *Manuscript* along with Wittgenstein's criticism will support this claim.

In one chapter of this supposed book, *Theory of knowledge*, Russell intended to address the problems of metaphysics of propositions and metaphysics of facts. Earlier, his views were in favour of the metaphysics of proposition, where the judgements were addressed directly to the parts of the proposition, independent of the facts represented by it. Later on, Russell embraced a multiple relation analysis of judgement, and therefore, the propositions were replaced with facts as the complexes of

metaphysic. According to this version, for Cassio to judge that Desdemona loves Othello is for a four-place relation of judging to relate Cassio, Desdemona, loving, and Othello. If there is a corresponding complex formed from Desdemona, loving, and Othello, then this judgement is true, but if there is no corresponding complex, then it is false. Then, on this approach, the 'content' of the judgement is represented by the entities of the relata of the judging relation over and above the judging mind, and this approach leaves out *the way* these relata can combine to form a complex. But this lacuna is conspicuous in the case of asymmetrical relations like loving, because there are two ways in which the relation of loving can combine Desdemona and Othello to form a fact: Desdemona can love Othello or Othello can love Desdemona (Rickets 2002, p. 233). Nevertheless, the adoption of this new kind of metaphysics confronted Russell with a lot of problems and detained him from developing a coherent logic in *Principia*, but this fact didn't motivate him to abandon the metaphysics of facts.

As it was probably expected, Wittgenstein disagreed with this view. He said that every right theory of judgement needs to make it impossible for someone to judge something nonsensical like 'that table penholders the book' and that Russell's does not satisfy this requirement (Rickets 2002, p. 234). To bring out the force of Wittgenstein's objection, we have to take into consideration the view of language that must implicitly accompany Russell's multiple relation analysis. According to this view, the words in a sentence must signify constituents of complexes and the sentences which express judgements are made true or false by the existence or non-existence of the complexes formed from these constituents. So, if the 'content' of the judgement is represented by the identity of relata of the judging relation, then only the identity of the items signified by the words are relevant for the expression of a judgement. Then, essentially, sentences are collections of names. But the problem here is raised by the question of what happens with a nonsensical array of names like 'Desdemona Othello', since, according to Russell's approach, this should be false, because there

is no complex formed just from two individuals (Ricketts 2002, p. 234). Thus, Russell failed to distinguish between falsehood and nonsense. Nevertheless, this failure didn't stop Russell, because he had a response prepared for this objection: 'Desdemona Othello' cannot express a judgement, because there is no judgement-relation of the right multiplicity. His reason was that it is not *possible* for just two individuals to combine to form a fact. Since the direct appeal to logical possibility of the content of a proposition wasn't sufficient, Russell added to the judgement-relation an argument place for forms. This decides the validity of a judgement-relation, because the judgement-fact of that relation will be true only if it is a complex of the contained form with only the contained items as constituents, otherwise, it will be false. In 1913, this was the version of the multiple relation analysis. Afterwards, Russell revisited it because of Wittgenstein's disagreement, but neither the amended formulation was acceptable for the latter (Ricketts 2002, p. 235).

Wittgenstein's observations and criticisms come from a completely different point of view. Russell had a view of representation in which direct realism is combined with a view of language according to which the validity of the atomic sentences depends on the association between words and things. Russell's view can be considered an adaptation of the classical empiricism of language, in which meaningful words are seen as names, and names are seen as mere labels. Wittgenstein broke decisively with this view, and he introduced a view of representation which is adequate to a conception of truth as correspondence. So, in Wittgenstein's view, in 'Desdemona loves Othello' it is the fact that the symbol 'Desdemona' stands in a certain relation to the symbol 'Othello', and not the complex that symbolizes. Thus, facts are symbolised by facts, so that if a certain thing is the case in symbol, it means that a certain thing is the case in the world. The fundamental representational relationship of sentences with reality is what Wittgenstein calls 'sense' (Ricketts 2002, p. 235). Wittgenstein's insight of 1913 which sets him on the path of the philosophy of the *Tractatus* is this view of sentences as models of

reality, of which the first fruit was his treatment of the logical connectives, as they figure in singular molecular sentences.

Wittgenstein's promise in *Tractatus* was that he would give there a system for solving all the problems of philosophy. We may think that for solving philosophical problems we have to correct our misunderstandings somehow and we can reasonably expect from *Tractatus* to instruct us how to take a sentence of everyday language and to determine the logic of that sentence. The problem is that we cannot expect a result of logical analysis to be an informative statement about logical form, because Wittgenstein follows the principle that propositions cannot represent their logical form. Nevertheless, the *Tractatus* does contain two kinds of logical analysis: 'complete analysis' and 'clarificatory analysis'. But even though 'complete analysis' resembles a philosophical method of the kind we seek, this is not how Wittgenstein expects us to solve the problems of philosophy; he rather expected us to solve them by using the 'clarificatory analysis' (Phillips 2007, p. 164).

To understand the difference between what is essential and what is accidental in a proposition, we must understand the difference between sign and symbol. A symbol is anything that is essential to the proposition expressing the sense that it does; this includes the proposition as a whole and, also, the individual words within the context of a proposition. In contrast to this, a propositional sign on its own cannot express a sense. Only if it is used as the projection of a situation, it can express a sense. The symbol is just the logico-syntactic use of the sign. On the other hand, the sign must be perceptible for a proposition, it must be a fact and it must be able to stand in a projective relation to the world; thus, the sign is whatever is perceptible of a proposition. Also, a sign must have a logical form in order for it to stand in a projective relation to the world and this logical form has to correspond to the possible state of affairs it has to represent. This difference between sign and symbol explains how we can misunderstand the logic of our language. If we want to find a method for logical analysis in *Tractatus*, we must consider the

possibility of recognizing the symbol in the sign by observing the significant use (Phillips 2007, p. 165).

The details about the distinction between 'complete analysis' and 'clarificatory analysis' are not important for the thesis of this paper, and, therefore, I will skip them. The important point to note about this is that Wittgenstein recognised that the complete analysis might be the proper solution. At first, he maintained that the clarificatory analysis is the right solution for solving philosophical problems on the ground of its success, but he changed his mind later, when he directed his attention to the grammar of the proposition.

These are the most important of Wittgenstein's criticisms against Russell. There are two important reasons why his view was completely different from that of Russell and, therefore, why they may not be considered on point. Firstly, he didn't ascribe so much importance to a proper logical analysis, which was one of the most important aims of Russell. And secondly, his claim was that language must reflect only possible states of affairs perceived in the world, sacrificing all the rest in order to satisfy this requirement. Nevertheless, for a better understanding of Russell's position, we must examine his principal ideas for a right theory of knowledge.

### III. Russell's theory of knowledge by acquaintance

The central theme of the *Theory of knowledge* was the epistemic basis of Russell's theory of language, especially focused on his doctrine of acquaintance. Russell tried to discover what kind of thought processes and what sort of knowledge help in understanding contingent propositions and in establishing their validity. Unfortunately, even if the problems presented by his concerns were genuine, his solutions didn't work. (Pears 1989, p. 170)

In the chapters published in *The Monist*, Russell defined 'acquaintance' as an extensional relation between subjects and objects and he demonstrated its importance in the cases in which the object is a particular. In this analysis of acquaintance, Russell dealt with three kinds of acquaintance with particulars, through

sensation, memory, and imagination (Pears 1989, p. 171). In the unpublished part of the manuscript, he writes:

These, we found, though their objects are usually somewhat different, are not essentially distinguished by their objects, but by the relations of subject and object. In sensation subject and object are simultaneous; in memory the subject is later than the object; while imagination does not essentially involve any time-relation of subject and object, though all time-relations are compatible with it. (Russell 1984, p. 100, quoted in Pears 1989, p. 171)

There are two important points about this passage: 1) it is important in the case of sensation that the particular that is the object of acquaintance may be simple or complex; 2) it is surprising that Russell maintained that acquaintance is an extensional relation that doesn't involve any knowledge of truths about its object, even in the case of acquaintance with complex particulars.

In the first two chapters that he never published, Russell argued that we are acquainted with predicates and relations as well as with particulars. Also, he was very interested in specifying the precise object of acquaintance when a relation is involved. This is happening because some dyadic relations are asymmetrical and, in these cases, acquaintance with the relation itself without an understanding of the different properties of its two slots for particulars would not be enough. This case is applicable also for certain relations with more than two terms.

The difficulty with which he was contending is that if acquaintance is extensional, it will not include any knowledge of truths about its objects. It will be insufficient to explain the contribution of acquaintance with an asymmetrical relation to the sense of a proposition in which the name occurs. This is happening only if that acquaintance involves the knowledge that it may link the same particulars in two different ways and the ability to discriminate between them. In the same way, acquaintance with



any universal must involve knowledge of its type and of the type of particulars with which it may combine to produce complexes.

Although in 1913 Russell found out from Wittgenstein about his claim that the general words signify forms rather than objects, he refused to adopt this idea. He distinguished clearly the universals from forms and he claimed that we need acquaintance with both before we can understand a proposition. He maintained that we must be acquainted with the relation sentence itself (Pears 1989, p. 173).

Broadly speaking, if the relation is one-one, he calls it *acquaintance*, and if the relation is one-many, he calls it *understanding*. About the latter, there is an account of understanding propositions that Russell develops in *Theory of knowledge*. This involves a dramatic extension of the scope of acquaintance, because it includes forms among its objects as well as universals and particulars. Russell maintained that the only acquaintance that someone must have for understanding a proposition is the separate acquaintance with each of its elements. In order to answer to the question 'what makes it possible to combine the three constituents in thought in a way that make sense?' Russell suggests that this is possible only if we are already acquainted with the general form of dyadic relational propositions. Someone must have advanced knowledge of this form, a knowledge that supports his understanding of logic, because the difference between a relation and its terms is a *logical* difference:

I think it may be shown that acquaintance with logical form is involved before explicit thought about logic begins, in fact as soon as we can understand a sentence. Let us suppose that we are acquainted with Socrates and with Plato and with the relation 'precedes,' but not with the complex 'Socrates precedes Plato.' Suppose now that someone tells us that Socrates precedes Plato. How do we know what he means? It is plain that his statement does not give us *acquaintance* with the complex 'Socrates precedes Plato.' What we understand is that Socrates and Plato and 'precedes' are united in a

complex of the form 'xRy,' where Socrates has the x-place and Plato has the y-place. It is difficult to see how we could possibly understand how Socrates and Plato and 'precedes' are to be combined unless we had acquaintance with the form of the complex. (Russell 1984, p. 99, quoted in Pears 1989, 175)

What he holds is that what enables us to understand a logical form is 'logical experience' (Pears 1989, 175), which is a kind of immediate knowledge, different from judging.

But the next issue that Russell must explain is how anyone achieves advanced acquaintance with such a form, because here is a risk of an infinite regress (Pears 1989, p. 176). This difficulty is pre-eminent if the entirely general facts are contingent and this is the way Wittgenstein understood Russell's view when he first read his *Manuscript*. This was another reason for his criticism and he tried to give a solution for this issue, but failed to achieve it. However, Russell claimed that the entirely general facts (with which he identifies the forms of propositions) are facts of a very special kind: according to his description, the corresponding propositions are self-evident. Through this, there is no need to verify singular propositions of the same form, and in this case Wittgenstein's criticism misses the mark.

For self-evidence, Russell gave two arguments: 1) that in their case the transition from understanding to the apprehension of truth is immediate; and 2) that the entirely general propositions are simple, because they contain no constituents, and therefore, understanding a direct relation of the subject to a simple object is *acquaintance* (Pears 1989, p. 177). The first argument is not so strong, because it cannot be maintained even if we consider introspection; but the second is more independent and proper.

Regarding asymmetrical relations, Russell suggested that, in fact, all relations are symmetrical, since in a proposition of the type 'x before y', the term 'before' refers to the same relation as the term 'after'. According to Russell, these symmetrical relations are called 'pure relations' (Pears 1989, p. 178). When a relation is pure, there is no need for terms in order to be intelligible. This result is

important for the theory of acquaintance, because it suggests that the mind can be acquainted directly with pure relations, not just with relational complexes containing terms.

#### IV. Wittgenstein's reaction

Wittgenstein's response to Russell's abandonment of his theory was that the major problem with his theory was that he needed to give a better explanation and analysis for how the constituents of the propositions come to the acquaintance, but, otherwise, it was a good project and he shouldn't abandon it.

Wittgenstein's objection regarding understanding was offered in a letter addressed to Russell in 1913. There he wrote:

I can now express my objection to your theory of judgement exactly; I believe it is obvious that from the proposition '*A* judges that (say) *a* is in relation *R* to *b*,' if correctly analysed, the proposition '*aRb*.v. $\sim$ *aRb*' must follow directly without the use of any other premise. This condition is not fulfilled by your theory. (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 121)

We can observe that there is a similarity between Wittgenstein's view of understanding and that of Frege. Both claim that an expression can be a name or it can fail to be one only when it lies in a context in which an expression could carry out the required function. They add that it is possible for existential statements to not provide such a context, but that doesn't mean that nothing else may provide it.

Another point in which Wittgenstein's scepticism is raised is aimed at the generality of properties as ingredients<sup>1</sup>. About this, Wittgenstein said that it may be only a symptom of a word what at first seemed to be a defining criterion, because in general we do

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<sup>1</sup> What general concepts are concepts of, for example: 'as alcohol is for beer or wine'.

not use language according to some strict rules. Further, he said that not only because we are unable to give the real definition of a word, but, more than that, because there is no real 'definition' for them, it ensures that we are unable to circumscribe the concepts we use. (Travis 2006, p. 57)

Wittgenstein's point was that acquaintance must be intensional if acquaintance with the constituents of a proposition will explain how the subject knows that he has put them together in a way that makes sense. This is also an objection for Russell's theory of judgement from 1910, but it is clear that his point was against the 1913 theory, because it requires acquaintance with the form of dyadic relations as well as acquaintance with the three constituents. This means that Wittgenstein claimed that Russell made no progress towards a solution to the problem, not even when he had brought the forms into the theory of acquaintance, because it remains unexplained how the subject knows that these constituents can be combined within those forms. The original idea of Wittgenstein's theory of proposition is that if the form is treated as an object of acquaintance, then it recreates the problem that it was designated to solve. (Travis 2006, p. 58)

The problem with Wittgenstein's criticisms and responses is that it doesn't seem that they are legitimate and that he understood completely Russell's theory. About this issue Russell himself pointed out in a letter where he described his meeting with Wittgenstein in 1913:

We were both cross from the heat. I showed him a crucial part of what I had been writing. He said it was all wrong, not realizing the difficulties — that he had tried my view and knew it wouldn't work. I couldn't understand his objection — in fact he was very inarticulate — but I feel in my bones that he must be right, and that he has seen something that I have missed. If I could see it too I shouldn't mind, but as it is, it is worrying, and has rather destroyed the pleasure in my writing — I can only go on with what I see, and yet I feel it is probably all wrong and that Wittgenstein will think me a

dishonest scoundrel for going on with it. Well, well — it is the younger generation knocking at the door — I must make room for him when I can, or I shall become an incubus. But at the moment I was rather cross. (Clark 1975, pp. 204-205, quoted in Pears 1989, p. 169)

Wittgenstein's regrets for Russell's abandonment of his project are clearly formulated in his *Notebook*, where he directly formulates his opinion, but, unfortunately, these didn't restore Russell's interests<sup>2</sup>.

## V. Conclusion

There is a lot of evidence that Russell was deeply affected and influenced by Wittgenstein's criticism and that he refrained to publish a large part of his manuscript only because of this. We can take five facts in support of this claim: 1) that Russell hoped for a collaboration with Wittgenstein on this project, but his criticism was enough to destroy this dream; 2) about the first of unpublished chapters of Russell's manuscript, named 'On the Acquaintance Involved in Our Knowledge of Relations', Wittgenstein held that relations are not objects but forms; 3) most of Russell's subsequent chapters are concerned with propositions and the understanding of propositions, but Wittgenstein rejected Russell's distinctive ideas on these topic; 4) in large part, Wittgenstein's picture theory of propositions is a reaction against Russell's 1913 theory; 5) the next major work of Russell (*The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*) contains clear departures from his 1913 doctrines about qualities, relations and propositional forms in the direction in which he believed Wittgenstein to have gone, but these are incomplete (Travis 2006, p. 170) Also, it is highly

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<sup>2</sup> 'I am very sorry to hear that my objection to your theory of judgment paralyzes you. I think it can only be removed by a correct theory of propositions.' (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 121, quoted in Pears 1989, p. 169).

probable that Russell didn't publish the second part of his manuscript because of Wittgenstein's criticism.

It is unfortunate that Russell's 1913 project was never finished and published, because it could have been a remarkable work, providing not only a coherent and fairly complete survey of mental phenomena, but also numerous technical devices and notions. It seemed like it could be the biggest and most complete work that Russell ever attempted, because he would have introduced a lot of new technical notions, such as new standards for a contact-free syntax, a predecessor of the semantic theory of truth, an ontologically sophisticated 'no propositions' theory of judgement, a logic of certainty and others never explored by subsequent authors (Lackey 1981, p. 141) It is possible that analytic philosophy could have developed differently if this book had been finished and published in 1913. But Wittgenstein's critical vision changed and dramatically influenced this course of events. The problem is that Russell believed more in Wittgenstein's philosophical potential and hoped that he will give better solutions for the issues of his theory and, also, that he will develop a proper theory of knowledge for the philosophy of language. Unfortunately, these hopes were never accomplished, because Wittgenstein, although influenced by Russell's works, conceived a completely different philosophical system of language.

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