1 Rereading Russell and Wittgenstein

Since its publication in 1921, Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus has attracted a broad variety of interpretations. The work has been viewed as a revolution in the metaphysics of logic, with Wittgenstein inventing the truth-tables and ushering in modern logic and even modal logic. It has been viewed as the holy text of the antimetaphysical doctrines of logical empiricism – a work attempting to establish a foundational observation language grounding empirical (scientific) discourse in an effort to show that all philosophical or metaphysical propositions are pseudo-propositions.1 Wittgenstein’s attraction to the tragic lives of Schopenhauer, Weininger, and Kierkegaard has been a resource for irrationalist interpretations as well. Rejecting both logic and metaphysics as the focus of the Tractatus, they herald its entries on solipsism, value, religion, and mysticism as central to its message. Therapeutic interpretations attempt an even more radical break than do irrationalist interpretations. The therapeutic reading denies that there is any positive philosophical theory in the work. On this reading, the Tractatus is against philosophical theory and offers a treatment for the condition of thinking that there are riddles that must be solved by a philosophical theory. Thus, we find diametric opposition among even the most prominent philosophical interpretations of the Tractatus. We find those that take its central focus to be in epistemology, ontology, logic, semantics, ethics, religion, mysticism, or all of these together. We find interpretations of the text as realist, physicalist, phenomenalist, solipsist, idealist, existentialist, irrational, and therapeutic. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that interpretations differ significantly on what figures provide the best background orientation from which to understand the book. Is it to be Russell and Frege, or logical positivists such as Carnap, Ayer, and Popper? Is it to be Kant’s transcendental idealism or Schopenhauer’s mysticism?

It is difficult to avoid a pessimistic induction that reaches the conclusion that no satisfactory account of the *Tractatus* will be found. There seems to be no fundamental principle, no Archimedean point, which could unify the apparently diverse themes of the book. “The history of *Tractatus* interpretation,” writes Stern, “is for the most part a history of wishful thinking, each successive group of interpreters seizing on the passages they have found most interesting in order to reconstruct the doctrines they knew must be there.”\(^2\) Stern believes that an important lesson can be extracted from this. No interpretation, he says, could be adequate to all the Tractarian doctrines because the work itself is in tension between diverse metaphysical, antimetaphysical, and antiphilosophical tendencies and motives.

Russell’s philosophy had once served as an Archimedean point for viewing the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein was, after all, Russell’s student. And Wittgenstein himself wrote that his book was an effort to address the problems he and Russell shared.\(^3\) But over the years interpreters have fought themselves free of interpreting Wittgenstein as a Russellian. Perhaps the breach began when Anscombe correctly pointed out that Tractarian “objects” cannot be identified with the sense-data Russell embraced in his *Problems of Philosophy* (1912), *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914), and logical atomism lectures (1917). A consensus emerged among many interpreters that Russell’s logical atomism is not the proper starting point from which to understand Wittgenstein. In hope of illuminating the central questions that animated Wittgenstein, Anscombe abandoned Russell’s atomism and turned instead to Frege’s philosophy of language and arithmetic. No interpretation today finds Russell and Wittgenstein working in alliance on the same project in philosophy. The interpretations of Pears and Hacker, both very influential and important, acknowledge that the two started out that way with Russell imagining his Austrian pupil to be his protégé. But they conclude that the *Tractatus* ushers in an orientation that is in opposition to Russell’s philosophy.

The marginalization of Russell is deeper in therapeutic readings of the *Tractatus*. For instance, Conant finds no precedent in Russell’s philosophy for the Tractarian notion that logical truths are meaningless (*sinnlos*). Conant does see a precedent in Frege’s philosophy. He likens the matter to Frege’s distinction between function and object. Functions, in Frege’s view, are incomplete or unsaturated (*ungesaßtigt*) while objects are complete. Since


function words represent unsaturated entities, Frege demands that they never occur in subject positions. Russell rejected Frege’s doctrine, noting that “inextricable difficulties” envelope the view. How are we to say of a function that it is unsaturated or even that it is a function without violating Frege’s doctrine? The very statement of Frege’s doctrine that functions are unsaturated violates its own proscriptions governing meaningfulness. This suggests to Conant an example of something literally meaningless and yet elucidatory. Diamond’s “resolute” reading of the *Tractatus* demands that its entries be regarded literally meaningless. In her work, the conceptual distance between Wittgenstein and Russell is maximized. Diamond writes:

My way of talking about what is in the book is meant to reflect Wittgenstein’s ideas about his own authorship: there are lines of thought which he wanted a reader of his book to pursue for himself. In the case of the *Tractatus*, one can add that there are lines of thought which he wanted Russell, as reader – Russell in particular – to pursue.

Far from an ally, Wittgenstein is now construed as antithetical to Russell’s philosophy. In Diamond’s view, parts of the *Tractatus* were intended as lessons of instruction for Russell.

The viability of such interpretations may seem surprising given that in the preface of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein disavows any “novelty in detail,” and mentions that he is “indebted to Frege’s great works and to the writings of my friend Mr. Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts.” But in present debates over the message of the *Tractatus* the historical fact that the themes of the *Tractatus* were developed under Russell’s mentorship is regarded as little more than a platitude. The curious events surrounding Wittgenstein’s failed efforts to publish the *Tractatus* are often cited to buttress this attitude.

Having been rejected by the publishers of Kraus, Weininger, and Frege, Wittgenstein beseeched Russell for help in bringing the work to press. Russell agreed to write an introduction, and on its basis Wittgenstein was able to negotiate with the Leipzig publishing house Reclam. Russell sent the introduction and quite naturally wrote that he would try to amend it if Wittgenstein found anything unsatisfactory in his remarks. Wittgenstein

responded by thanking Russell for the introduction, and included the following in his letter:

There's so much of it that I'm not in agreement with both where you are critical of me and also where you're simply trying to elucidate my point of view. But that doesn't matter. The future will pass judgment on us – or perhaps it won't, and if it is silent that will be a judgment too . . . The introduction is in the course of being translated and will then go with the treatise to the publisher. I hope he will accept them!

But when Wittgenstein sent the translated introduction to Reclam, he had a change of heart. He insisted that it was not to be published with the work but was only to help in the publisher’s own orientation with regard to the work’s significance. The note soured the deal with Reclam. Wittgenstein wrote a letter to Russell, taking responsibility and explaining that “when translated into German all the refinement of your English style was obviously lost in the translation and what remained was superficiality and misunderstanding.” Wittgenstein’s rejection of Russell’s introduction suggests that the problems and motivations for the theses of the *Tractatus* were not shared by Russell. This bolsters the view that the *Tractatus* was not a work in alliance with Russell’s philosophy. Accordingly, interpreters of the work have not felt constrained by the context of Russell’s philosophical positions, goals, successes, and desiderata.

Of course, all of this is set in the context of a fixed interpretation of Russell’s philosophy. But what were Russell’s philosophical positions? The answer is complicated. Russell’s philosophy evolved significantly in the years leading up to and after the publication of *Principia Mathematica*. Against which of Russell’s many philosophical theses was Wittgenstein allegedly rebelling? Hacker writes:

Both Frege and Russell conceived of the logical connectives as names of logical entities . . . Russell construed them as naming functions from propositions to propositions. This conception was linked to their idea that propositions are names of truth-values (Frege) or complexes (Russell). But it is a dire error to think that “p v q” has the same logical form as “aRb.”

Hacker awards Wittgenstein the “achievement” of having “freed himself of many of Russell’s deep confusions about the role of logical expressions.” But in the *Principia*, Russell had abandoned his early ontology of propositions and adopted the wedge (“v”) and the tilde (“~”) as *statement connectives*.

---

8 Ibid., p. 152.
11 Ibid., p. 22.
Rereading Russell and Wittgenstein

in just the modern sense. Hacker should award Wittgenstein the achievement of having agreed with *Principia* on the logical connectives. A gap in one’s understanding of Russell’s positions on the nature of logic easily distorts one’s picture of Wittgenstein. Quite clearly, the degree of distance found between the *Tractatus* and Russell’s philosophy depends on what one takes Russell’s philosophy to have been. Though Wittgenstein published little in his life, he left a voluminous Nachlass of worksheets. The years since the publication of the *Tractatus* have produced a good many distinct interpretations of its central theses. Time has produced something of a consensus, however, concerning the Tractarian criticisms of Russell’s philosophy, and this is the subject of the present book. Russell also left voluminous worksheets, and these have shed an entirely new light on Russell. Much of the consensus as to the nature of the Tractarian criticisms relies upon attributing to Russell positions he did not hold. In the last thirty years, there has been a significant rereading of Russell. Rereading Russell demands a rereading of Wittgenstein.

**Two dogmas of Russellian interpretation**

Two theses have dominated interpretations of Russell’s philosophy for many years. These two theses are so widely held that it is rare to find challenges to either in the vast literature on Russell. They are:

1. In *Principia Mathematica*, Russell advanced a ramified type-theory of entities.
2. Russell’s logical atomism is a form of reductive empiricism.

Russell’s manuscripts and work-notes reveal that both are false. To borrow a colorful phrase from Kant, the manuscripts awaken us from a dogmatic slumber. Rejecting the two dogmas of Russellian interpretation has very important consequences for rereading Russell and Wittgenstein.

Ray Monk’s recent biographies nicely illustrate how historical accounts of Russell and Wittgenstein are built upon the dogmas. The nature of the personal and intellectual relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein is invariably built around Russell’s letters to Ottoline Morrell. Much has been made, for instance, of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Russell’s multiple-relation theory of judgment, a theory first espoused in *Principia* and later worked out in Russell’s 1913 manuscript for a book on the theory of knowledge. In the wake of a storm of protest from Wittgenstein, Russell abruptly abandoned his book project some 350 pages toward its completion. One can find Russell writing Ottoline that Wittgenstein’s criticisms

---

were an event of first-rate importance in my life, and affected everything I have done since. I saw he was right, and I saw that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy. My impulse was shattered, like a wave dashed to pieces against a breakwater. I became filled with utter despair, and tried to turn to you for consolation.

Indeed, in the same letter Russell goes on to say that “Wittgenstein persuaded me that what wanted doing in logic was too difficult for me. So there was no really vital satisfaction of my philosophical impulse in that work, and philosophy lost its hold on me. That was due to Wittgenstein more than to the war.”\(^\text{13}\) When Russell writes Ottoline of despair of ever doing fundamental work in philosophy, of suicidal depression over failed work – feelings which, he says, were caused by exasperating exchanges with Wittgenstein – Monk seizes upon what he takes to be evidence of Wittgenstein’s transformation from Russell’s pupil to Russell’s master.

The exact nature of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Russell’s multiple-relation theory is, in fact, hard to pinpoint from the cryptic passages of the *Tractatus* and the remains of the exchanges between the two. On the interpretation advanced by Griffin and Sommerville – an interpretation that Monk assumes to be correct – Russell’s multiple-relation theory requires the assumption of *Principia’s* type-theory of entities. Wittgenstein allegedly rejected the theory of types of *Principia*, writing to Russell that “all theory of types must be done away with by a theory of symbolism showing that what seem to be different kinds of things are symbolized by different kinds of symbols which cannot possibly be substituted in one another’s places.”\(^\text{14}\)

Monk concludes that Wittgenstein was “jettisoning large parts of the logic that Russell had devised for *Principia*, in particular the theory of types.”\(^\text{15}\) Wittgenstein’s idea, then, is supposed to have been that the theory of types must be rendered superfluous by a proper theory of symbolism. Monk offers what he takes to be a stinging blow:

In the face of such a sweeping dismissal of his theory, Russell might have been expected to present a spirited defense of his position or at least some tough question as to how his logistic foundations of mathematics might avoid contradiction without a theory of types. But he had by this time abandoned logic almost entirely.\(^\text{16}\)

Monk’s interpretation weds itself to the thesis that Russell embraced an ontology of types of entities. This is understandable, for this is part of the orthodoxy and appears in a great many works on Russell’s philosophy of mathematics. For instance, Hacker writes, “It is easy to suppose, Wittgenstein remarked in his first onslaught upon the Theory of Types . . . that ‘individual,’ ‘particular,’ ‘complex,’ etc., are primitive ideas (Urzeichen). But in so doing, we forget that these are not primitive ideas.”17 Wittgenstein is often said to have pointed out that a type-theory of entities is not a solution but an ad hoc dodge of the paradoxes that confront logicism. He is said to have pointed out that Russell violates type-theoretical strictures in his effort to set out a theory of types of entities. Moreover, he is said to have revealed that ramified type-theory relies on contingent truths as if they could provide a foundation for logic. None of these interpretations can stand once it is discovered that Russell never embraced a theory of types of entities. This is just the discovery that faces us.

The dogma that Russell advanced a ramified type-theory of entities clouds the proper understanding of Wittgenstein. Russell’s manuscripts and publications reveal that he had worked steadfastly since 1905 to formulate a theory of symbolism which made the type distinctions that block the paradoxes part of the formal grammar of a type-free calculus for logic. Russell’s work reached an apex with his “substitutional theory” of propositional structure. This theory attempts to solve the paradoxes plaguing logicism by showing how logic can reconstruct mathematics without the ontological assumption that every open formula comprehends an entity (attribute or “propositional function”), and without the ontological assumption of classes. Russell’s manuscripts reveal that his work to build type and order distinctions into formal grammar evolved into the no-propositions, no-classes, and no-propositional function theory of *Principia*. Thus, the idea that grammar must supplant type distinctions among entities is a position Wittgenstein learned from Russell. It is not at all odd or perplexing, then, that Monk doesn’t find Russell worried about Wittgenstein’s alleged “sweeping dismissal of his [type-] theory.” There was no such dismissal because there was no type-theory of entities.

The rejection of the first dogma requires an entirely new picture of the intellectual and philosophical relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein. When Wittgenstein wrote that “all theories of types must be done away with by a theory of symbolism,” he surely was not criticizing Russell’s ontology of types of entities. There was no theory of types of entities in *Principia*. The demand that types be built into grammar was a lesson Russell taught him. We shall

argue that his point was that Russell had not gone far enough in building type distinctions into formal grammar. Russell relies on a difference between a universal and a particular (another “type” distinction, as Wittgenstein saw it). In Wittgenstein’s view, this must also be built into logical grammar.

Monk’s biographies attempt to explain issues pertaining to Russell’s life by tying them to his debates with Wittgenstein over philosophical logic. This is laudable, but it takes a serious risk. If one gets the philosophy wrong, the explanation collapses. In his efforts to demonstrate that Wittgenstein became Russell’s “master,” Monk relies on the dogmas of Russelian interpretation. But the dogmas are mistaken. Clarke’s 1975 biography of Russell started the “pupil becomes master” motif. He writes:

From the early summer of 1912 Wittgenstein’s relationship with Russell, little more than six months old, began to change. On paper it might still be that of pupil and teacher, but the teacher was already eager for the pupil’s opinion of his work.18

Monk expanded the theme significantly. As characterized by Monk, Wittgenstein began as Russell’s student, but was soon to become his intellectual master where the philosophy of logic and mathematics were concerned. They first met in October 1911 during Cambridge’s Michaelmas term. Wittgenstein continued in January 1912 and over the next term. As Monk tells the story, he pursued his studies in mathematical logic with such vigor that, by the end of it, Russell was to say that he had learned all he had to teach, and indeed gone further.19 Monk takes Russell literally, and would have us believe that Wittgenstein learned everything important Russell knew about mathematical logic in less than one year. By January 1913, Monk proclaims that the cooperation between the two has come to an end. “In the field of logic, Wittgenstein, far from being Russell’s student, had become Russell’s teacher.”20

Monk’s case is largely based on Russell’s self-deprecating letters to Ottoline. Yet there is a straightforward alternative explanation of the letters. Russell’s emotional life was a shambles during this period. His failed relationship with his first wife Alys was largely the cause. Lady Ottoline was his angel of mercy, his hope in new love for release from despair and suffering. Yet Ottoline was often aloof to Russell’s pouring sentimentality and took much of his letters as attempts to cajole her sympathies in hope of a level of intimacy and emotion she simply did not feel. Russell was then forty-one, and wanted a companion and children.21

Ottoline had no intention of abandoning her life with Philip Morrell and her daughter, and soon tired of Russell’s often maudlin declarations of suicidal feelings contrived to drive her away from them.

Russell’s letters to Ottoline must be read in the context of his technical work, otherwise they lend support to a skewed picture of events. One often-quoted letter concerns Wittgenstein’s “rewriting” of *Principia*. Russell once remarked to Ottoline that “Wittgenstein has persuaded me that the early parts of *Principia* are very inexact, but fortunately it is his business to put them right, not mine.” August 1913 dates the following entry in Pinsent’s diary: “It is probable that the first volume of *Principia* will have to be re-written, and Wittgenstein may write himself the first eleven chapters. That is a splendid triumph for him!” Monk takes this to provide evidence of Russell realizing his inferiority to Wittgenstein in mathematical logic and his bequeathing its foundations to his pupil. Monk writes:

These remarks are revealing. They show how Russell was still inclined to look upon Wittgenstein’s work as a kind of “fine tuning” of his own. He talks as if the inexactitude of the early parts of *Principia* are a mere detail, but those early parts contain the very foundation upon which the whole of the rest was built. And Wittgenstein was not repairing it, as Russell continued to think, but was demolishing it altogether.

The colorful image of the genius Austrian pupil who bested the most famous philosopher of the time now reaches a zenith.

This has become part of the folklore of Wittgenstein, but it does not pass technical scrutiny. Sections A and B of *Principia* consist of eleven starred numbers: *1–5* is the propositional system, *9, 10, and 11* concern quantification theory, *12* introduces Reducibility, *13* discuss identity, and *14* is Russell’s theory of definite descriptions. There were new technical developments concerning *1–5* that came to Russell’s attention in 1913. Sheffer read a paper to the American Mathematical Society on 31 December 1912 maintaining all the quantifier-free formulas of *Principia’s* sentential calculus can be expressed via one logical connective. Russell received Sheffer’s paper on 15 April 1913 and was interested in the revisions to *Principia* that it enables. The Sheffer stroke appears in Wittgenstein’s “Notes on Logic 1913” which were composed in Norway. With the intercession of Moore, these notes were later offered on Wittgenstein’s behalf so

22 Russell, Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 23 February 1913, ibid., p. 446.
that he would fulfill the dissertation requirement for a Research Student for the B.A. degree.\textsuperscript{27} It would not in the least belittle Russell’s stature as mentor if he had agreed that Wittgenstein should make it part of his work for the degree to find a new sentential deductive system based on Sheffer’s new connective, reducing the number of primitive principles of \textit{Principia}'s *1–*5. This is the likely explanation of the so-called “splendid triumph” that Pinsent mentions. But Wittgenstein did not find the reduction Nicod found in 1916. Nicod demonstrated that only one axiom, together with the rule of uniform substitution and one other inference rule governing Sheffer’s one logical connective, suffices to generate \textit{Principia}’s sentential calculus.\textsuperscript{28} Nicod died tragically in 1924. In the 1925 introduction to the second edition of \textit{Principia}, Russell recommended that Sheffer “rewrite” [foundational chapters of] the \textit{Principia} in accordance with the new methods.\textsuperscript{29}

There is no question that Wittgenstein had ideas for improving the philosophical foundations of \textit{Principia} and that Russell was enticed by them. But this provides no basis for Monk’s conclusion that Russell abandoned \textit{Principia} in favor of Wittgenstein’s work on logic. Russell was attracted to Wittgenstein’s suggestion that Reducibility would be obviated by the doctrine that “a [propositional function] can only occur through its values.”\textsuperscript{30} In the first edition of volume 1 of \textit{Principia}, Russell’s own remarks concerning the status of Reducibility are illuminating. He wrote:

although it seems very improbable that the axiom should turn out to be false, it is by no means improbable that it should be found to be deducible from some other more fundamental and more evident axiom. It is possible that the vicious circle principle, as embodied in the above hierarchy of types, is more drastic than it need be, and that by a less drastic use the necessity for the axiom might be avoided. Such changes, however, would not render anything false which has been asserted on the basis of the principles explained above: they would merely provide easier proofs of the same theorems.\textsuperscript{31}

In \textit{Principia}, Russell offered a pragmatic justification of Reducibility. He recognized that it is “not the sort of axiom about which one can rest content.”\textsuperscript{32} He maintained that some formulation embodying type structures must be correct, and expressed a hope that with further work in the

\textsuperscript{27} That Wittgenstein’s \textit{Notes on Logic} were submitted as a dissertation to fulfill the requirements of the B.A. degree is argued by McGuinness. See McGuinness, \textit{Wittgenstein}, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{28} Jean Nicod, “A Reduction in the Number of the Primitive Propositions of Logic,” \textit{Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society} 19 (1917): 32–41. The paper was read before the society on 30 October 1916.


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. xxix. \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 59 (quoted from the 2nd ed.).

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. xiv (quoted from the 2nd ed.).