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John W. Cook
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I

From Idealism to Pure Realism

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Wittgenstein's Philosophical Beginnings

Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge in 1911 to study with Russell, having a background in engineering and no formal training in philosophy.¹ Since 1908 he had been enrolled in the Engineering Department of Manchester University, where he had begun work on the design of an aircraft engine. His interest in this work was eventually supplanted by an interest in mathematics and the foundations of mathematics when a fellow student directed him to Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics*. This began a chain of events that led him to Cambridge in October 1911, where he spent the next five terms at Trinity College as Russell's student and protégé.

At Cambridge his interest in the foundations of mathematics was augmented by Russell's concern with epistemology. This was not completely new territory for Wittgenstein, for, as Anscombe reports: "As a boy of sixteen Wittgenstein had read Schopenhauer and had been greatly impressed by Schopenhauer's theory of the 'world as idea' (though not of the 'world as will'); Schopenhauer then struck him as fundamentally right, if only a few adjustments and clarifications were made."² Similarly, Von Wright reports: "If I remember correctly, Wittgenstein told me that he had read Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* as a youth and that his first philosophy was a Schopenhauerian epistemological idealism."³ This is confirmed by a passage in Wittgenstein's pre-*Tractatus* notebooks, in which he describes his philosophical development as having begun with idealism (NB, p. 85). With such a philosophical orientation he must have received a rude shock at Cambridge, for idealism had recently come under attack by both Moore and Russell.

What Wittgenstein encountered there can be partly inferred from Russell's account of his own development.

During 1898, various things caused me to abandon both Kant and Hegel. . . . But these motives would have operated more slowly than they did, but for the influence of G. E. Moore. He also had a Hegelian period, but it was briefer than mine. He took the lead in rebellion, and I followed with a sense of emancipation. Bradley argued that everything that common sense believes in is mere appearance; we reverted to the opposite extreme, and thought that *everything* is real that common sense, uninfluenced by philosophy or theology, supposes real.⁴

What Russell fails to mention here is that he and Moore did nothing to challenge the idea that what we perceive (or 'directly perceive') are sense-impressions, not tables, chairs and people. The result was that they both embraced mind–body dualism, and, moreover, they took this to be the “common sense view of the world.”⁵ In doing so, they departed from the tradition, beginning with Berkeley, that seeks to overcome philosophical skepticism regarding ‘the external world’ by embracing phenomenalism. As a result, they were obliged to address the various forms of skepticism that dualism introduces.⁶ Yet Russell and Moore dealt with these problems in distinctly different ways.

In crediting Moore with leading the rebellion, Russell was no doubt referring to Moore's essay “The Refutation of Idealism,” published in 1903,⁷ and over the years Moore continued to sharpen his attack on idealism. In his 1910–1911 lectures, published much later as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, he undertook to criticize phenomenalism as well, maintaining that both theories are not only untrue but are sharply at odds with the way the plain man, the nonphilosopher, thinks of himself and the world – at odds, as he put it, with “the Common Sense view of the world.” In 1914, in “The Status of Sense-Data,” Moore presented a somewhat improved version of what he had said in 1910, arguing this time that phenomenalism fails to accommodate “the natural sense” of certain of our everyday words.⁸ (In particular, he argued that, contrary to Berkeley, a counterfactual analysis of such a sentence as “The pot boiled over while no one was watching” misrepresents what the plain man would mean by that.) In the same essay Moore maintained that the only plausible account of the relation of sense-data and material things is the Lockean view that material things are distinct from, and the cause of, sense-data. And yet he acknowledged that such a view presents a major problem, for it makes it difficult to see *how* we could ever know that there are material things causing our sense-data and how we could know what qualities material things have.⁹ This is a difficulty Moore never satisfactorily overcame.¹⁰

Russell, although he may have been goaded by Moore to abandon idealism, followed a very different route. By 1914, in *Our Knowledge of the External World*,¹¹ he had adopted a position quite the opposite of Moore's, for he rejected the causal theory of perception and devised a reductionist account of material things. On one point, however, he agreed with Moore: he allowed that the plain man *believes* in the existence of a world of material things beyond sense-data. Russell's reductionist account, then, was not intended to rescue common sense from skepticism. On this point he was prepared to say only that “*in so far as physics or common sense is verifiable, it must be capable of interpretation in terms of actual sense-data alone,*”¹² thus leaving himself the option of declaring that the plain man regularly believes things

and says things that cannot be known to be true. The maxim, as he called it, for his style of philosophy was this: "Whenever possible, logical constructions are to be substituted for inferred entities."¹³ Here we see Russell's indifference to ordinary language: his logical constructions were not intended to analyze things the plain man says but to provide (verifiable) substitutes for them wherever "inferred entities" are mentioned or presupposed. As for skepticism, Russell could only say that, while no one tries to live by this philosophy, it is "logically irrefutable."¹⁴ This, one could say, was the principal difference between Russell and Moore: while Moore labored to defend (his dualistic version of) common sense against skepticism, Russell was sure that no such defense can succeed and so concerned himself with devising logical constructions that bore only a distant resemblance (or none at all) to what the plain man thinks and says.

This, then, was part of the philosophical atmosphere in which Wittgenstein found himself at Cambridge, and it will be instructive to consider how he reacted to it. Although deeply influenced by idealism, he must have been impressed by the fact that Moore and Russell were arguing that idealism is a very peculiar view, one that is certainly at odds with the way we all normally think of ourselves and the world. And yet Moore and Russell were not in agreement on the proper alternative to idealism. There was, therefore, much that remained unsettled, and Wittgenstein was obliged to make some fateful choices at this early point in his career, choices that shaped not only the *Tractatus* but his later writings as well. To understand the choices he made, we need to consider the alternatives available to him.

First of all, it never occurred to Wittgenstein to challenge the very idea of sense-impressions (or sensible qualities), and that fact limited his options in a most important way. It forced him into a choice between joining Moore in embracing Locke's causal theory of the relation of sense-data and material things or following other empiricists in adopting a reductionist (phenomenalist) account of the 'external world.' This choice could not have been difficult to make, for like other philosophers of the period Wittgenstein must have been dissatisfied with the causal theory of perception. Russell, in his 1914 essay "The Relation of Sense-data to Physics," stated the objection as follows:

But how is the correlation itself [between physical objects and sense-data] ascertained? A correlation can only be ascertained empirically by the correlated objects being constantly *found* together. But in our case, only one term of the correlation, namely, the sensible term, is ever *found*: the other term [i.e., the supposed physical cause] seems essentially incapable of being found. Therefore, it would seem, the correlation with objects . . . is itself utterly and for ever unverifiable.¹⁵

This argument, which Wittgenstein was later to state as his own (see

WL32, p. 81), had far-reaching consequences in Wittgenstein's thinking. For the argument can be generalized as an objection to *any* view that holds that we have inductive evidence for something *essentially* unverifiable. (To state the matter using terminology Wittgenstein later adopted, Russell's argument is that one could not have a reason to treat Xs as *symptoms* of Ys unless Xs and Ys had been regularly observed to go together, which would be possible only if Xs and Ys are *both* observable phenomena.¹⁶) There cannot, then, be *evidence* for the existence of anything that transcends experience, and so (assuming that beliefs arise from evidence) it can't be the case that anyone *believes* in anything that transcends experience. Accordingly, when Wittgenstein explained the *Tractatus* to Frank Ramsey in 1923, he said that it is "nonsense to believe in anything not given in experience."¹⁷ Or, as he said later, "It isn't possible to believe something for which you cannot imagine some kind of verification" (PR, p. 89).¹⁸

This point has an obvious bearing on what Moore and Russell held in regard to 'common sense': both maintained that the plain man holds a dualistic view of the world. Because this saddles the plain man with beliefs in a variety of transcendent entities, Wittgenstein was obliged to dismiss this account as nonsensical. (For the same reason he could not have agreed with Russell that the philosopher's job is to substitute logical constructions for what the plain man says, for this view of philosophy also derives from the assumption that the plain man constantly assumes the existence of various transcendent – or "inferred" – entities.) Later, in *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein made this point explicit by saying that "the common-sense philosopher [i.e., Moore] . . . *n.b.* is not the common-sense man, who is as far from realism as from idealism" (BB, p. 48). This comes to: the common-sense man is not a realist in that he does not speak of things that transcend experience but is also not an idealist in that he does not doubt (or deny) the existence of tables, chairs and other people.¹⁹

In reviewing Wittgenstein's options, then, there are various things we can rule out: the Lockean view of perception, the dualistic view of 'common sense,' and the idea that philosophers must content themselves with inventing logical constructions. What can we rule in?

In Wittgenstein's pre-*Tractatus* notebooks there is a group of remarks, dated 1 May, 1915, in which Wittgenstein contrasts his own views with Russell's. The most significant of these are the following:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but *obvious nonsense* if it tries to doubt where no question can be asked.

For doubt can only exist where a question exists; a question can only exist where an answer exists, and this can only exist where something *can* be said. . . .²⁰

My method is not to sift the hard from the soft [as Russell claims to do], but to see the hardness of the soft (NB, p. 44).

In the first of these remarks Wittgenstein is clearly dismissing Russell's view (see above) that skepticism is "logically irrefutable." Taken together, however, these remarks are a commentary on Russell's distinction between "hard and soft data." In *Our Knowledge of the External World* Russell explained this as follows:

I mean by "hard" data those [beliefs] which resist the solvent influence of critical reflection, and by "soft" data those which, under the operation of this process, become to our minds more or less doubtful. The hardest of hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense, and the general truths of logic. . . .

Certain common beliefs are undoubtedly excluded from hard data. Such is the belief . . . that sensible objects persist when we are not perceiving them. Such also is the belief in other people's minds . . .²¹

What Russell here calls "critical reflection" he identifies on a later page as philosophical skepticism, saying that it is essential to philosophy "to practise methodological doubt, like Descartes" in order to subject our naive beliefs to "the ordeal of sceptical criticism."²² By this process, says Russell, we discover which of our beliefs are "capable of a true interpretation," i.e., which are "hard data." For Russell, then, a central question of philosophy was this: Which of the propositions of ordinary language are (as he put it) capable of interpretation in terms of actual sense-data alone? And, owing to his dualistic view of 'common sense,' he was obliged to hold that *some* of these propositions – *some* of the things we commonly say – fail this test. It was in opposition to this that Wittgenstein said that his own method, by contrast, "is to see the hardness of the soft." By this he meant that his method is to show that all the propositions of our everyday language belong to a phenomenological language.²³ At the time of the *Tractatus* he took this to mean that what the plain man says in speaking of tables and chairs can be analyzed into propositions about phenomenal entities. Later on, as I will show, he came to think that the *Tractatus* version of reductionism was mistaken and, under the influence of Wolfgang Kohler, replaced it with a subtler form of phenomenalism.

To make good this position, what Wittgenstein found himself in need of was not a new solution to skepticism regarding 'the external world,' for other empiricists – beginning with Berkeley – had already blazed that trail. What he needed was a way of embracing phenomenalism without falling into solipsism, i.e., without remaining a skeptic in regard to other minds.²⁴ Because Russell at this time remained a dualist, he was prepared to leave other minds in limbo: he rejected the argument from analogy and concluded that one cannot know whether any other person exists.²⁵ Finding this unacceptable, Wittgenstein turned for a solution to a radical form of empiricism which was much in vogue at the time: neutral monism.²⁶ This theory, which originated with William James and Ernst Mach, holds that the world consists, not of mind and matter,

but of “pure experience.” Or as Mach put it, “the world consists only of our sensations.”²⁷ The radical feature of neutral monism is that, unlike idealism, it does not hold that everything is mental or *in* a mind. On the contrary, it claims to eliminate altogether the (Cartesian) mind or ego, thus doing away with the subjectivity of experience. In this view, then, there is nothing that is subjective (or private) and therefore there is nothing that is unknowable: not only are such things as tables and chairs given in immediate experience, but so, too, are the thoughts, feelings, desires, etc. of other people.²⁸ This, then, was the view Wittgenstein adopted in the *Tractatus*.

In the next chapter I will provide a fuller account of neutral monism and evidence of Wittgenstein's adoption of this view. Before turning to that, however, there is a misconception regarding the *Tractatus* that I must address here.

Anscombe, in her influential book on the *Tractatus*, says that “empiricist or idealist preconceptions . . . are a thorough impediment to the understanding of . . . the *Tractatus*.”²⁹ She goes on to say that “there is hardly any epistemology in the *Tractatus*.”³⁰ What Wittgenstein was chiefly concerned with, according to Anscombe, were questions about naming and reference and other matters having to do with language. And these questions, she thinks, are unrelated to any epistemological concerns.³¹ This interpretation of the *Tractatus* is utterly insulated from history.

Neutral monism, Wittgenstein's chosen ontology, was designed specifically to solve epistemological problems. So far as language is concerned, what Wittgenstein thought was this: to make an iron-clad case against skepticism what is needed is a theory of meaning that shows that the very nature of language precludes a philosopher from raising questions about (or expressing a belief in) the existence of anything not given in experience. Such a theory is needed, he thought, because philosophers have supposed that they could understand, could make sense of, such unanswerable ‘questions’ and unverifiable ‘beliefs.’ Indeed, Russell, in his 1910 essay “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description,” had undertaken to show how this is possible: “. . . among the objects with which we are acquainted are not included physical objects (as opposed to sense-data), nor other people's minds. These things are known to us by what I call ‘knowledge by description’ . . .”³² He illustrates this by declaring that although we cannot refer to a table directly, since it is not given in experience, we can still speak of it by means of a definite description of the form “the physical object which causes such and such sense-data.” In this way, said Russell, “knowledge by description . . . enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience.”³⁴ In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein un-

dertook to show that neither this nor any other theory of reference could make it possible to speak of (or think of) entities not given in experience.³⁵ To show this, he devised a theory of language based on the idea that in order for a proposition to have sense it must be connected to the world – to *experience* – by means of unanalyzable names. If language consists, in the last analysis, of elementary propositions which are (as he put it) “configurations” of such names (TLP, 3.21), this will show that, contrary to Russell, one cannot by means of definite descriptions refer to entities that are not given in experience and may not exist.³⁶ To understand Wittgenstein, then, it is essential to recognize that he meant to show in the *Tractatus* that the only possible language is a phenomenological language and that therefore the epistemological problems posed by philosophical skeptics (since they cannot be formulated in a phenomenological language) are pseudo questions; they are, as he put it, *obvious nonsense*. This is why Wittgenstein could say in the *Tractatus* that “the reason why [philosophical] problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood” (TLP, p. 3).

So Anscombe's interpretation profoundly misrepresents the *Tractatus*. Worse yet, by failing to recognize Wittgenstein's concern with skepticism and the way this concern dictated his views about language, her interpretation hinders a proper understanding of the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*, both of which, as I will show, presuppose an acceptance of neutral monism.

If one wants to understand Wittgenstein, one must recognize that the fundamental assumption of the *Tractatus* is a metaphysical one, namely, that neutral monism alone provides the means for solving epistemological problems, and that this same premise underlies the *Investigations*, so that the two works are fundamentally alike and their differences relatively unimportant. The common premise of the two books is that Moore and Russell were both wrong about ordinary language, for in everyday life we do not refer to anything that transcends immediate experience. In short, Wittgenstein took the position that philosophical problems can be solved by reductionism. And the difference between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, as the chapters which follow will demonstrate, lies chiefly in the fact that after 1929 he replaced his early version of reductionism with another.

Notes

1. In May 1912 Wittgenstein's friend David Pinset wrote in his diary: “Wittgenstein has only just started reading [in philosophy] and he expresses the most naive surprise that all the philosophers he once worshipped in ignorance are after all stupid and dishonest and make disgusting mistakes.”

- Quoted by Brian McGuinness in *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig 1889–1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 104.
2. G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London, 1959), pp. 11–12.
 3. G. H. von Wright, "Biographical Sketch," op. cit., p. 5.
 4. Bertrand Russell, "My Mental Development," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (New York, 1944), pp. 11–12.
 5. Thus, in his 1915 essay "The Ultimate Constituents of Matter" (reprinted in *Mysticism and Logic*, George Allen and Unwin: London, 1951) Russell writes: "Common sense is accustomed to the division of the world into mind and matter" (p. 125), and he goes on to speak of "the dualism of common sense" (p. 126).
 6. Russell, in 1912, stated the matter as follows: "... the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known. Hence, two very difficult questions at once arise; namely, (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be?" [*The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 11].
 7. Reprinted in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), pp. 1–30.
 8. Reprinted in *Philosophical Studies*, op. cit., pp. 191 and 195. By 1914 Moore and Wittgenstein had become well acquainted (see "An Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp [Tudor: New York, 1942], p. 33), and there is internal evidence that suggests that various things Wittgenstein later wrote (e.g., PI, §116) were directed at Moore's attack on phenomenalism in "The Status of Sense-data."
 9. "The Status of Sense-Data," op. cit., p. 196. In later years Moore was to say that one way in which he differed from philosophical skeptics is that "I am inclined to think that what is 'based on' an analogical or inductive argument, in the sense in which my knowledge or belief that this is a pencil is so, may nevertheless be certain knowledge and *not* merely more or less probable belief" [Four Forms of Scepticism" in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Macmillan, 1959) pp. 225–226].
 10. See my essay "Moore and Scepticism" in *Knowledge and Mind*, eds. Carl Ginet and Sydney Shoemaker (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 3–25.
 11. Published by George Allen and Unwin: London, 1926, pp. 83–93. There can be no doubt that Wittgenstein was familiar with Russell's book, for he makes a number of comments on it in his pre-*Tractatus* notebooks (NB, p. 44)
 12. *Our Knowledge of the External World*, op. cit., pp. 88–89.
 13. "The Relation of Sense-data to Physics," reprinted in *Mysticism and Logic*, op. cit., p. 155.
 14. *Our Knowledge of the External world*, op. cit., p. 74.
 15. Op. cit., pp. 145–146.
 16. In lectures (see LSD, pp. 12–13, quoted in Chapter 9) Wittgenstein invoked this generalized version of Russell's argument to declare that one is guilty of a *contradiction* if one says both (i) another person's behavior gives us a *clue* to his mental states and (ii) we can't observe the mental states of other people.
 17. Quoted from Ramsey's notes by Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 77.

18. The fact that the argument I have stated here is not made explicit in the *Tractatus* was typical of Wittgenstein's general unwillingness to present arguments for his own views. Russell, in a letter dated 28 May, 1912, said of Wittgenstein:

I told him he ought not simply to *state* what he thinks true, but to give arguments for it, but he said arguments spoil its beauty, and that he would feel as if he was dirtying a flower with muddy hands. I told him I hadn't the heart to say anything against that, and that he had better acquire a slave to state the arguments. I am seriously afraid that no one will see the point of anything he writes, because he won't recommend it by arguments addressed to a different point of view. (Quoted by Brian McGuinness in *Wittgenstein: A Life*, op. cit., p. 104.)

19. A comment is in order here about the term "idealism." In a passage quoted above, Russell says that Bradley, an idealist, argued "that everything that common sense believes in is mere appearance." As thus understood, idealism maintains that tables and chairs, for example, are not real. In *Our Knowledge of the External World* Russell describes idealism as a philosophy that "condemns almost all that makes up our everyday world: things and qualities, relations, space, time, change, causation, activity, the self. All these things, though in some sense facts which qualify reality, are not real as they appear. What is real is one, single, indivisible, timeless whole, called the Absolute" (op. cit., p. 16). Russell also calls this position "universal scepticism" (ibid., pp. 74 and 78). Wittgenstein at some point adopted Russell's usage, in which idealism is identified as a form of skepticism. Thus, in *On Certainty* he writes: "The idealist's question would be something like: 'What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?'" (OC, §24). In his 1931 lectures we find him setting up the following contrast: whereas "idealists were right in that we never transcend experience," "realists were right in protesting that chairs do exist" (WL32, p. 80), thus implying that idealists do not allow that chairs exist. Wittgenstein, we might say, came to think that Moore and Russell each had a part of the truth, Moore's being that common sense is philosophically defensible, Russell's being that whatever is philosophically defensible must not transcend immediate experience.
20. These first two sentences were retained in the *Tractatus* at 6.51. In 1930 Wittgenstein said in his conversations with Waismann: "... it is only the method of answering a question that tells you what the question was really about. Only when I have answered a question can I know what it was aimed at. (The sense of a proposition is the method of its verification.)" (WVC, p. 79).
21. Op. cit., pp. 77–79.
22. Ibid., p. 242.
23. Moore, despite his rejection of phenomenalism, had said that it has one great advantage over other theories, for "it enables us to see, more clearly than any other view can, how our knowledge of physical propositions can be based on our experience of sensibles" ("The Status of Sense-Data," op. cit., p. 190). Wittgenstein, apparently, found this sufficient recommendation and for the rest of his life took it for granted that some version of phenomenalism must be correct. Even as late as 1948 Wittgenstein praised Berkeley as "a very deep thinker" (see Introduction, this volume), the relevance of this being that Berkeley, while debunking the idea of material things, claimed not to be denying the existence of tables and chairs.