

A New Reading of Russell's 'Introduction' to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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Contrary to the "standard reading" on the subject (Eames 1989, Hylton 1990, Hacker 1996), the presupposition that Russell's philosophy entered into "bankruptcy" with the impact of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has no historical and philosophical basis, be it at the time of Russell's reading of the manuscript of that book, in 1919, or at its publishing date (1921), or later. That presupposition wrongly identifies Russell's views at the time of the "Introduction" to that book with a naïve atomism, based on the confusion between logic, psychology and epistemology, to which he would have renounced in the face of a purified and more advantageous approach of logic than that of the *Tractatus*. From this perspective, this book would itself expose, in a sense, an atomist view of logic, but, contrary to what happens with Russell's, a perfectly consistent one. In this paper, I will try to show that the essential point of the "Introduction" is that Russell, whose philosophy in the meantime had evolved to a view on the vagueness of ordinary language that I will designate as "partial semantic holism", could not share Wittgenstein's concept of logic, and, especially, a more or less radical holism that seems to characterize it, leading not only to mysticism but, generally, to the idea of the impossibility of philosophy itself.

Let's start with the interpretation of Russell's concept of vagueness according to the "standard reading". One of its first subscribers (Iglesias 1977 and 1981) rightly points out that, strictly speaking, not one but two "Introductions" to the *Tractatus* exist, and that the essential aspect of the difference between the second (published in the English version of that book) and the first one is the introduction of a decisive passage in which Russell attributes to Wittgenstein the idea of a logically perfect language under the pretext that "In practice, language is always more or less vague, so that what we assert is never quite precise." (Russell 1988, 101) Nevertheless, the vagueness which Russell refers to in this passage, as either the paper "On Propositions" (1919), either *The Analysis of Mind* (1921) or the essay "Vagueness" (1923) show, can in no way be confounded with a simple property of the representations of ordinary language (see Russell 1988a, 147-148). This "naïve" concept of vagueness, from Russell's side, existed in fact in the philosophy of logical atomism up to 1919 (see Russell 1986, 174) and, particularly, up to the wake of the doctrine of neutral monism, but from the twenties on, that is, at the time of the *Introduction* to the *Tractatus*, he began to interpret his concept of vagueness in semantic terms.

More or less at the same time that Wittgenstein seems to defend in the *Tractatus* a classic and atomist theory regarding the meanings of the words of ordinary language (Wittgenstein ²1933, 4-025), Russell holds a holistic view according to which meaning, in general, is given to us only through the use of language. It is just such a use that explains the vagueness in ordinary language. In "On Propositions"(1919), he observes in this respect: "A word has a meaning, more or less vague; but the meaning is only to be discovered by observing its use: the use come first, and the meaning is distilled out of it." (Russell 1986a, 290) And in the "Lecture X" of *The Analysis of Mind*, two years later, he develops such theory: "It is not necessary,

in order that a man should 'understand' a word, that he should 'know what it means', in the sense of being able to say 'this word means so-and-so'. (...) Understanding language is more like understanding cricket: it is a matter of habits, acquired in oneself and rightly presumed in others. To say that a word has a meaning is not to say that those who use the word correctly have ever thought out what the meaning is: the use of the word comes first, and the meaning is to be distilled out of it by observation and analysis. Moreover, the meaning of a word is not absolutely definite: there is always a greater or less degree of vagueness." (Russell ¹¹1978, 197-198)

As *The Analysis of Mind* shows, the epistemological problems connected with the (so-called) "theory-laden observation" are at the hub of Russell's theory of meaning: if the datum is always already impregnated with theory, that is, only is "datum" in the light of a certain theory, "It follows that no datum is theoretically indubitable, since no belief is indubitable." (Russell ¹¹1978, 297-298) In how far can we say that no datum really exists as such and thus is essentially different from the theory itself? Russell, having in mind the *Tractatus*, would say that philosophical analysis implies the inexistence of a pure datum, free of interpretation, and that, thus, such a datum is a fiction; but he would add that theory demands the postulate of the existence of a pure datum as a condition of its own possibility, even if that datum is always already impregnated by an interpretation. The analysis in question in the *Tractatus*, from this point of view, is imposed by the semantic relativity between the complex and the simple, not by the fact that the complex is ultimately composed by the simple, however remote this may be (Russell 1988, 148). In other words: the "complex" is complex on account of that relativity, and not because in the last analysis it is composed or constituted by the simple; the indeterminacy of the complex is the semantic indeterminacy of our representations and of meaning in general, and is such indeterminacy that makes it exactly what it is ("complex").

Now, in the "Introduction" Russell attributes implicitly to the *Tractatus* this notion of semantic relativity we have been analysing (Russell 1988, 101-102), although such type of semantic holism, which Quine made very well-known under the name of "indeterminacy of translation", seems generally to be absent from that book and, generally, from Wittgenstein's so-called "first philosophy". Anyhow, the essential point is that Russell's logically perfect language and that of Russell's "Wittgenstein", that is, the same logically perfect language that Russell to a certain amount attributes to Wittgenstein, has as fundamental purpose (contrary to the "standard reading" on the subject), not to re-establish a "precision" and "exactness" definitely estranged by the very generality and ambiguity of the vagueness of ordinary language, but just to enable a logical and ontological analysis of the world through it, which apparently is compromised by the semantic indeterminacy of our representations and of meaning in general (see Russell ⁴1973, 117-118).

In how far can we say that Wittgenstein holds a holistic view on meaning in the *Tractatus*, as has been suggested by some interpretations (McCarthy 1991)? I will

distinguish here, briefly, two sorts of radical holistic views in that book, even if they are somehow connected: one semantic, rejected by Russell, and another characteristically logical, or logico-structural, which he would partially accept.

The argumentation in favor of a semantic holism from Wittgenstein's side is particularly important regarding the problems of the justification of the logical form of atomic propositions and the legitimacy of solipsism, on which the well-known theory of the *Tractatus* that in any case we can't transgress the limits of language to treat its existence as a fact is based: if that form, which represents (*Darstellung*) the form of the corresponding facts, could in its turn be "represented", that is, if we could "represent" in its turn the *whole* in which that representation consists, our explication would be empty and self-contradictory, because that "representation" would position itself outside the limits of factual language that is supposed to *represent* in the first place (Wittgenstein ²1933, 4-12, 4-121). Similarly, in the case of solipsism, if the limits of logic are the limits of the world and of language itself as a *whole*, as shown in the *Tractatus*, no language, without denying itself, can identify and mention the point of view based on which world and language can be understood (Wittgenstein ²1933, 5-62, 5-63, 5-632, 5-633, 5-641). (This is just, as we know, the case of the logical language of the *Tractatus* itself.) In both cases, Wittgenstein's argumentation uses the idea of an essential semantic relativity in which the supposed justification incurs to turn it against itself, and he does so not simply from the viewpoint of the resulting unavoidable circularity, but above all from the viewpoint of the contradictions between the *logical scope* to which normally belongs that justification and which is given through the set of conditions of the possibility of the "form of representation" treated in a first part of the *Tractatus*, and the *original semantic scope* in question (the scope of the representation as a whole, that is, in its essential relation with the world).

Certainly, as D. McCarthy has shown, the doctrine of logic itself, in the *Tractatus*, is holistic, in the sense that its categories and fundamental properties, globally considered, express the categories and fundamental properties of the world considered as a whole (McCarthy 1991). As Wittgenstein says: "Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits." (Wittgenstein ²1933, 5-61) Nevertheless, one of the fundamental differences between semantic holism and logical holism is that the latter is essentially a logico-structural holism which is indifferent to the problem of the semantic relativity between logic and the world (or between "theory" and the "datum"), in the sense that the conditions of the possibility of representation in general, which we referred to above, are essentially syntactical or logico-structural conditions, not semantic ones. In contrast, semantic holism, coming to the conclusion of an essential impossibility to renounce language as a universal *medium* of thinking and establishing what the Hintikka call the "ineffability of semantics" (Hintikka 1986), that is, the illegitimacy of any discourse about language which would not be itself subordinated to its own possibility conditions (which are already essentially given through it), exposes a real semantic relativity, which seems to be completely absent in logical holism.

The problem of holism is subjacent to the whole of Russell's "Introduction" and, especially, to the "conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language" (Russell 1988, 101). Russell thought, as I have already suggested, that his notion of a partial semantic holism was somehow accepted by Wittgenstein's theory of showing, and, therefore, that the *Tractatus* would accept and develop such a language in order to avoid the pernicious holistic consequences of that theory. This explains why he interpretes that book as if it was possible for Wittgenstein, in order to escape from mysticism, to abandon his radical version of semantic holism and to adopt Russell's hierarchy of types-languages (Russell 1988, 111-112), or why he was prepared to accept, with some restrictions, several important points of Wittgenstein's doctrine of "pure logic" (Russell 1988, 105-107). But, in the end, it is obvious in the "Introduction" that Russell could not accept Wittgenstein's holistic starting-points. The crux of his argumentation is, of course, the theory of showing, and, especially, the thesis that it is not legitimate to represent the logical form common to propositions and facts, or, if one prefers, to *represent the whole in which such a relation consists*. That thesis, when applied to logic in general, leads, according to him, to mysticism and to the final impossibility of philosophy (Russell 1988, 108). The "representation" is only really one as long as it is a representation of facts, and any claim to represent it in its turn independently from that essential relation, as happens in the philosophical discourse, is necessarily empty and self-contradictory, or, as Russell would say resorting to his own concept, "bad grammar" (Russell 1988, 103), that is, it violates the logical syntax that is at the basis of the possibility of meaning in general while trying to construct a metasyntax that would justify it. The point, for Russell, regarding our impossibility to represent the "form of representation" in general, is, it is worth underlining, that Wittgenstein's solution for the problem of the semantic relativity inherent to that representation implies the acceptance of a radical holism as far as the doctrine of logic itself presupposes *an exit to outside the world and language as a whole*. As he says: "The totalities concerning which Mr. Wittgenstein holds that is impossible to speak logically are nevertheless thought by him to exist." (Russell 1988, 111-112) What constitutes a problem is not the apparent internal contradiction of Wittgenstein's theory, making statements prohibited by the theory itself, but rather this other fundamental circumstance that a radical holism in philosophy does not possess any internal criterion (as is the case of the "logically perfect language" for Russell's partial semantic holism) that would permit to really justify itself.

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