

Farewell to the Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*?

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In recent years, new interpretations on the works of Frege and Russell have emerged, challenging the received view on their respective goals. Because Wittgenstein acknowledges the influence from Frege and Russell in the *Tractatus*, it stands to reason that the changes in the former are reflected in the latter. Regrettably, the focus of such *Tractatus*-interpretations has been partisan. In what follows, I will delineate and defend a bipartisan interpretation of the *Tractatus*. As an upshot, I challenge the motivation behind the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*.

First, the key for deciding the extent of Frege's and Russell's respective influence on the *Tractatus* can be found in Wittgenstein's pre-*Tractatus* writings. Warren Goldfarb, having investigated these, argues that

[a]lthough one sees a significant amount of concern with Frege, there is little evidence of a full appreciation of Frege's views, and no evidence of Wittgenstein working through those views from within. Rather, the basic framework and the basic stance are thoroughly inherited from Russell; and the working through them, from within [...] is visible (Goldfarb 2002, 197).

Even if this evidence suggests that Russell was the chief influence on the *Tractatus*, we cannot categorically dismiss Frege. The picture before us suggests that *Tractatus* was a Russellian project, complemented by Fregean elements conspicuously absent from Russell's works (such as the notion of elucidation).

Given this, what exactly was Russell's project that Wittgenstein inherited? Russell answers this in the following:

The adoption of scientific method in philosophy [...] compels us to abandon the hope of solving many of the more ambitious and humanly interesting problems of traditional philosophy. Some of these it relegates [...] to special sciences, others it shows to be such as our capacities are essentially incapable of solving. But there remains a large number of the recognized problems of philosophy in regard to which the method advocated gives all those advantages of division into distinct questions, of tentative, partial, and progressive advance (Russell 1914/1974, 118-119).

So how are we to understand Russell's 'scientific method of philosophy'? According to Gregory Landini, this is, essentially, an eliminativistic programme. Commonly, Russell's *Lectures on Logical Atomism* is regarded as the paradigm for his early philosophy. But using the lectures as a paradigm for early Russell is not only anachronistic but also misleading. Instead, Landini turns to Russell's earlier, oft-neglected works. Using Russell's substitutional theory of 1905/06 as the source, a strikingly different paradigm, accentuating the eliminativism of Russell's philosophy emerges. An example of this method is found in Russell's 1905 paper "On 'Insolubilia' and their Solution by Symbolic Logic", which discusses different approaches to resolve the problems with class theories, and advocates abandoning classes from ontology as a solution to the paradox of classes. Although Russell recognizes the inherent difficulty in carrying out the task, he contends that his substitutional theory can accomplish this. This shows that Russell's ap-

proach is not reductivistic but eliminativistic: classes are not *reduced* into other entities, but they are *eliminated* from ontology. By employing the substitutional theory, Russell reconstructs class structures (those deemed worth preserving) using propositions, avoiding ontological commitment to classes as entities. Landini summarizes Russell's method as follows:

Russell's logical atomism was precisely a conception of philosophy as eliminativistic analysis, reconceptualization, and reconstruction. The ontology of an old theory is abandoned (or obviated). Only structures of the old theory are recovered (when possible). [...] The method advocates a form of structural realism, for it *retains* only the structure given by the laws of the old ontological framework (just as Maxwell's equations for electromagnetic waves in an aether are retained in Einstein's no-aether theory of relativity) (Landini 2003, 115).

Although this overview is brief, it suffices for grasping the essence of Russell's eliminativistic method. As for Russell's influence on Wittgenstein, it is obvious that the eliminativism should be acknowledged. But what is its role in the *Tractatus*? A close reading of the *Tractatus* shows that it is written in the spirit of Russell's philosophy:

Wittgenstein was Russell's protégé, [...] enthralled by the many successes of Russell's eliminativistic programme, which made logical analysis, followed by logical synthesis (construction), the essential task of philosophy. In reading the *Tractatus*, it is essential to keep in mind that Wittgenstein *accepted* Russell's eliminativism as part of his own programme (Landini 2003, 118).

Now, what about the Fregean elements of the *Tractatus*? To understand these, I will turn to James Conant's interpretation of the notion of 'elucidation' that occurs both in Frege's and Wittgenstein's works. To properly understand 'elucidation', we need to recourse to Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, a formula language for the expression of pure thought, and distinct from ordinary language; the relation of these two is illustrated by comparing the latter to a microscope and the former to the eye. Yet even if the *Begriffsschrift* helps in uncovering the illusions due to ordinary language, it cannot do without the help from ordinary language. The primitive notions of a theory are not susceptible to formal definitions within that theory; they must be introduced by elucidations in ordinary language. These in turn cannot be translated into the *Begriffsschrift*. For the elucidations to succeed, they must be understood as transitional; they must be understood as nonsensical when judged by the standards of the *Begriffsschrift*. Conant applies this point to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and, at first, Wittgenstein's elucidations seem to be akin to Frege's: they are elucidatory nonsense, purporting to *show* something that cannot be *said* (Conant 2000, 177). Conant argues that this is a pervasive illusion. The *Tractatus* invites the reader to approach it as she would approach any other philosophical text. But this leads the reader to the recognition that the procedure she has followed dissolves under its own weight. The philosophical problems the reader (mis)took herself to be engaging now dissolve, since they were due to the illusion that they can be framed in language. For Conant, the difference between Frege and Wittgenstein is that

[t]he aim of Fregean elucidation is to help us to understand the principles of construction which underlie his *Begriffsschrift*. The mark of our having grasped his elucidations is that we have mastered his symbolism and are able properly to use it to express thoughts. Frege's elucidatory "propositions" cannot be expressed in *Begriffsschrift*, but the logical distinctions which they attempt to convey [...] show themselves through the difference in the signs of the *Begriffsschrift*. [...] The only "insight" that a Tractarian elucidation imparts, in the end, is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to such illusions of thought. The assumption underlying Tractarian elucidation is that the only way to free oneself from such illusions is to fully enter into them and explore them from the inside (Conant 2000, 195; 197).

Despite its allure, Conant's interpretation is problematic, not the least because he summarily overlooks Russell's contributions to the *Tractatus*.

Now we face questions about the success of Wittgenstein's Russellian programme. Landini interprets this as follows:

Tractatus was a handbook of constructive criticisms and preliminary ideas toward the perfection and completion of Russell's eliminativistic program for a new philosophy of logical form (Landini 2003, 121).

The point is that Wittgenstein's goal in the *Tractatus* was merely to delineate how the Russellian eliminativism could be perfected. The system he outlines does not amount to a full-fledged theory, and it is questionable whether Wittgenstein ever hoped to complete this task. However, Wittgenstein himself never completed this task. After returning to academic philosophy in 1929, Wittgenstein began to change his mind on what his earlier work could amount to. In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* he writes: "Since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again [...] I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book" (Wittgenstein 1958/1999, x). Although Wittgenstein admits to flaws in his earlier work, he does not completely abandon it. Neither does he maintain that *only* his later work is of any worth; some aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy remain constant, and the early works contain germs of the views which are not fully developed until his later works.

Now, interpreting the *Tractatus* as an attempt to perfect Russell's eliminativist programme gives a decisive argument against the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. In fact, the need for the resolute reading dissolves. As the resolute reading is promoted both as a way of making sense of the more cryptic remarks in the *Tractatus*, and as a way of finding continuities between Wittgenstein's earlier and later works, this consequence is of utmost importance.

A crucial problem in *Tractatus*-interpretations is reconciling the 'frame' of the book (the Preface, plus sections 6.53 through 7) with its body. The problem emerges from considering section 6.54 alone:

My propositions elucidate in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

If the propositions in the *Tractatus* are nonsensical then what can one hope to achieve after working through them? One could interpret Wittgenstein's rejection of nonsensical propositions *resolutely*, and maintain that this was what Wittgenstein advocated, which is a central aspect of the

resolute reading. This reduces most of Wittgenstein's views in the *Tractatus* into nonsense; its contents are akin to sentences like "Socrates is identical". The advantage of this view is that it lessens the contrast between Wittgenstein's early and late views: the "grave errors" of the *Tractatus* comprise virtually the entire book. After reading the *Tractatus*, the reader should come to realize its nonsensical nature and, hence, be cured from the tendency to philosophize.

The merits of the resolute reading proposed by Cora Diamond, James Conant and others is that it seems to make sense of the 'frame' of the *Tractatus*. After reading the book, one is cured of the tendency to hold that there is something ineffable that cannot be said but that must be shown. But this comes with a price: all the philosophical insights in the *Tractatus*, including Wittgenstein's views on the proper role of philosophy, become nonsensical. This is peculiar, given that Wittgenstein revisits these views in his later work. Thus, if Wittgenstein had held that the *Tractatus* contained nothing but austere nonsense and the 'frame' (as per the resolute reading), it would have been odd for him to maintain the views he later expressed. The resolute reading seems to sever the very continuity between early and late Wittgenstein it purports to establish. Furthermore, if Wittgenstein inherited his philosophical outlook from Russell, then Russell would have to get a share of this fallout. But one can conclude this only by neglecting Russell's positive contributions to the *Tractatus*; one can support the resolute reading only from a Fregean partisanship. By adopting a bipartisan approach to the *Tractatus*, we see doubts looming over the very motivation for the resolute reading.

So what are we left with at the end of the *Tractatus* if we regard it as a handbook for perfecting Russellian eliminativism? In particular, how are we to understand the mystical remarks in the *Tractatus* (or even its 'frame')? Landini's interpretation here is negative: If the eliminativist programme outlined in the *Tractatus* is completed, what one is left with is just mystical pronouncements. Russell's scientific philosophy of the logical form becomes extremely austere, if all the logico-semantic notions are built into the structure of language. Moreover, this approach seemingly undermines the possibility of advancing arguments in its support. But what does the notion of 'building the logico-semantic notions into the structure of language' entail? An analogy should illustrate the answer. A construction site for a building invariably uses scaffolding, which are indispensable for the construction. Once the building is finished, these are no longer needed. Although this follows from completing the eliminativist programme, it is paramount to notice that Wittgenstein *did not* accomplish this. This would follow only if the *Tractatus* had presented a completed version of Russellian eliminativism. But the *Tractatus* contains no such version. The paradigm shift Wittgenstein outlines in the *Tractatus* still needs to be understood in the conceptual framework of the old theory, lest it be nonsensical. This seems to be the reason behind the wording of *Tractatus* 6.54: whoever understands *him* must see that the *propositions* in the *Tractatus* are nonsensical. Whoever carries out the eliminativist programme must relinquish the ladder (the old theories) that enabled her to frame the new theory. Now the need for the resolute reading dissolves: the propositions of the *Tractatus*, some framed in Fregean/Russellian conceptual notation, others in everyday language, are nonsensical *when assessed by the standards of the perfected scientific philosophy*. As propositions of everyday language, they are "in perfect logical order" (Wittgenstein 1974, 5.5563). However, these are not the propositions to be used *in* scientific philosophy,

even if these are the *only* propositions in which it can be *framed*. If the language of scientific philosophy demands that all logico-semantical notions are built into its structure, then the theory does not allow any of its guiding principles to be formulated in that language; any such attempt would amount to nonsense. Thus, one has to use everyday language as the ladder for the perfected scientific philosophy. And this is overlooked by the proponents of the resolute reading.

In conclusion, Wittgenstein never completed the Russellian system of scientific philosophy, and it remains open whether this was ever his intention. But why is this so? Allow me to offer a speculative answer. Completing the system would have amounted to the discovery to which he alludes in *Philosophical Investigations*, one that would have enabled him to stop doing philosophy. This would have meant abandoning philosophical approach to questions which perplex each of us the most, including the *Tractatus*-passages where Wittgenstein discusses life, death, and the mystical. It could be maintained that Wittgenstein was aware of what the completed system would amount to, but that the price was too high for him. As Wittgenstein remarks, the crystalline purity of logic (and, *a fortiori*, of the Tractarian eliminativism) rendered it no longer applicable to actual uses of language (Wittgenstein 1958/1999, §107). Instead of pursuing the former, Wittgenstein decided to return to the rough ground, to the philosophical problems of everyday language. Although this violates the principles of scientific philosophy, it allowed his work to have content that would have been lost with the Tractarian eliminativism. Thus, instead of throwing away the ladder after ascending it, Wittgenstein threw it away before climbing it, for in order to get to the rough ground, no ladder is needed.

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