

# Russell vs. Wittgenstein: In Defense of Russell (A Reply to Some Old Thesis of Peter Hacker's Interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*)

Henrique Jales Ribeiro, Coimbra, Portugal

jalesribeiro@gmail.com

Peter Hacker is currently one of the most influential and brilliant specialists of Wittgenstein's philosophy. His thesis on the connection between Russell and Wittgenstein, both prior to *Tractatus* and therein, were presented mainly in *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, published in 1996, that is, 14 years ago. In subsequent books, Hacker resumes these thesis and continues to use them in his readings of Wittgenstein after the *Tractatus*. To my knowledge they have not been subjected to any more or less systematic criticism from reviewers particularly interested in Russell's philosophy, as would be perfectly natural, since (as I will suggest) they are debatable or even controversial for those who have interpreted this philosopher under different, and probably more coherent, presuppositions. Hacker's theses are illustrations of what I have polemically called in my doctoral dissertation and in some papers in English (Ribeiro 1999, 2001, 2005) a 'Wittgensteinian reading of Russell's philosophy'. For all of the above reasons, I will focus essentially on Hacker's book previously mentioned. Naturally, my intention, as his in *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies*, is to provide input for a better understanding of the matters at issue.

Peter Hacker's central thesis is that the *Tractatus* provides the first systematic research on the nature of logic from a viewpoint which, albeit largely metaphysical, envisages eliminating any impure associations with psychology and epistemology, or, as he says, "liberating the philosophy of logic from its antecedents failure to differentiate adequately the truths of logic from empirical, psychological or putative Platonist generalisations" (Hacker 1996: 34), as the ones of Frege and Russell. The novelty and originality of *Tractatus* consists, in fact, in such logical reduction of its subject-matter, against the mentioned associations made by those thinkers, in spite of the antipsychologistic premises of their respective philosophies. In the case of Russell and before that book, there were, of course, serious inconsistencies in his philosophy, which lead to Wittgenstein's criticisms and are carefully studied by Hacker; but the main difference between the two philosophers, according to him, was not merely a technical one. What we have with *Tractatus* is a new conception of logic based on the rejection of the confusion between logic, on the one hand, and psychology and epistemology, on the other hand, "even though distortions remained" (*ibid.*) This was already the direction in which Wittgenstein's review of Russell's theories in the manuscript *Theory of Knowledge* pointed (see *ibid.*: 26). Hacker, like some other critics before him (see Hylton 1990), suggests that Russell should have lead his thought according to the methodologically pure path of Wittgenstein's views on logic, and that he did not know how to do it without renouncing to its own approach, which was the cause of the inextricable troubles underlying his theories. Furthermore, he believes that the evolution of Russell's philosophy after *Tractatus* had no relevance at all to the genesis of contemporary analytical philosophy. In short, Hacker's interpretation is founded on three fundamental assumptions regarding the connection between

Russell and Wittgenstein: *i*) the philosophy of the former—before *Tractatus*—has wrongly confused the subject-matter of logic with those of psychology and epistemology; *ii*) the philosophy of the latter proved, particularly in that book, that such confusion was illegitimate by putting logic in its right place and unveiling its true meaning; *iii*) by and large Russell accepted this fact, although he did not fully understand it, nor managed to draw the appropriate consequences from it.

The first assumption needs to be elaborated for a better understanding. An important illustration of it are Russell's views on the relation between logic and ordinary language. Max Black had previously argued that it is precisely the confusion between logic and epistemology that in the end explains the need for a logically perfect language when this is contrasted to a ordinary one (see Black 1989), and for what is known as the "myth of the paraphrase" or of "the ideal translation". According to Hacker, both Frege and Russell subscribe to the same fundamental view on the matter: "They held natural languages to be logically defective, both in containing vague terms and in failing adequately to represent the subject-matter of the truths of logic. Hence, for logical, proof-theoretic and metaphysical purposes, they should be replaced by a logically perfect language: namely the language of *Begriffsschrift* or *Principia*. This would make sense only if... the role of the propositions of logic is indeed to represent a certain subject-matter with maximal accuracy... Contrary to Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein argued that 'all propositions of everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order' (TLP, 5.5563). By this, he later explained, he meant that 'the propositions of our ordinary language are not in any way *less correct* or *less exact* or *more confused* than propositions written down, say, in Russell's symbolism or any other '*Begriffsschrift*'" (Hacker 1996: 26).

Russell's concept of ordinary language can be summarised in three main ideas, according to Hacker's interpretation, which, as previously mentioned, matches that of Black and other authors:  $\alpha$ ) ordinary language is not in perfect logical order, i.e., it is essentially vague and defective, and it is for that reason that philosophical analysis requires a logically perfect language;  $\beta$ ) such is precisely the artificial language of *Principia*;  $\gamma$ ) Russell believes in  $\alpha$ ) because he wrongly confuses the subject-matter of logic with the ones of psychology and epistemology.

I now intend to briefly dispute the reading of Russell and Wittgenstein which can be drawn from the thesis described above. As for Russell: In spite of Hacker's careful historical analysis, he does not takes into consideration some special developments of Russell's philosophy after "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", which lead to findings on the connection between logic and ordinary language significantly different from the ones already presented. I will return to this point later on. On the other hand, Hacker's reading is based on the metahistorical assumption that the development of Russell's philosophy,

after *Principia*, should have been subordinated to Wittgenstein's conception of logic, in view of its greater consistency. Why should the foundations of logic not be grounded on psychology and epistemology, contrary to what Russell suggests in the introduction of *Tractatus* (cf. Wittgenstein 1933: 7-8)? Evidently, only by developing a philosophical project of the kind could Russell have found the answer to the question; and this was just what he endeavoured until the book *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. The argument that, after *Tractatus*, the most interesting developments of logic were achieved entirely independently of Russell's views and pursuant to those of Wittgenstein, is disputable and, on several accounts, controversial. Nonetheless, it is unacceptable in the protohistorical version that Hacker lends to it in *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*: that Wittgenstein, already at the time of *Tractatus*, was to some extent aware of the impact and historical scope of his own theories.

However, this is not very important for me here. I would like to reply to Hacker's theory according to which both Russell's philosophy and that of Wittgenstein at the time of *Tractatus* were essentially atomist, the difference between the two atomisms being that, unlike the former, the latter would be pure and free of epistemological assumptions (cf. Hacker 1996: 29-30). In my view, this is a disputable interpretation, which once again comes closer to the interpretations of some English authors of the 1960s who believed in an alleged "tradition of British empiricism" (see Pears 1956). Regarding atomism and Wittgenstein in particular, the opposite is true: as was held by D. McCarthy (McCarthy 1991), the conception of logic in general, in *Tractatus*, is clearly holistic, in the sense that it is based on the grounds that logic is not only one of many ways of representing the World, but is, rather, the essential condition for *all* possible representation or for *all* the systems of representation (ordinary language, geometry, mechanics, music, etc.); and, so understood, logic is the mirror of the World as a *whole*, the limits of it being equivalent to the limits of the World and of all language with meaning (*TLP*, 5-61). It is from this holistic perspective that Wittgenstein's distinction between showing and saying, and his theory of solipsism, in *Tractatus*, must be interpreted. Focusing on the first: we cannot exceed the limits of language in order to "represent" what it has in common with facts, that is, the *whole* in which representation properly called consists of, since such "representation" would violate the limits of factual language itself (*TLP*, 4-12, 4-121). Now, if we try to reread again Wittgenstein's book according to a holistic view like this, the conclusions to draw will be quite different from those of Hacker's atomist reading. In special: Wittgenstein's (somewhat radical) holism lies at the root of his well known analogy between *Tractatus* and a ladder, which lead the philosopher directly to the thesis that his propositions in that book are senseless (*TLP*, 6-54).

As for Russell, I have already suggested that Hacker does not always interpret his philosophy in a contextual manner, and that sometimes he reads it following views which were only later presented in the history of the analytical movement. However, criticising that kind of methodology is not my priority. My main objection is: some of Russell's works and papers produced immediately after "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" and the impact on him of Dewey's pragmatism, pointed to what we can call a "partial semantic holism", according to which (in short) what is represented in ordinary language is always mediated or interpreted by it, but nonetheless exists *per se* and independently of the representation itself. This type of holism was already mentioned in Russell's paper "On Propositions" (Russell 1986a), but it is suggested quite

clearly in the preparatory manuscripts of *The Analysis of Mind* (Russell 1988), even before the English edition of *Tractatus*, and had as its main consequence the withdrawal of the acquaintance theory. In fact, it was just this partial holism that leads Russell to a new concept of vagueness (Russell 1988a) and to a view similar to that of Wittgenstein, according to which ordinary language is in order and does not require any correction through a logically perfect language (see Russell 1978: Lecture X). And it is from its perspective, against to a radical version of holism that leads directly to the end of the philosophy, as happens apparently with *Tractatus*, that we should reread today Russell's introduction to that book (Ribeiro 2005). Generally speaking, after the 1920s holism and its problems are the leitmotif of the development of Russell's philosophy.

Concluding and in light of the observations above, I would like to comment briefly Hacker's thesis on the concept of logically perfect language. First, the concept only appears to us in 1918, namely in "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (Russell 1986: 176). Hacker, like Black before him, ambiguously suggests to its readers that the concept had already been unveiled in *Principia* (Hacker 1996: 20); but for reasons I cannot develop here, this is not true. Furthermore, one cannot forget that when the concept emerges in the development of Russell's philosophy its purpose was not to correct ordinary language and to restore a precision or accuracy somehow alienated. As I have mentioned before, for Russell too ordinary language is in (perfect logical) order. It is very clear in some passages of "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" that a logically perfect language would not be entirely artificial or symbolic, as the language of *Principia* is. In order to be logically perfect, as Russell says in that paper, such language should include vocabulary, in particular, names relating to each individual's private experience (1986: 176). In 1923, Russell further adds that a logically perfect language should include "words, perceptions, thoughts, or something of the kind" (Russell 1988a: 152); since this is impossible, it is a purely ideal language (*ibid.*). It is clear, from this point of view, that Russell's types are not only logical or mathematical entities, and that they must include or embrace all human experience. In so far as the logically perfect language should establish a connection, in a way not explained by Russell, between his theory of types and the theories of acquaintance, descriptions and logical constructions (as Black pertinently saw), we can see that Hacker's simplistic view of it cannot be accepted. What would be then the purpose of such language? Essentially, as I have argued in previous papers (see Ribeiro 2001), to enable an ontological analysis which was challenged by holism and its dangerous consequences for the status of philosophy. In my view, this is what Russell himself explicitly holds years later, in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. Nonetheless, having arrived at this crucial idea, we are already very far from a Wittgensteinian reading of Russell's philosophy, like the one presented by Peter Hacker.

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