

## Aesthetics and logical atomism

Russell's famous lecture series "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" is rarely cited for its aesthetic pronouncements, though there is a way in which these lectures can be viewed as an aesthetic treatise. By aesthetics I don't have in mind mathematical or logical simplicity, and the working out of one's theory in conformity with Occam's razor which Russell appealed to. Rather I have in mind the aesthetics, or foundations of one, suggested by Russell's thoughts on particulars and sense-data. With regard to simple atomic facts like 'This is white', we find Russell saying:

They have to be taken in a very sophisticated sense. I do not want you to think about the piece of chalk I am holding, but of what you see when you look at the chalk. (*Logic and Knowledge*, p. 198)

Similarly, he says of the proper name 'this' that its use must be confined to objects of immediate acquaintance.

I will not deny that Russell had epistemological motivations and it may well be that immediate knowledge is to be preferred to that involving inference, since it possesses greater certainty. One may object that perception itself is fallible, which is the source of the principal

criticism against knowledge by acquaintance. This aside, however, there is a pure aesthetic element in Russell's atomism. Whether it is a good aesthetics or sufficiently worked out remains to be determined. It does offer a scheme sufficiently different from the one in which we ordinarily look at things to deserve explicit mention.

The aesthetics of logical atomism is reminiscent of the innovative art and literature in the early decades of the century, if not that of today. When Russell asks us to become attentive to the pure sense-datum in 'This is white' and to forget that he is holding a piece of chalk, he is asking for an alteration in the way we see things very much like the art students who are obliged to see lines, colours or shadows in place of the accustomed objects. The two are not very different: Russell means to remind us that we do not perceive entities, the drawing master does not want a line where there is only a gradation.

Two difficulties with sense-data emerge in this context. Can we forget that Russell is holding a piece of chalk? Secondly, is there a sense-datum of whiteness? The first question is not easily answered. As for the second, who can say what is perceived in the infinitesimal moment?

I do not regard the aesthetics of atomism as inferior to the avowed aesthetic statements we find in music and painting. We are requested to "listen to the pure tones" or "admire the lines and colours". This is especially true of impressionistic art and music since Schoenberg. In one we find the absence of the traditional pictures, in the other there is no melody.

Though there are difficulties with Russell's sense-data which many have declared insurmountable, one should also recognize their aesthetic element for the philosophical justification they offer to much art and literature.

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