

Russell's unpublished book on theory of knowledge

by R. K. Perkins, Jr.

IN AN INTERESTING piece of scholarship titled "Russell's Unpublished Book on Theory of Knowledge",¹ Kenneth Blackwell and Elizabeth Ramsden Eames argue that (1) the first six "missing" chapters of Bertrand Russell's unpublished book on theory of knowledge written in the spring of 1913 are to be found in *The Monist* in 1914 and 1915,² and that (2) the *Monist* articles embody little or no revision of the missing chapters, i.e. that Russell "did not revise them extensively."³

Blackwell and Eames find much of the evidence for (1) in the extant manuscripts and in Russell's correspondence with Lady Ottoline Morrell. And it seems to me that this conclusion is incontestable. But as regards (2) the matter is somewhat less certain. Indeed, the "evidence" seems to consist in (a) the paucity of "external" evidence (e.g., Russell's letters) to the contrary,⁴ and (b) Russell's frequent reference in the *Monist* to "theory of knowledge" and his

¹ *Russell*, no. 19 (Autumn 1975), 3-14, 18.

² The six *Monist* articles are: (1) "On the Nature of Acquaintance. I. Preliminary Description of Experience", *Monist*, 24 (Jan. 1914), 1-16; (2) "On the Nature of Acquaintance. II. Neutral Monism", *Monist*, 24 (April 1914), 161-87; (3) "On the Nature of Acquaintance. III. Analysis of Experience", *Monist*, 24 (July 1914), 435-53; (4) "Definitions and Methodological Principles in Theory of Knowledge", *Monist*, 24 (Oct. 1914), 582-93; (5) "Sensation and Imagination", *Monist*, 25 (Jan. 1915), 28-44; (6) "On the Experience of Time", *Monist*, 25 (April 1915), 212-33. The first three articles are reprinted in Russell's *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. R. C. Marsh (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

³ Blackwell and Eames, pp. 13, 14, 18.

⁴ There is some external evidence. On 16 July 1914, Russell writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell that he is "doing a great deal of work, partly Sensation and Imagination." And on 2 February 1915, he tells her that he "had to revise an article on Time for the *Monist*." (As quoted in Blackwell and Eames, p. 14.) Blackwell and Eames take note of these letters but find no evidence of "extensive" revision.

careless use of the word “chapter” in the *Monist* version of Chapter VI, together with the working assumption that whatever is not very carefully revised is probably not very extensively revised. But (a) smacks of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, and (b) involves, at the very least, a doubtful proposition on which to hang the justification of (2).

In what follows I wish to suggest that Russell did revise at least the third and fourth chapters of the theory of knowledge book in preparing them for publication in the *Monist*. Quite apart from the issue of what is to count as “extensive” revision, there is, I believe, good evidence that Russell’s epistemology underwent distinct and significant modification from the time shortly after the spring of 1913 when he wrote his book to the publication of the *Monist* articles in 1914 and 1915. Specifically, I believe that there is evidence that Russell must have modified his unpublished 1913 views on the nature of mental objects, and that that change is reflected in the third and fourth *Monist* articles. I intend to show that it is extremely unlikely that the account of mental objects given in those articles is the view Russell held in the spring of 1913 when he wrote his theory of knowledge book.

As Blackwell and Eames have carefully determined, Russell wrote the entire book (350 pages) in 31 days from 7 May to 6 June 1913.⁵ That is a rate of eleven pages a day—a rate which would allow him to complete the first seven chapters in fifteen days. But if the six *Monist* articles of January 1914 through April 1915 are the *unrevamped* first six chapters of the 1913 book, it becomes totally baffling why the account of mental objects stressed in the third and fourth *Monist* articles should be incongruous with that of Chapter VII, as indeed it is.

In the third and fourth *Monist* articles, Russell defines “mental” as applying to *facts* of a certain sort, *viz.* facts involving the relation of acquaintance (or any relation which presupposes acquaintance).⁶ In the fourth article he says that mental *particulars* cannot be defined at all “since we have no reason to assume that subjects are in fact always or ever of a different kind from other particulars.”⁷ Moreover, in the third article he says, “The definition of what is ‘mental’ as what involves subjects is inadmissible, in view of the fact that we do not know what subjects are.”⁸ Russell’s rejection springs, as he says, from the fact that since “subjects are not given in acquaintance, it

follows that nothing can be known as to their intrinsic nature.”⁹ And, “it *may* be that subjects are constituents of other facts of the kind we should call physical, and therefore a fact which involves a subject may not be always a mental fact.”¹⁰

But this account hardly fits with what Russell says in Chapter VII of the unpublished book. There, while reviewing his discussion of acquaintance in the earlier chapters, he characterizes “mental” in the very way which he repudiates in the *Monist* articles. In Chapter VII he reminds us of what (he says) he had told us in earlier chapters—*viz.* that one kind of object of acquaintance is “mental objects, *which are those of which a subject is a constituent.*”¹¹

If we are to believe with Blackwell and Eames that the *Monist* articles are simply unrevised missing chapters of the theory of knowledge book, then we shall have to assume that Russell not only expressed conflicting views about mental objects within a short, concentrated period of writing time, but also that he reported a piece of his own work, written merely a few days before, in such a way as to attribute to himself a view which he had, in fact, expressly stated to be “inadmissible”.

While this is, of course, a possibility, there is a more reasonable hypothesis that not only is fairer to Russell, but also squares better with what we know about his other writings at the time.

In 1912 in *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell held that we most likely do have acquaintance with our Selves, and that the term “mental” could be applied to particulars.¹² He still held this view of “mental” in “The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics”, written in early 1914,¹³ where he defines “mental” primarily as applying to particulars, and only in a derivative sense as applying to facts: “I shall call a particular ‘mental’ when it is aware of something, and I shall call a fact ‘mental’ when it contains a mental particular as a con-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹¹ “[Theory of Knowledge]”, unpublished manuscript in The Bertrand Russell Archives, McMaster University, n.d., f. 143. Emphasis added. I wish to thank the Bertrand Russell Estate and McMaster University for making it possible for me to receive a photocopy of the typescript.

¹² *Problems* (1912; reprinted, New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1959), pp. 49, 51, 109. Cf. Russell’s “The Nature of Sense-Data—A Reply to Dr. Dawes Hicks”, *Mind*, 22 (Jan. 1913), 78.

¹³ *Scientia*, no. 4 (1914). Reprinted in Russell’s *Mysticism and Logic* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 140-73. In a convincing piece—“Our Knowledge of Our Knowledge”, *Russell*, no. 12 (Winter, 1973-74), 11-13—Blackwell contends that, contrary to Russell’s own recollections in *Portraits from Memory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), p. 212, it was not *Our Knowledge of the External World*, but probably “The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics” which he dictated extemporaneously on 1 or 2 January 1914.

⁵ Blackwell and Eames, p. 8.

⁶ See *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 165, and the *Monist*, 24 (Oct. 1914), 582-3.

⁷ *Monist*, 24 (Oct. 1914), 582-3.

⁸ *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 165.

stituent.”¹⁴

When Russell wrote his book on the theory of knowledge in May of 1913, his account of “mental” no doubt mentioned subjects as essential constituents. But I believe he changed his mind sometime before July of 1914 when he published his third *Monist* article. By that time his doubts about self-acquaintance had grown to firm denial, and the inappropriateness of his former account required that he revise certain chapters of his earlier work which he wished to publish. Presumably, Chapter VII was not revised because he never decided to publish it.¹⁵

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¹⁴ *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 145.

¹⁵ It should be noted that Russell’s revised view of mental objects may also be found in two of his 1915 writings. See his “The Ultimate Constituents of Matter”, *Mysticism and Logic*, pp. 125-6. This paper was delivered before the Philosophical Society of Manchester in February 1915, and was first published in the *Monist*, 25 (July 1915), 399-417. See also the brief “Letter from Bertrand Russell”, dated 7 June 1915, in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 12 (8 July 1915), 392.