

# Reply to Russell's letter of 16 May 1960

by Albert Shalom

## EDITORIAL NOTE

*To illustrate a list of recent acquisitions in Russell (Summer 1981), we printed in facsimile Russell's letter of 16 May 1960 to Professor Albert Shalom concerning the interpretation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. The correspondence between Russell and Shalom began when Shalom wrote on 1 May 1960 asking whether Russell had the time and inclination to read a translation of a lecture which Shalom had given the previous December in Paris. The paper was entitled "The Metaphysical Thinking Underlying Wittgenstein's Tractatus". Shalom had received "different and even contradictory appraisals" of his paper, and he very much wanted to have Russell's opinion of it.*

*Close to the age of ninety, Russell was entering a hectic period in his life in which he worked assiduously for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He had published three books in 1959 and had produced prefaces and introductions for other people. As usual, he was besieged with mail including numerous requests to read unsolicited manuscripts sent to him quite regularly. Yet he had managed to answer correspondence in a very personal way. In November 1959, he had been involved in a controversy regarding the refusal of the editor of Mind to review Ernest Gellner's Words and Things, a book which attacked the then prevalent philosophy of linguistic analysis and for which Russell had written the introduction. In the early months of 1960, he took time out from his usual writing on the nuclear threat to reply to several articles devoted to his theory of descriptions and his ethical theory in the journal Philosophy.*

*Russell's reply (4 May 1960) to Shalom's first letter states: "Thank you for your letter of May 1. I shall be interested to see your paper on Wittgenstein's Tractatus, but, as I am very busy, it may be some time before I can read it carefully." On 8 May Shalom wrote back in appreciation enclosing his paper and an offprint of an article, "Qu'est-ce qu'un concept?", Revue internationale de philosophie, 50 (1959): 1-15. The main objection raised against his paper, Shalom admitted, was that Wittgenstein was not concerned with problems of epistemology at the time of his writing the Tractatus. Nonetheless, Shalom felt that the "picture theory" of reality implies an epistemology, and he was unable to see a fallacy in his paper: "Perhaps the fact that I'm not a logician has something to do with the matter. If you could enlighten me on this point I should be most grateful to you."*

Russell's letter of 16 May followed. On 25 May Shalom challenged Russell's interpretation. Far from underestimating the notion of structure, Shalom claimed that he had emphasized the notion as the key to understanding the *Tractatus*. "In fact, my main point is that Wittgenstein's analyses of various concepts are unintelligible unless understood as arguments in terms of the dominating idea of structure or form. And that is what I understand as a metaphysical argument." Shalom went on to say that his interest in any philosopher was to try to discover the chief concepts employed in the philosopher's analysis and to examine the manner in which the analysis was performed. For this reason, the later Wittgenstein was not devoid of interest. In a postscript, he asked Russell whether he would be in London in July of that year, and if so, whether a meeting was possible. Russell replied on 18 June as follows: "Thank you for your letter of May 25. I am sorry that at present my time and thought are so occupied with matters very remote from those with which your letter deals that I cannot offer you a reasoned reply. Unfortunately, I do not expect to be in London in July so that I am afraid a meeting will hardly be possible." On 14 Shalom requested the return of his paper, and Russell complied on 19 July.

Shalom is now Professor of Philosophy at McMaster. We invited him to comment on his exchange with Russell, particularly Russell's letter of 16 May 1960. His comments take the form of a further (and no doubt final) letter in the exchange.—Carl Spadoni

## SHALOM'S REPLY TO RUSSELL

28th April 1982.

Dear Lord Russell:

The suggestion was made about a month ago that I should address your shade, and reply to a letter you sent me almost twenty-two years ago, when I was living in Paris, a letter dated 16 May 1960. As I recall, I did reply at the time, but since I made the *faux pas* of referring to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the curt and icy three lines I received in response constituted, of course, the end of any further correspondence. Naturally, I knew that you were opposed, for obvious reasons, to the metamorphosis of the logic-dominated Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* into the language-dominated Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. But at the time, I had no idea of the extent to which your lordship would not brook even the faintest suggestion of a possible query on that score. Had I known, for instance, that in March of 1959 you had written to one of your correspondents that "I think Wittgenstein's influence has been wholly bad", I might have responded differently—though it would only have been for reasons of courtesy.

This brings me back to the response I'm supposed to make to your letter, because it is necessary for me to situate this letter of yours if it is to have any meaning other than that of being just one more of your innumerable and, of course, masterly *obiter dicta* flourished around for the benefit of your admirers. If I sent you that paper on the *Tractatus* it was for a reason, and as soon as I received your letter I realized that you had not understood that reason. I had been working on the *Tractatus*, on some of Frege's papers and on some of your own early writings since about 1955 or 1956, work which culminated in a fairly lengthy manuscript entitled "La Philosophie du Langage de Frege et de Wittgenstein", which I deposited at the Sorbonne in 1967 as the so-called "thèse secondaire" for the Doctorat D'Etat. The point of the thesis was an attempt to make sense, philosophically, of a logico-linguistic approach which I had reluctantly come to regard as the only viable approach in philosophy. I say "reluctantly" because I could not really discern what Bradley would have called the philosophical "first principles" of that approach. It will give you some indication of the rapidity with which this provisional adherence of mine evaporated, if I add that in 1970 or 1971 I wrote to the publisher who had tentatively accepted the manuscript, in order to say that I had decided that the entire manuscript was unsatisfactory, and needed reworking from scratch. I had, in fact, come to the conclusion that the whole logico-linguistic approach led nowhere.

So much for the general background to your letter. Let me now briefly describe the more specific background. It would be exceedingly difficult to work on the *Tractatus* without being fully aware of what you refer to as "... the influence of mathematico-logical symbolism upon his [i.e. Wittgenstein's] thinking..." Reading that I was supposed to be underestimating that influence was my first indication of how totally you had misunderstood the paper I sent you. For the point was that it was precisely this "influence of mathematico-logical symbolism" which, for me, constituted the *problem*. Metaphysical problems are not wholly resolvable into such symbolism, and unlike you, Wittgenstein was acutely aware of this. His way of dealing with it, as we all know, was to deny that metaphysics refers to anything real at all: it is simply a matter of signs which stand for nothing; it is something like a "feeling", a feeling of "the mystical"; it raises questions which have no right to be raised ... and so on and so forth.

However, Wittgenstein also realized that the main limit to the reductive enterprise did not lie in those mysterious entities called "sense data", but in something subjective which is responsible for there being such so-called "sense data". He expressed this limit in the *Tractatus* by his interpretation of what he called "the metaphysical subject" which he

conceived as “not belonging to the world but ... a limit of the world”. It was this “metaphysical subject” which seemed to me to raise the need for a metaphysical analysis of *Tractatus*—statements like the one I attempted to analyze, the statement that “... we make to ourselves pictures of facts ....” When I read your letter I realized that for you, there simply wasn't any problem there at all, that you were quite content to limit yourself (as before) to the mathematico-logical mode of thinking applied to language and to sense data, whatever these entities are, and my interest in what you might have to say regarding the metaphysical problems raised by the *Tractatus* began to wane rather rapidly.

At the time, apart from a paper by Pierre Hadot on Wittgenstein's supposed “negative mysticism”, just about nothing had been written on Wittgenstein in France, though there was a good deal of interest in his work. The paper I sent you was a lecture Jean Wahl had asked me to give on Wittgenstein at his Collège Philosophique, in St. Germain des Prés, and the preoccupation I had was the one I've just indicated rather than a statement of the fairly obvious fact of “the influence of mathematico-logical symbolism” on Wittgenstein's thinking. As I recall, Miss Ishiguro, who later became a well-known “expert” on the later Wittgenstein whom you disapproved of so greatly, made exactly the same objection as the one you made in your letter. It would be the objection of anyone approaching the *Tractatus* predominantly in terms of “mathematico-logical symbolism”. But was this “mathematico-logical symbolism” really the central concern in Wittgenstein's position? I do not think so.

In your letter you state that Wittgenstein “hated” your introduction to the *Tractatus* “... because my introduction expounded the views that he had when he wrote the *Tractatus* and he had, meantime, forgotten that he ever held such views.” Even at the time, I found this explanation most unlikely, since it scarcely fitted in with my analysis of that work. But I did not realize just how disingenuous it was. After all, it was a year *after* this letter of yours that Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* were published, and his letters to you were probably beyond the ken of any notion of their future publication. As early as 1915, that is to say seven years before the appearance of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had written that “Russell's method in his ‘Scientific method of philosophy’ is simply a retrogression from the method of physics”, a view which is meant to contrast with his own view which he expressed by saying that “the philosopher” should “not occupy himself with questions which do not concern him”. The scientism which he implies in your own approach is quite different from his own motivation. His acceptance of “the propositions of science” as being the only valid propositions, and his acceptance of logicism as indicating the structure of “what is the case”—these are acceptances of

*constraint*, of *limit*, and not principles of ultimate reality, as they tend to be in your own approach. And I do not think that you ever made that distinction or worked out its possible implications.

In your introduction, you certainly saw that despite Wittgenstein's assertion that the philosopher should not “concern himself” with questions which are beyond scientific discourse, he nevertheless *did* concern himself with such questions. But that is as far as you did see. It did not occur to you that that very fact might be the central point of the whole structure of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's notes for the latter half of 1916 are, I think, eloquent testimony to this central tension which was to give rise to the doctrines of the *Tractatus*. I will refer to one theme only in these notes. In August of 1916 Wittgenstein wrote: “The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious!”, and again “The I is not an object.” The tradition to which you belong spontaneously interprets such statements as implying a kind of metaphysical self-centredness which, of course, allows its adherents to feel virtuously unself-centred when they robustly try to force this “I” into their utterly inadequate categories. At no stage in your development can I conceive of you as regarding the “I” as “deeply mysterious!” and, of course, that is your privilege, since philosophy is a matter of ultimate options. My point is merely to illustrate the obvious difference between the approach in your introduction to the *Tractatus* and that of the *Tractatus* itself, which drew its substance from the *Notebooks*.

But as a matter of fact, you must have known this perfectly well when you wrote me that letter. You, of course, knew of the existence of those notebooks, since Wittgenstein explicitly asked you to publish them after his death which, at the time he wrote you that letter in 1913, he regarded as imminent. You also received letter after letter in which he expressed, constantly and in various ways, a “spiritual torment” which seemed to form something of a counterpart to a philosophy of mathematico-logical structure and symbolism. Moreover, you will surely have remembered *something* of a letter of 3 March 1914, in which he stated that despite his friendship for you there was a total [*ganz und gar*] difference between both of you in what he referred to as “*unsere Ideale*”. The philosophical side of that difference seemed to be expressed clearly enough in August 1919 when he wrote to you that “... I'm afraid [*sic*] you haven't really [*sic*] got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical propositions is only a corollary [*sic*]. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed [*gesagt*] by props.—i.e. by language [*sic*]—(and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown [*gezeigt*]; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.”

I take this to be an expression of what I refer to, above, as the central

tension giving rise to the *Tractatus*. It has little to do with your interpretation of the *Tractatus* and almost expressly contradicts the overwhelming importance you give to “mathematico-logical symbolism”. But in fact, all this evidence concerning the essential and fundamental difference in approach between Wittgenstein and yourself, was quite clearly expressed by him in his 1920 letter to you about that introduction: “... when I got the German translation of the introduction, I couldn’t bring myself to have it printed with my work after all. For the fineness of your English style was—of course—quite lost and what was left was superficiality and misunderstanding.” This has nothing to do with your explanation of why Wittgenstein is supposed to have “hated” your introduction; nor do I detect any tone of hatred, especially if one considers the previous sentence: “Now, however, you will be angry at what I have to tell you: your introduction will not be printed, and in consequence neither will my book.”

It is, of course, convenient for you to think in terms of Wittgenstein’s supposed “hatred” for your introduction because that implicitly invokes a well-known phenomenon (*il n’y a que la vérité qui blesse*) which, in fact, had nothing to do with this situation. The tone Wittgenstein uses strikes me as being that of someone who has simply realized, once and for all, that you just did not understand what he was getting at. And personally, I’m inclined to think that it was just because you realized this that it was *you* who came to “hate” Wittgenstein’s influence, describing it as “wholly bad”, “silly”, “nonsense”, and the like. What is at issue here is fundamental philosophical options, and your 1960 letters to me are no more than an exceedingly minor fall-out of that issue. Most of what you said concerning the *Tractatus*, in this 16 May letter, was so obvious that at first I wondered why you had bothered saying it—until it dawned on me that that was *all* you were saying, and that for you saying the obvious about that work was a substitute for dealing with its possible metaphysical implications.

In your last paragraph you tell me that the *Tractatus* cannot be understood “except as being ... an attempt to interpret the relation of logical symbolism to fact.” But the *Tractatus* also makes it quite clear that what you are referring to as “the relation” must necessarily pass through what Wittgenstein calls “the metaphysical subject”. It is that “metaphysical subject” which “compares” facts to signs, which “makes pictures to itself”. The paper I sent you was an attempt to make some kind of sense of this remarkable picture-making or comparing capacity of this supposed “metaphysical subject”. But here again, you simply did not see the point. I now regard that paper as quite wrong-headed, but not because I had “underestimated” the influence of mathematico-logical symbolism

on Wittgenstein’s thinking, but because I had overestimated its metaphysical adequacy.

I will end by saying that today all these controversies seem to me to be of no more than historical interest—which is not to deny that history is of extreme importance. For reasons which would certainly mean very little to you—although in your present mode of existence I might be quite wrong about this—I do not think that the real problems of philosophy lie in the areas delimited by the conflict between Wittgenstein and yourself, or between Wittgenstein and Frege. It seems to me that Wittgenstein, Frege and you represent warring factions within a basically similar general direction. And what I’m saying is that the real problems of philosophy do not seem to me to adequately formulated or represented by that general direction.

As a sign or symbol of that last statement, I express the hope that you are posthumously healthy.

Yours sincerely,  
A. Shalom.