

# Acquaintance, knowledge and description in Russell

by Gilead Bar-Elli

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RUSSELL'S FOUNDATIONALISTIC PROGRAMME in epistemology incorporated the principle that propositional knowledge is dependent, and somehow based, on objectual knowledge, i.e. on knowledge of the constituents of the proposition. This was a consequence of a more radical position, which construed the very understanding of a proposition as somehow based on knowing (being acquainted with) its constituents. Russell did not present, explicitly, a detailed theory of the relationships between the objectual knowledge of the constituents and propositional knowledge, which is somehow reduced to it. It seems plausible, however, to regard various aspects of his philosophy, such as his analysis of the logical form of various kinds of propositions, and his distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance, as belonging here.

Elsewhere<sup>1</sup> I have suggested that Russell's theory of descriptions may be seen as a decisive step towards such a theory. It should be regarded as an analysis of the logical form of some propositions, which is in conformity with his epistemological principle. The latter is thus construed as an effective constraint on an adequate theory of logical form. Put in a nutshell, the idea

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my "Constituents and Denotation in Russell", *Theoria*, 46 (1980): 37–51; and "Russell's Principle of Acquaintance and Its Significance", *Iyyun*, 29 (1980): 93–101 (in Hebrew with an English abstract).

is that logical form is regarded, on this interpretation, as what “maps” constituents (or sequences of constituents) onto propositions; it thus enables knowledge of constituents to be transformed into propositional knowledge.

Thus presented, the programme is beset by two major additional tasks: an account of what the knowledge of logical form consists in, and an account of what is involved in knowledge of the constituents of a proposition. Except for occasional remarks, I shall not deal here with the first problem, which deserves a discussion on its own.<sup>2</sup> The latter of these tasks is the topic of the second part of the present article, where I argue that the epistemic character of acquaintance is conceptually dependent on the idea of a proposition being *about* an object. This idea, I shall argue, is unintelligible on the model of acquaintance as the sole mode of knowing objects. Its intelligibility depends on the subject’s possessing the general notion of knowing objects, or referring to them, by description (even where no specific identifying descriptions of the object are available to him).

Preparatory to that, I shall describe, in the first part of the paper, a puzzling ambivalence in Russell’s attitude towards knowledge by description: Russell introduces it, alongside acquaintance, as a kind of *objectual* knowledge; while under his offered analysis it emerges as an unnecessary and, in fact, unintelligible element of a *purely propositional* knowledge, where the only mode of knowing objects is by acquaintance.

The “solution” I offer to this puzzle consists in the idea that the notion of knowledge by description is evoked as part of what is involved in the understanding of the purely propositional knowledge by which Russell analyzes certain descriptive contexts. This idea is elaborated in the second part of the paper.

The notion of knowledge about objects is, in some respects, the Russellian ancestor of the modern notion of knowledge *de re*. There is a tremendous amount of work that has been done recent-

ly on *de re* knowledge. By and large, this work has focused on two main topics: the logical form and the semantics of modal formal languages, which can represent the *de dicto/de re* distinction on the one hand, and the epistemic preconditions for justified ascriptions of *de re* knowledge on the other. I cannot discuss the bulk of this literature in the present article, though I am well aware of its relevance to some of the issues I raise here. Apart from obvious limitations of space, a partial excuse for that is that my main thesis, as stated above, has to do not so much with the preconditions of justified ascriptions of *de re* knowledge as with the *conceptual role* of the notion of *de re* knowledge, or *knowledge about objects* (which, as I shall argue, is Russell’s notion of knowledge by description) within Russell’s general epistemological framework. I shall confine myself to Russell’s ideas in one of his most fruitful periods: the years between *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918).

## I

Russell distinguished knowledge of truths (propositional knowledge) from knowledge of objects. This distinction cuts across another distinction central to his theory, namely, the distinction between two different kinds of knowledge, knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

Briefly, we know an object *by acquaintance* when we have a “direct cognitive relation to that object”, when the object is “presented to us and we are “directly aware of the object itself”.<sup>3</sup> An “object” here can be either a “particular”, a “universal”, a “sense-datum”, a “concept”, or a “relation”.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, we know an object *by description* “when we know that it is ‘the so-and-so’, i.e. when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property.” Also, it is, in general, not to be assumed that we are acquainted with the object, that is, “we do not know any proposition ‘A is the so-and-so’ where A is something with which we are acquainted” (*ibid.*, p. 156).

<sup>2</sup> There is relatively little material on this in Russell’s published writings of the period. Much more is to be found, however, in the recently published 1913 manuscript, *Theory of Knowledge*, ed. E.R. Eames with K. Blackwell, Vol. 7 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984). Especially important here are the doctrines of the “sense” of relations and the acquaintance with pure forms expounded in Chaps. VIII and IX of Part I, and Chaps. I and II of Part II.

<sup>3</sup> “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, in *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), pp. 152–68 (at 152).

<sup>4</sup> Russell had a rather elaborate theory of sense-data which I shall completely ignore in the sequel, for I believe that it can be fruitfully separated from his more general epistemological investigations. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 154.

This definition is not at all clear: I take it that “knowing an object by description” is stipulated here to mean “knowing of the object that it is the so-and-so”, and this in turn is analyzed as knowing that there is one and only one object which is so-and-so. The difficulty is that it seems clear that as the *analysandum* Russell has in mind a kind of objectual knowledge—it is an object which is supposed to be known by description—whereas the *analysans* is purely propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if the kind of objectual knowledge Russell is set to analyze is the one expressed by phrases of the form “*M* knows the so-and-so”, it seems that the analysis offered is obviously wrong. Saying that *M* knows the present President of the United States surely doesn’t mean just that *M* knows that there is one and only one President, at present, of the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

It may be suggested that the kind of cases Russell had in mind was cases in which the definite description is the grammatical subject of the known proposition. To make the contrast clearer, consider the following four statements:

- (a) A knows Bismarck.
- (b) A knows the first Chancellor of the German Empire.
- (c) A knows that Bismarck was an astute diplomatist.
- (d) A knows that the first Chancellor of the German Empire was an astute diplomatist.

<sup>5</sup> The objectual nature of knowledge by description is taken for granted by many authors. Cf., for example, L. Linsky, *Names and Descriptions* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1977), pp. 95–6; and A.J. Ayer, *Russell and Moore* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 43. These authors, like many others, don’t seem to feel the difficulty pointed out in this paper: that within the confinements of Russell’s theory, this objectual kind of knowledge is hardly intelligible.

<sup>6</sup> There is an obvious similarity between this and Strawson’s point in “On Referring” that “referring to ... a particular thing cannot be dissolved into any kind of assertion” (*Logico-Linguistic Papers* [London: Methuen, 1971], p. 15; cf. pp. 16–17). There is an important dissimilarity, however. Strawson’s critique may seem unjustified because Russell has never suggested reducing definite descriptions to assertions. In fact, he overemphasized the opposite: that descriptions are incomplete symbols, by themselves do not mean anything, and, needless to say, do not assert anything. But curiously enough, Russell did introduce an objectual notion of *knowledge by description*; my point here relates to this notion.

Assuming for the moment that “Bismarck” functions here as a real proper name, (a) and (c) are intelligible, according to Russell, only to those acquainted with Bismarck. In both cases such an acquaintance is a necessary condition for their significance. Reading the above definition of knowledge by description literally, we first hypothesized that it applied to cases like (b). It is not uncommon, however, to think of Russell’s notion of knowledge by description with regards to cases like (d). This, I believe, is in some sense right, but the sense in which it is right is not at all clear, and, as I shall argue later on, it would be wrong to regard it as implying a denial of the objectual character of knowledge by description. This denial may derive from a very common tendency to conflate the problem of knowledge by description with another problem, which Russell put thus: “... to consider what it is that we know in cases where we know propositions about ‘the so-and-so’ without knowing who or what the ‘so-and-so’ is.”<sup>7</sup> Russell makes it clear, at the very opening of “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, that this was the main problem he was addressing in that article. His analysis of (d)-type cases presents a solution of this problem in that it presents the content (the known proposition) as *not* involving the denotation of “the so-and-so”.

It is plausible, therefore, to suggest that Russell introduced the notion of knowledge by description in order to solve the above “aboutness problem”. In other words, that he regarded the notion of knowledge by description to be required for understanding his analysis of (d)-type sentences. Something like the above is implicit, I think, in the way some people present the Russellian notion of knowledge by description. Knowing an object by description is, according to Evans, for instance, “a way of discharging” Russell’s aboutness principle, which Evans put thus: “It is not possible for a person to have a thought about something unless he knows which particular individual in the world he is thinking about.”<sup>8</sup> This is Evans’ particular glossing of Russell’s more general formulation of the principle which states that it is impossible for someone to have a thought without knowing what it is about. Evans’ claim about discharging this requirement in terms of knowledge by *descriptions* may seem rather surprising, for Russell

<sup>7</sup> “Knowledge by Acquaintance ...”, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford U. P., 1982), p. 44.

clearly alluded to the principle in question in order to justify his “principle of *acquaintance*”. This may suggest that he thought that the only way of discharging the above principle was by acquaintance.

Evans also talks of “thought of an object by description” as a “thought of the object as the unique satisfier of some description”. But, surely, to think of *an object* as the sole satisfier of a description is one thing, and to think that there is a sole satisfier of the description is another. It is natural to say, with Evans, that in the first case one is thinking about the object, but not so in the second. The second is, however, the “official” Russellian analysis of the contexts Evans has in mind, and Evans doesn’t seem to feel the difficulty in making room for the first within the confines of Russell’s theory. A predicate like “... is thinking about Bismarck” would, according to Evans’ presentation of Russell, break down into “... is thinking that the so-and-so is such-and-such” and “Bismarck is uniquely so-and-so”. But this hardly helps. Once again, to think that there is one and only one so-and-so is a different kind of thought than one about the so-and-so. Someone may entertain the former even when the latter is not available to him (as for instance when there is nothing which is the so-and-so).

I emphasize all this not in order to suggest that Evans’ interpretation was wrong. In fact, as the reader will see later on, much of Evans’ intuition here is vindicated in this paper. The point is that it needs vindication. Having realized that knowledge by description is an objectual notion in Russell, there is a problem in understanding how there could be room for it within the Russellian confinements. And having realized that Russell appealed to it in his analysis of (d)-type propositions, there is still a difficulty in understanding in what its contribution to such an analysis consists. The difficulty is particularly acute because of Russell’s clear and unhesitating view that a correct analysis of (d)-type cases construes them as *purely propositional knowledge* in which “the denotation [the object described] has no cognitive status whatsoever.”

#### *Knowledge by description—propositional knowledge*

According to Russell’s analysis of sentences containing definite descriptions, a sentence like “The first Chancellor of the German Empire was an astute diplomatist” means that “Someone and no other was first Chancellor of the German Empire, and he was an

astute diplomatist.” Generally, “the *F* is *G*” [ $G(x)Fx$ ] means “There is exactly one thing that is *F* and it is *G*” ( $(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow y=x) \& Gx]$ ). Summarizing his analysis (with slight changes due to a different example), Russell writes: “Here it is plain that there is no constituent corresponding to the phrase ‘the first Chancellor of the German Empire’. Thus there is no reason to regard this phrase as expressing a constituent of the judgment....”<sup>9</sup> Russell emphasizes this point repeatedly: “The actual object which is the denotation of the description is not ... a constituent of propositions in which descriptions occur....”<sup>10</sup> Thus, propositional knowledge of the sort “the so-and-so is such-and-such” does not involve any epistemic relation whatsoever to the denotation of the description “the so-and-so”.<sup>11</sup> (This is true not only of sentences such as (d) above, but also of those such as (b).)

In his discussion of knowledge-by-description, Russell brings the following example:

We know that the candidate who gets most votes will be elected, and in the case we are very likely also acquainted ... with the man who is, in fact, the candidate who will get most votes, but we do not know which of the candidates he is, i.e. we do not know any proposition of the form “A is the candidate who will get most votes” where A is one of the candidates by name.<sup>12</sup>

This is a good illustration of the propositional nature of knowledge by description: to know that the candidate who gets most votes will be elected is knowledge which does not involve any epistemic relation to the described entity (“the candidate who gets most votes”), even if we do happen to be acquainted with the candidate in question. The object is not a constituent of the proposition, or of our knowledge, though we are in fact acquainted with the candidate who was elected.

As against this, it could be claimed that both (b) and (d) are

<sup>9</sup> “Knowledge by Acquaintance ...”, p. 161; cf. also p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166; cf. “On Denoting”, *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. R.C. Marsh (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> This claim is connected to, though different and in some sense stronger than, Russell’s famous claim that descriptions do not have meaning by themselves. Cf. *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 172; *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> “Knowledge by Acquaintance ...”, p. 156.

ambiguous on Russell's theory: whereas on one reading knowledge is construed as purely propositional (relating to a whole proposition), on the other it is not. The two ways of understanding (b) (where " $Fx$ " means " $x$  is first Chancellor of the German Empire") would, accordingly, be:

b':  $M$  knows that there is one and only one  $F$ .  
 $Km\{(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow x=y)]\}$ .

b'': There is one and only one  $F$  and  $M$  is acquainted with it.  
 $(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow x=y) \ \& \ K*mx]$ .

Similarly, the two possible ways of understanding (d) (when " $Sx$ " means " $x$  is an astute diplomatist") are:

d':  $M$  knows that there is one and only one  $F$  and that it is  $S$ .  
 $Km(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Sx]$ .

d'': There is one and only one  $F$  and  $M$  knows it to be  $S$ .  
 $(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Km(Sx)]$ .  
 Or:  $(\exists x)[Km(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Sx]$ .<sup>13</sup>

This may cast some doubt on the "purely propositional" construal of knowledge by description.

#### *Knowledge by description—objectual notion*

The notion of knowledge by description is *introduced* by Russell as a kind of objectual knowledge; it should not be understood merely as knowledge of a proposition containing a description, but rather as knowledge of the object described. Russell makes a characteristic remark to that effect in the opening of "On Denoting": "... we know that the centre of mass of the solar system at a definite instant is some definite point ... but ... this point is only known to us by description." It should also be remarked that knowledge by acquaintance is definitely knowledge of objects, and not knowledge of the propositions about the objects we are acquainted with. In view of the kind of contrast Russell makes

<sup>13</sup> Formally speaking, (d) has another reading:

$$(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \leftrightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Sx \ \& \ K*mx]$$

but it seems to overstretch the regular meaning of (d).

between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, the latter, presumably, is also objectual knowledge. There are numerous passages in "Knowledge by Acquaintance ..." that support this claim. Throughout the second half of that article Russell repeatedly talks of our knowledge "concerning objects which are only known by description". Summing up his discussion there, he writes: "We have descriptive knowledge of an object when we know it is the object having some property or properties with which we are acquainted."<sup>14</sup>

The view that knowledge by description is knowledge of the described object is implicit in several other passages: "... there are various stages in the removal from acquaintance with particulars: there is Bismarck to people who know him, Bismarck to those who only know of him through history..."<sup>15</sup>

This gradation strengthens the impression that knowledge of objects by description is a rather indirect mode of knowing objects, different from acquaintance only in that it is not as complete or direct. This impression is further sustained in the following passage:

It would seem that, when we make a statement about something only known by description, we often intend to make our statement ... about the actual thing described.... What enables us to communicate, in spite of the varying descriptions that we employ, is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description ... the proposition described is still the same.<sup>16</sup>

This means that when someone says that "The first Chancellor of the German Empire was an astute diplomatist", he *expresses* a certain proposition, but by the same token, he also *describes* a different proposition, the proposition expressed by " $B$  was an astute diplomatist" (where " $B$ " is a proper name of Bismarck); the same is true of all sentences of the form "The so-and-so was an astute diplomatist", where "the so-and-so" is an accurate description of Bismarck: each of the sentences *expresses* some specific proposition, but they all *describe* a single proposition. For Russell, this is important, because it explains how we can communicate

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

successfully in spite of the fact that sentences usually express different propositions to different people, and even different propositions to the same individual at various times.<sup>17</sup>

On this reasoning, then, not only is the proposition which a sentence *expresses* part of its cognitive content, but so is also the one it *describes* (that is, when there is one). Since, in any case, the described proposition contains the object in question as one of its constituents (for it is designated in it by a proper name), it seems to support the claim that knowledge by description involves, if only indirectly, knowledge of the described object, i.e. objectual knowledge.

### *Knowledge by description and aboutness*

Having thus emphasized the objectual nature of Russell's notion of knowledge by description, our previous line of interpretation, according to which the notion is brought into the analysis Russell offers for (d)-type cases, clearly suggests that Russell wished to retain something of the intuition that in (d)-type cases the ascribed knowledge is *about* the denotation of the description. For otherwise it is hard to see why Russell needed the notion of knowledge by description at all.

In a characteristic passage Russell writes: "... knowledge concerning what is known by description is ultimately reducible to what is known by acquaintance."<sup>18</sup> Russell clearly distinguishes here between what is known by description, which is evidently an object, and the knowledge concerning it, which is propositional. Of the latter he says that it is ultimately reducible to knowledge of what is known by acquaintance. Once again, it is to the initial move of construing this kind of knowledge as concerned with what is known by description that I want to call attention here. For the exact nature of this notion of a proposition concerning an object described in it remains, however, quite perplexing; since, as we have noted, from a strict epistemic point of view, from the point of

view of what is available to the knowing subject, the denotation of the description has no status whatsoever, and the knowledge involved is strictly about the constituents of the proposition and only about them. (We shall have more to say about his notion of about and its relationship to knowledge by description later on.)

As a first step towards a more elaborate explanation I shall try to provide later on, let me mention here that Russell probably toyed with several notions of aboutness. The first, which may be called *psychological aboutness*, has to do with the constituents of a particular thought as entertained by a particular subject: "Considered psychologically, apart from the information we convey to others, apart from the fact about the actual Bismarck, which gives importance to our judgment, the thought we really have contains the one or more particulars involved, and otherwise consists wholly of concepts."<sup>19</sup> The particulars and concepts involved are evidently the constituents of the proposition. But the "apart" clauses are also instructive, for they suggest that apart from this strictly psychological notion of thought and proposition, Russell alluded to another one which is the means of communication and of conveying information, and that is the objective meaning of our statements. This notion, which we may call *informational aboutness*, has to do, as the above quotation makes clear, with the actual truth-conditions of our statements, with what they say about the objective (communicable) world. In the second half of this paper I shall argue that access to both notions, and understanding the transition from the one to the other, are essential for the possibility of explaining the epistemic character of acquaintance, and perhaps for the possibility of knowledge in general. Knowledge of objects by description, I shall suggest, belongs to the second notion of aboutness, and is part of the conceptual machinery that makes the transition from one to the other intelligible.<sup>20</sup>

"Psychological aboutness" pertains to the constituents of the

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", *Logic and Knowledge*, pp. 195, 201 [= *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays*, ed. John G. Slater, Vol. 8 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 174, 179]; cf. also *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 103; also *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> "Knowledge by Acquaintance ...", p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In a characteristic passage Russell writes: "If I describe these objects [the objects of my awareness at a particular moment], I may of course describe them wrongly; hence I cannot with certainty communicate to another what are the things of which I am aware. But if I speak to myself, and denote them by what may be called 'proper names', rather than by descriptive words, I cannot be in error" (*Theory of Knowledge*, p. 7: 35–9).

proposition expressed by a sentence; “informational aboutness” pertains to those of the one *described* by it. Since a claim to knowledge is a claim to the *objective truth* of the known proposition, there must be some way of effecting the transition from one to the other. A subject lacking the concept of informational aboutness and of the proposition *described* by a sentence is, therefore, not only incapable of normal communication, but is also devoid of an essential element of making a claim to knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, we should ascribe to Russell a view according to which these epistemic contexts are governed by some principle of exportation: that a (d)-type context should be rendered as, or at least imply something like, “there is something of which *M* knows that it is the so-and-so and that it is such-and-such.” And analogously for (b)-type cases, we should have to regard them as implying something like “there is an object of which *M* knows that it, and only it, is so-and-so.” Symbolically, this principle of exportation would warrant the implication from

$$Km\{\exists x[(y)(Gy \leftrightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Fx]\} \text{ to } \exists x[K*m(y)(Gy \leftrightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Fx];$$

and from

$$Km[\exists x(y)(Gy \leftrightarrow x=y)] \text{ to } \exists x[K*m(y)(Gy \leftrightarrow x=y)].$$

These readings may explain Russell’s ambivalent attitude, for “*K\**” here is construed as somewhat “in between” propositional and objectual knowledge.

To conclude this part then, there seems to be an unresolved tension in Russell’s thought between a tendency to retain the notion of knowledge by description as a kind of knowledge of objects, and a tendency to analyze it away by purely propositional knowledge. Should we understand Russell as maintaining knowledge and reference to objects by description to be a superficial feature of our vernacular ways of talking—a feature we should do away with in a true analysis of the structure and content of our

thought and our knowledge? Or are the conceptual resources of knowing objects by description rather essential to the structure of our thought and knowledge?

In what follows I shall argue for the second option of the alternative. The basic point I shall try to defend is that the notion of knowing objects by description is indispensable for an explanatory account of the epistemic character of acquaintance, and consequently for the possibility of knowing singular propositions. Thus, I shall offer, in a roundabout way, an explanation of Russell’s ambivalent attitude towards knowledge by description. I say “in a roundabout way” because I am aware that at some crucial turns the ascription of the following considerations to Russell is questionable, and I do not intend to insist on it.

I shall further argue that the notion of knowledge by description is essential for the very *understanding* of atomic statements (and, hence, of quantified statements as well). The argument for that consists of two points. The first is tied to Russell’s principle of acquaintance and argues, on its basis in addition to the above, that knowledge by description is essential for understanding atomic statements. The second is more general in kind, and argues that knowledge by description is essential for the very understanding of logical form.

## II

### *The epistemic character of acquaintance*

Acquaintance, as we have seen, is a way of knowing objects; on the austere reading of Russell it is even the only kind of objectual knowledge. However, in order to understand Russell’s epistemology in its entirety one may ask: What is the cognitive status of acquaintance in his theory? In what sense and from which perspective is acquaintance with objects a kind of knowledge?<sup>22</sup> Before dealing with that problem let me say a word on why the question is important. (i) Its importance in Russell’s theory stems from the fact that acquaintance is the basic epistemic relation,

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted here that Russell sometimes alludes to a third notion of aboutness—which may be called “logical aboutness”—when he writes, in discussing a sentence like “The author of *Waverly* is the author of *Marmion*”: “Thus the true subject of our judgment is a propositional function” (“Knowledge by Acquaintance ...”, pp. 165, 167). I shall not elaborate on this.

<sup>22</sup> Russell must have been aware of the problem, as can be learnt from the following passage taken from his critique of James: “Immediate experience [namely acquaintance], which I should regard as the only real knowledge of things, he [James] refuses to regard as knowledge at all” (*Theory of Knowledge*, p. 32: 23–4).

and this gives the whole rationale to his principle of acquaintance. (ii) But even apart from the details of Russell's theory, a basic question facing any theory of language is how understanding is related to knowledge, and on many accounts of that question it seems that knowing objects is indispensable for understanding the semantics of atomic sentences (and, hence, of quantified ones).

Knowledge by acquaintance, according to Russell, is a direct relation, a sort of direct awareness of presence,<sup>23</sup> an unmediated relation independent of any propositional knowledge.<sup>24</sup> What is known by acquaintance cannot be expressed by a sentence or proposition but only by a name, the only significance of which consists in denoting the object with which we are acquainted, and which is totally non-descriptive.<sup>25</sup> If we turn our attention away from the designated object, the name becomes a meaningless mark or sound. The question is whether or not there is a significant connection between this kind of awareness of presence—this inexplicable, direct, non-propositional relation—and ordinary propositional knowledge, knowledge that the case is such-and-such.

It should be noted at the outset that the required connection cannot consist solely in the claim that acquaintance contributes to (propositional) knowledge. There are things that contribute (as, say, preconditions) to knowledge without their being in themselves kinds of knowledge. It is, for instance, plausible to argue that in many cases if I know that *p*, I must be causally related to *p*. But it is at least questionable whether this is in itself an epistemic relation: or, if it is, it may itself have further preconditions that may not. Hence, the mere fact that something contributes in some way to our knowledge is not enough to endow it with epistemic character—to regard it as a kind of knowledge.

We stressed before that in a certain sense propositional knowledge (and, in fact, all types of understanding) assumes acquaintance with objects, although the nature of these objects was left unexplained. This is the principle of acquaintance mentioned

above. However, this principle does not provide an answer to our query, but rather adds to its sharpness and difficulty. For the principle is only intelligible if acquaintance is construed as a cognitive relation. The principle itself does not provide us with any account of what the epistemic nature of acquaintance consists in.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Acquaintance with facts*

Russell suggested another way of linking the concept of acquaintance with propositional knowledge. I bring it here, not as an adequate answer to the question before us, but rather as an illustration of the internal tension in his theory. I refer to his views on our acquaintance with facts (or complexes) and not just with objects: "We may say that a truth is self-evident ... when we have acquaintance with the fact that corresponds to the truth ... in all cases where we know by acquaintance a complex fact...."<sup>27</sup> This formulation would seem out of place in Russell's conceptual framework, since he took acquaintance to be a two-place relation between a subject and an object. In fact, he defined "object" as what is found in the range of the acquaintance relation: "... any entity with which something is acquainted will be called an 'object', i.e. objects are the converse domain of the relation 'acquaintance'."<sup>28</sup>

Until approximately 1914, Russell tended to construe facts as complex objects. The fact that Brutus killed Caesar is, on this view, the complex object "the killing of Caesar by Brutus."<sup>29</sup> Later, Russell himself related how, under the influence of Wittgenstein, he came to believe that this view was mistaken, and that objects

<sup>23</sup> Cf. "Knowledge by Acquaintance ...", p. 162; *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford U. P., 1967), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Problems*, p. 25; cf. *Our Knowledge of the External World* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 200 [= *Collected Papers* 8: 178]; "Knowledge by Acquaintance ...", pp. 164–6.

<sup>26</sup> In his *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell somewhat played down the direct epistemic character of acquaintance by distinguishing it from attention: "Many mental facts involve *acquaintance* with objects to which no attention is given ..." (p. 129: 35). Acquaintance becomes here a more abstract and logical notion—what is logically required for understanding—while attention is the more psychological and epistemic notion: "... the order of psychological development ... appears to be mainly determined by the nature of the objects to which attention is given" (p. 130: 9).

<sup>27</sup> *Problems*, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 35: 25–7.

<sup>29</sup> *Problems*, p. 80. The conception of facts as complex objects is prevalent in *Theory of Knowledge*; cf. p. 80: 1, though at times Russell distinguishes between the fact that *a* is *F* and the complex "*a*-being-*F*". Cf. p. 127: 27.

and facts are different sorts of entities. Facts are not the sort of thing with which we can be acquainted, in Russell's technical sense, nor can they be named or pointed at.<sup>30</sup>

Between the period in which he held the somewhat simplistic view expressed in *The Problems of Philosophy* and the period in which he favoured the more refined position of "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", Russell remained undecided and vacillated between them: from an epistemological point of view he continued to speak of facts as objects with which we are or can be acquainted, while from a logical point of view he acknowledged the categorical difference between facts and objects. This state of affairs is illustrated in the following passage from an article written in 1914:

An observed complex fact such as that this patch of red is to the left of that patch of blue is also to be regarded as a datum from our present point of view: epistemologically, it does not differ greatly from a simple sense-datum as regards its function in giving knowledge. Its logical structure is very different, however, from that of sense: sense gives acquaintance with particulars, and is thus a two-term relation in which the object can be named but not asserted, and is inherently incapable of truth or falsehood, whereas the observation of a complex fact ... is not a two-term relation, but involves the propositional form on the object-side, and gives knowledge of a truth, not mere acquaintance with a particular.<sup>31</sup>

Russell's motivation there seems clear: he wishes to establish the epistemic character of acquaintance on the one hand, and to reduce, in a sort of Humean way, propositional knowledge to acquaintance on the other. Though we may sympathize with this motivation, such a philosophical "schizophrenia" cannot, however, be justified. And, in fact, Russell spoke of acquaintance with an

<sup>30</sup> Cf. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", 2nd to 4th lectures. There is a complication here. The point Russell usually attributes to Wittgenstein is the discovery that ascriptions of belief and, in general, "two-verb facts", cannot be construed as dual relations because of the propositional nature of the object (*Logic and Knowledge*, p. 226 [= *Collected Papers* 8: 199]; *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 46n.). It, therefore, obviously involved the categorical difference between facts and objects—and analogously between names and propositions—even apart from the special problem about belief.

<sup>31</sup> "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics", *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 109.

object as a complete and perfect kind of knowledge of it: "... so far as concerns knowledge of the colour itself, which is knowledge by acquaintance as opposed to knowledge of truths about it, I know the colour perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it is even theoretically possible."<sup>32</sup>

#### *The epistemic character of acquaintance explained*

Coming back now to the epistemic nature of acquaintance, we may try to extract from Russell's writings some of its characteristics. In discussing whether a subject could be acquainted with itself, Russell wrote: "If it is true, as it seems to be, that subjects are not given in acquaintance, it follows that nothing can be known as to their intrinsic nature. We cannot know, for example, that they differ from matter, or yet that they do not differ."<sup>33</sup> Here, acquaintance is clearly presented as an epistemic relation. It is suggested that the epistemic character of acquaintance involves knowledge of the *intrinsic nature* of the object known. But what does "intrinsic nature" mean here? From the end of the passage quoted, we may gather that Russell was thinking mainly of the object's identity. If so, acquaintance is, first and foremost, knowledge of the identity of that with which we are acquainted. Identity is also a major element in the ordinary, non-technical sense of acquaintance: "One who can be said ... to be acquainted with Bismarck has a special claim to know who he is."<sup>34</sup> The ability to identify an object has two facets; it involves the ability to pick out the same object in varying circumstances, to isolate it from its environment, to distinguish it from other objects, and, in addition, the ability to identify the object as being of a certain *type*, to apply various predicates to it, to sort it into groups according to various criteria. These two facets of the ability to identify are interrelated, but the connections are too complex to be unravelled here. We shall only say this (taking our cue from Frege): there is a sense in which the first element is contingent upon the second. That is, the ability to identify an object in changing surroundings, to isolate it from its environment and single it out as an individual, is based on the second kind of ability—the ability to sort the object into

<sup>32</sup> *Problems*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 37: 11–14.

<sup>34</sup> W. Sellars, "Ontology and Philosophy of Mind in Russell", in G. Nakhnikian, ed., *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1974), p. 62.

various groups. Acquaintance with an object, then, rests on the ability to determine what the object is, on knowing its identity and intrinsic nature. But such knowledge would appear to be propositional knowledge about the object with which we are acquainted.<sup>35</sup> On that line of argument it is not merely that the epistemic character of acquaintance rests on *some* propositional knowledge (like, e.g., “I exist”, or “There is a world out there”, etc.), but that it depends on propositional knowledge which is *about* the object in question. The question now is whether this notion of knowledge about an object can be explicated on the model of acquaintance as the sole mode of knowing objects, or rather, that it essentially requires the conceptual resources of knowledge by description.

#### *Description and the epistemic character of acquaintance*

Judging from what Russell says in several places, knowledge about an object is knowledge (of that object) by description.<sup>36</sup> However, Russell also held that a proposition is about its constituents. These constituents, according to Russell, are known by acquaintance, and so it is clear that there is a sense in which a proposition is about things known by acquaintance.<sup>37</sup> Thus, even if we accept our previous claim that acquaintance is contingent upon propositional knowledge, which is about the object with which we are acquainted (of course, if we do so, we weaken Russell’s claim that acquaintance is in no way propositional), we still have not explained the significance of knowledge of objects *by description*, since it is conceivable that the propositional knowledge is such that the object in question is a constituent with which we are acquainted.

<sup>35</sup> I am not sure that I have understood R. Chisholm’s reasoning in the last paragraphs of his “On the Nature of Acquaintance” (in Nakhnikian, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–56). It seems, however, that his conclusion that “it was a mistake ... to suggest that acquaintance, being knowledge of things, is not also knowledge of truths” (p. 56), though reached in an entirely different way, is akin to my point here. Vital to my point is the particular way I suggest of connecting these notions of knowledge of truths and of things by means of the idea of aboutness.

<sup>36</sup> Cf., for instance, the opening pages of “On Denoting”.

<sup>37</sup> Cf., e.g., *Problems*, p. 60. This is Russell’s dominant view, though occasionally he talked of knowing the constituents by description: “... material analysis may be called descriptive when the constituents are known by description, not by acquaintance” (*Theory of Knowledge*, p. 119: 25).

Suppose that I am acquainted with A; according to what we have said, this necessitates propositional knowledge of the form “A is such-and-such.” In this knowledge, “A” functions as a proper name and not as a description, and the object A will be a real constituent of the proposition that A is such-and-such.

It should be noted, however, that what is known to whoever is acquainted with A is not merely a proposition of the form “there exists an object that is such-and-such”, but rather “A is such-and-such”. This implies that part of the content of what one knows here is that *the object with which one is acquainted is the very object about which it is known that it is such-and-such*. It is true that when acquaintance with A and the propositional knowledge that A is such-and-such are taken separately as two pieces of knowledge, none of them seem to involve knowledge by description of any particular object. There is a sense, however, in which they cannot be regarded separately: acquaintance with A involves propositional knowledge of the form “A is such-and-such”, and that in turn depends on acquaintance with A. It is this interdependence, I suggest, that involves knowledge by description: the knowledge that the object which is known by acquaintance is the object about which it is known that it is such-and-such.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> I find a similarity between this problem and one that Russell discusses in *Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 125–6. He distinguishes between “simple perception”—where the object is perceived as one unstructured whole—and “complex perception”—where it is perceived as structured, say as *a-R-b*. He then asks: “How shall we know that *C*, the object of simple perception, is identical with *a-R-b*, the object of complex perception?” (p. 125: 20). He proposes a solution in terms of the distinction between acquaintance and attention: we must “be able to know that an object to which we attend at one moment is identical with an object with which, at another moment, we have inattentive acquaintance” (p. 125: 42). The analogy is this: An explanation/analysis of an (epistemic) feature of simple perception/acquaintance is shown to require a “referential depth”—whereby reference to the object of the simple relation is effected by a structural complex having a definite logical structure. There are, of course, important differences. Russell is raising a first-order epistemic problem—how do I know so-and-so? I was emphasizing a logical-conceptual point—what is involved in the epistemic nature of acquaintance. For his purpose Russell emphasizes the fact that “we can attend to an experience which is in the immediate past, even if we did not attend to it or its object when it was present.” For my purpose I would emphasize that in order to explain the epistemic nature of attention, one need refer to the object of attention as, e.g., the object of a particular past acquaintance.

One may naturally protest here that this appeal to descriptions is a superficial feature of the way we have chosen to describe what is involved here. On that superficial level we could just as well regard the mere occurrence of "A" (in "being acquainted with A", and "knowing that A is such-and-such") as displaying the fact that there is one and the same object involved; or we might even express the identity explicitly by saying that one is acquainted with A and knows that B is such-and-such and that  $A=B$ . In either of these no descriptions seem to be called for.

I want to argue in contrast that the appeal to descriptions goes much deeper, and that it is an essential element of the notion of knowing a proposition to be about a particular object.

#### *Description and the logical "depth" of aboutness*

One line along which I would like to argue for that view finds its clue in the distinction between "psychological aboutness" and "informational aboutness", which we have observed before. Claims to knowledge are dependent on a recognition of the distinction between what seems to one to be the case and what the case in fact is—what is objectively true. In terms of the Russellian distinction, it requires, on the subject's part, a conception of the objective "informational proposition". When it is realized that the epistemic character of acquaintance depends on its being "backed" by propositional knowledge about the object, the above implies that the epistemic character of acquaintance consists in some awareness of the notion of "the object out there with which I am acquainted" (or, "which is the cause of my impressions", etc.). That is, it must take the form of a proposition of the type "the so-and-so is such-and-such". Otherwise, the notion of knowing a proposition about an object could only take the form of knowing a proposition about what is known by acquaintance, and this would obliterate the distinction between what seems to be the case and what in fact is the case.

The particular description involved may of course vary from one case to another. It may be "the object there on my right" or "what I am touching with my hand now", or "what is standing behind that table", or "the object of my past experience", etc. But in all these cases the subject must have available to him the general notion of referring to objects by description as part of the conceptual machinery that makes objective reference and claims to knowledge possible. In each such case one must have the idea of referring to or talking about an object whose identity is indepen-

dent of the particular allegedly known proposition. This idea of independent and partial identification does not make any coherent sense on the model of acquaintance as the sole and complete way of knowing objects;<sup>39</sup> in contrast, it is explicitly articulated in the idea of referring to objects of description.

Let me try putting it in still some other terms. Acquaintance is a strongly perspectival notion. It is identified mainly (solely?) by the very specific circumstances of the subject. In order for such a notion to have any objective status and to serve as the basis of the subject's knowledge, the subject must recognize this perspectival nature as such. But for this the subject must have a conception of what it is to refer to and to identify the same object independently, from a different perspective. This conception of independent identifications must involve reference by description. Hence, the idea of reference by description must be at the conceptual ken of a subject who grasps his perspectival identification as such.

I should emphasize here that I am not claiming that the object of acquaintance is not, or cannot be, a "real" object that can be a part or constituent of an objective fact. What I do claim is rather that to the extent to which acquaintance relates to *knowledge* of such objective facts, the notion of knowing the object by description must be available to the subject as a precondition of his epistemic claim which is involved in his being acquainted with the object. And again, I am not claiming that any singular proposition of the form "A is such-and-such" (with "A" as a proper name) or any claim to know such a proposition, is reducible, or translatable, to a descriptive one, or to a claim to know an object by description. The claim is, rather, that the *general conception* of referring to, or knowing, objects by description, is an essential part of what is involved in such claims to knowledge.

Evans argued that for a subject to have a thought of the form "A is F", it must satisfy the "generality constraint" which implies that the subject must have a conception of what it is for A to be G, or H, etc., for a whole range of such concepts. (What is in that range, and what else is implied by the constraint, as well as what are its justifications are vital questions that I leave aside here.<sup>40</sup>) Evans does not require here the ability just to apply other predicates to

<sup>39</sup> As Russell says in *Our Knowledge*, p. 115: "It is a mistake to think as if acquaintance had degrees."

<sup>40</sup> Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, pp. 100–5.

objects, but rather the ability to conceive of  $A$  as subject to other predications. That is to say, it is not the ability to form other thoughts of the form “ $A$  is  $G$ ”, “ $A$  is  $H$ ”, etc., as instances of  $(\exists x)(Fx)$ ,  $(\exists x)(Gx)$ ,  $(\exists x)(Hx)$ , etc., but as instances of  $(\exists x)(Fx \& Gx \& Hx \dots)$ . There is no predication, one may say, without co-predication. Having an idea of  $A$  which is thus subjected to the generality constraint requires, however, the resources of referring to an object by description: “the object which is  $F$ , is also  $G$  and  $H$ , etc.” So, again, the general conception of referring to objects by description must be regarded as part of the conceptual resources on which the ability to have singular thoughts and to know propositions of that kind depends. I suppose that formulating explicitly what is involved in understanding  $(\exists x)(Fx \& Gx)$  would be something like  $(\exists x)[Fx \& (\forall y)(y=x \rightarrow Gy)]$ , which is a “sort” of Russellian description (not quite so, of course; there is no uniqueness involved). The point is, that though there is a sort of conceptual complexity in  $(\exists x)(Fx)$ , there is a different sort of conceptual complexity in  $(\exists x)(Fx \& Gx)$ : here, in addition to the idea of a predicate being instanced, is involved the idea of predicates being instanced by the *same object*.

I have repeatedly referred to the need to ascribe to a subject the *general conception* of referring to objects, or knowing objects by description. This is not to imply that any case of knowing a proposition of the form “the so-and-so is such-and-such” is a case of knowing a proposition about a particular object, or of knowing that object by description. I may know, for instance, that the shortest spy is a spy, or that the Wimbledon champion of 1984 is a good tennis player, without thereby knowing a proposition about a particular object, or knowing him by description. These cases may be cases of “purely propositional knowledge”, which are really just knowledge of certain existential statements to be true. There certainly may be additional conditions required for the ascription of the aboutness relation to such thoughts, or for regarding them as cases of knowing particular objects—that is, by description. (These “further conditions” are, of course, the topic of extensive literature on the conditions of *de re* ascriptions to which I have alluded at the beginning of the paper and which I must here leave aside.)

But all this does not affect, and comes on top of, the point made here—that the general conception of knowing and referring to objects by description is not a superficial feature of our vernacular ways of talking which can, and should, be explained away in a

proper analysis of the logical forms involved; on the contrary, it is essential to various deep components of our thought and knowledge.

It emerges that there is a somewhat interesting logical structure to the notion of “about”. In order for the notion of “about” to fulfil the job we have ascribed to it—i.e. grounding the general notion of knowledge of objects on that of propositional knowledge and the idea of a proposition being about an object—there must be an inherent relation between the proposition as a whole and what it is about. It was Frege’s discovery that the logical form of a sentence is intimately connected with the kind of entity it is about—whether it is about an object, or a concept. I have elsewhere called this “categorical aboutness”, and it may explain part of the reason for Frege’s position that knowing what a sentence is about is an element of understanding it.<sup>41</sup> What *specific* object, or concept, a sentence is about was regarded by Frege to be, in general, determined “locally” by the senses of its names and predicates. Russell’s main insight here may be presented as rejecting Frege’s latter thesis, and proposing instead that “specific aboutness” is also something related to the sentence (or proposition) as a whole, and determined by its *logical structure*. A proposition, we may say, is conceived here to be about something *in virtue of its structure*. The claim that a proposition is about (one of) its constituents is, from that point of view, an arbitrary and empty stipulation. It is like saying that one sees one’s own retinal image. Seeing may be conceived of as a structured complex, one of whose many components is the retinal image. When we specify *what* we see, the object of seeing, we *give a point* to this whole structure. Analogously, there must be some logical “depth” to the notion of “about”, if what a proposition is about should be genuinely related to its logical structure.

It may be plausibly suggested that on Russell’s view the logical structure of a proposition is what relates the separate constituents of the proposition to its objective meaning. Part of the significance of the claim that what a proposition is about is determined by its logical structure is precisely that what a proposition is about is part of that objective meaning. On Russell’s view of

<sup>41</sup> Cf. my “Reference and Aboutness in Frege” (from the author); and my “The Notion of Aboutness in Frege” (in Hebrew, with an English abstract), *Iyyun*, 33 (1984): 434–54.

constituents and acquaintance, the stipulation that a proposition is about its constituents would, therefore, rob the notion of aboutness of its main significance. When a proposition is about something denoted by description, in contrast, the relation between the proposition and what it is about is explicitly articulated by the structure of the proposition as a whole.

A language that does not allow for something like referring to objects by description would, therefore, be inadequate for expressing those features of our thought which are required for explicating the epistemic character of acquaintance. Whether such a language would fit even for the very ascription of knowledge to a subject depends on whether we would be willing to ascribe knowledge to someone who lacked the conceptual apparatus required for accounting for the epistemic nature of what he knows.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*<sup>42</sup>

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