

THREE STUDIES OF RUSSELL'S NEUTRAL MONISM (CONCLUDED)

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III. THINKING OF PROPOSITIONS

Writing to Russell from Austria in the summer of 1913, Wittgenstein expressed rather cold sympathy: "... I am sorry to hear that my objection to your theory of judgment paralyses you. I think it can only be removed by a correct theory of propositions."¹ A month earlier Wittgenstein had formulated his famous "objection" to that theory: from someone's judging that two terms, *a* and *b*, are in some relation *R* to each other, the proposition "*aRb* \vee \sim *aRb*" must follow directly "without the use of any other premiss"—a condition "not fulfilled" by Russell's theory. Whether Wittgenstein's later comment alluded precisely to the earlier objection, or instead to a general dissatisfaction with Russell's theory of judgment on a variety of grounds, may never be known for certain. Nevertheless, evidence does make it clear that Wittgenstein's objection had a devastating personal effect on Russell, which he recalled in a letter to a close friend some three years later:

... I wrote a lot of stuff about Theory of Knowledge, which Wittgenstein criticised with the greatest severity. His criticism ... was an event of first-rate importance in my life, and affected everything I have done since. I saw he

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 121.

was right, and I saw that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy.² (*Auto.* 2: 57)

The material casualty of this episode in Russell's career was his major project, *Theory of Knowledge*, which he abandoned two-thirds completed. Part I concerned acquaintance with particulars; Part II was concerned with simple or atomic judgments, such as that *a* is before *b*, while Part III—almost certainly never written—was to have been devoted to what Russell called “molecular propositional thought”. The episode also changed the direction of Russell's philosophy, perhaps decisively. His next major effort in epistemology (*The Analysis of Mind*) would profess a new orientation, while from the rubble of *Theory of Knowledge* little was salvaged. Neither the relation of acquaintance, nor a reserved place for the self, nor the multiple-relation theory of belief or judgment, nor the doctrine of logical forms were reshaped in the new epistemology.

It has been tempting to interpret Wittgenstein's cryptic objection to Russell's theory in a way which makes it logically compelling, to see the abandonment of *Theory of Knowledge* as a deductively reasoned and thus inevitable consequence. Such an approach befits Russell. Recently an article has appeared meant to vindicate that approach.³ Whether or not this latest word on the matter is also the last word remains to be seen, but pursuing the issue it here would only lead too much to the background. My intention, rather, is to look in the other direction: at the work itself. Whatever the strength of Wittgenstein's objection, suitably interpreted, I think there is enough evidence of structural weakness within *Theory of Knowledge* itself to have diminished Russell's confidence in the project. There is no denying, of course, that his difficulties were precipitated, or at least exacerbated, by Wittgenstein himself. Part II of this work shows clear signs that Russell was hemmed in by more questions about his theory of prop-

² I have changed Russell's question mark at the end of the first sentence to a period.

³ See Nicholas Griffin, “Was Russell Shot or Did He Fall?”, *Dialogue*, 30 (Fall 1991): 549–53. This paper was occasioned by comments on Griffin's view made by me in an earlier review article (also published in *Dialogue*) of *Theory of Knowledge*. References to this and to other articles are given in the Griffin article.

ositions than he was able to answer, some perhaps he had not previously thought to ask himself. Not only that, Russell's account of propositions in the second part was presented defensively rather than with the confidence which he had shown even in Part I when discussing questions related to acquaintance. Also, a new distinction makes its appearance in Part II between logic and epistemology, with Russell pointedly shifting the focus of discussion to the latter. (Although this distinction was elaborated in Chapter IV of Part I, there is some evidence that the chapter itself was composed afterwards and fitted back into the text.⁴) This manoeuvre suggests either that Russell wished to keep his account of propositions clear of the domain of logic, possibly because he had come to regard the whole project as belonging primarily to philosophical psychology, or else that perhaps he supposed that strictly logical issues pertaining to propositions would be dealt with more satisfactorily in the course of Part III. Whatever his motives—and they may well have been mixed—Part II reveals a Russell uncharacteristically groping his way forward. Wittgenstein's influence appears to have been as much stimulating as disorienting.

However, such details are better suited to biographical and literary interests. I think that much deeper tensions were at work in Russell's argument which made his account of propositions untenable in the areas of both epistemology and logic, an account more burdened with liabilities than buoyed by merits. This is what I shall try to show by way of a sketch. Russell's grand project in *Theory of Knowledge* was meant to build upon the relation of acquaintance in an intricate way. It not only served his account of perception but was intended to support the theory of judgment (or belief) and the closely related theory of propositions, but in the end it proved inadequate. Russell's project became an embarrassing sort of ruin: a magnificent foundation to which he could find no secure means of attaching an edifice. Eventually he would abandon even the foundation. I will try to illustrate the stresses in Russell's project by examining two related topics: acquaintance and the nature of propositional knowledge.

⁴ See *TK*, Introduction, pp. xxxviii–xli.

Section 1.

When Russell began *Theory of Knowledge* by describing acquaintance as “the simplest and most pervading aspect of experience” (*TK*, p. 5), he made it clear that this relation was to have a foundational role in his epistemology, but not until the later chapters of Part I would it become clear just how broadly he understood the word “experience”. His first goal had been to emphasize the importance of acquaintance for the analysis of perception. “All knowledge of particulars radiates out” from one or a small number of objects of attention, to any of which the proper name “this” can be given (p. 40) and which thereby constitutes the meaning of that word. Such an object is one term of the relation of acquaintance, whereas the other term—the subject which attends—is not itself an object of acquaintance. (In *Theory of Knowledge* Russell glossed “I” as a definite description.) In perception, at least, the object is present to the subject; conversely, the subject attends to the object. Acts of perception have a temporal dimension which Russell took to characterize the nature of this type of acquaintance. However, he declared, “in order to know a present experience, it is not necessary that I should perceive the fact [of my being aware], and it must be possible to pick out an experience as present without having perception of this fact”, for otherwise one would be “embarked upon an endless regress” (p. 39). Hence he was willing to assign to phrases like “the present experience” and “the present object” the role of being proper names, virtually synonyms of the logically proper name, “this”; above all, they were not to be treated as phrases of the form “the so-and-so”.

Russell’s deep fascination with the temporal dimensions of experience is revealed in two later chapters. In one of them he sought to distinguish between sensation and imagination on the grounds, if possible, of the introspected presence or absence of a time relation; in the other he examined the relation of remembering (one form of which he wanted to count as a species of acquaintance or attention) and then turned to develop a highly detailed definition of temporal relations among physical events which was meant to serve the construction of a relative time series.⁵ But, up to this point in *Theory of*

⁵ In Chapter v (“Sensation and Imagination”), Russell did not commit himself to

Knowledge, the focus of analysis had been on the components of experience—terms, objects, and relations treated separately—and these, Russell well knew, were only part of the story. It was essential to analyze how they were related, how they could comprise unified structures like the occurrence of a certain object *A* before some other object *B*. Such occurrences are perceived as wholes in our experience and are analogous to discrete objects of acquaintance or attention. Employing an expression of Meinong, Russell called them “complexes” and set out to produce an analysis of these clusters of objects and relations, starting with atomic dual complexes such as “*A*-before-*B*” (a precursor of the celebrated “*aRb*” which did not surface until Part II).⁶ Such an investigation was possible because, unlike simple (unanalyzable) objects named by demonstratives, a dual complex consists of two terms together with the relating relation which orders those terms. (He could assume that the idea of relations being constituents of complexes and of our being acquainted with them would be already familiar from both *The Problems of Philosophy* and an earlier paper, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”).⁷ Russell began by claiming that our ability to understand the name of a relating relation must be based on acquaintance with “the bare relation” itself rather than with merely similar complexes involving the same relation. He argued that the necessity of distinguishing different types of similarity for such complexes would depend either on recognizing the specific relation of similarity itself or else (in a vicious regress) positing a higher level of similarity among similar complexes. If pre-echoes exist (other than on phonograph records, that is), then this particular argument in *Theory of Knowledge* is a vivid pre-echo of his view

a criterion based on introspection for distinguishing between cases of imagination and sensation. Chapter VI (“On the Experience of Time”) was the last of the chapters from *Theory of Knowledge* which Russell published in the journal, *The Monist*; his use of the term “events” in a technical sense in *TK* was restricted to this chapter.

⁶ Molecular complexes were to have been the raw material for study in Part III, being expressed as compounds of atomic complexes by means of words like “and”, “or” or “not” (see p. 80).

⁷ *TK*, pp. 82–3. See *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chap. 10, “On Our Knowledge of Universals”, and two earlier papers: “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” (reprinted in *Mysticism and Logic* and *Papers* 6) and “On the Relations of Universals and Particulars” (reprinted in *LK* and *Papers* 6).

in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, written more than twenty-five years later, that relations like similarity are "parts of the non-linguistic constitution of the world".⁸ The language of the later argument differs, of course: instead of "complexes" Russell speaks of "percepts"; the higher level of similarity now takes the form of utterances about similar colours; in place of acquaintance is a process called "noticing" which involves "attention", the latter described in physiological terms as "partly a sharpening of the appropriate sense-organs, partly an emotional reaction" (*IMT*, p. 51). But the intent of the two arguments is clearly the same, as is the launching of an infinite regress against the opposite view. In *Theory of Knowledge*, universals are revealed to be an objective part of the world precisely because they are objects of acquaintance capable of being revealed through a "direct inspection of data" (*TK*, p. 95). However, he was less interested in proving their existence than in finding a proper way to identify them.⁹

Russell moved on to advance an argument about relations which is found solely in *Theory of Knowledge* (presumably, it was meant to counter a difficulty which had been posed by Wittgenstein). He contended that words like "precedes" and "before" are not themselves the names of relations but should be treated as incomplete symbols. "There cannot ... be two acquaintances, one for 'before' and one for 'after'", Russell insisted, "but ... only one, from which both are derived" (p. 85). Such words also misleadingly suggest that the relation they express is between their two object terms (*A* and *B*), and that the relation itself has what he calls a "from-and-to" character—the "sense" of the relation—that sets those terms in a definite order ("*A* precedes *B*"). However, in the case of asymmetrical relations like "precedes" it would not be adequate to identify a complex in terms of acquaintance with both the relation and its two terms, *A* and *B*, since that would leave undetermined the actual order of the terms needed to describe

the complex. The converse order of the terms ("*B* precedes *A*") is equally intelligible but, unlike the case of symmetrical relations, different in meaning. Russell's solution to the problem of such complexes was based on the claim that the terms of an asymmetrical relation, when properly analyzed, are not the two objects themselves but rather each object itself and the complex to which it belongs. In effect, the stated relation (*precedes*) is replaced in his analysis by two other asymmetrical relations. Each of the terms has what he calls a "position" in relation to the complex: if *A* precedes *B* then there is a complex in which *A* is earlier and *B* is later.

Compounding this novel but obscure argument is the absence of any clearly stated purpose. Why did Russell think it important to replace the ordinary name of certain relations? Would this make it any easier to discover the actual relation by means of acquaintance? Possibly Russell thought so. He observed: "The word 'sequence' would be better than 'before' or 'after' as the name of the relation involved"; and he then suggested tentatively that "the apparent incapacity of relations for subsisting without terms is partly due to the fact that our words for relations are nearly all such as involve a definite sense, and that sense is only explicable by means of terms" (p. 88). The word "sequence", accordingly, was taken to name a "pure" relation, one which does not "demand terms in order to be intelligible". The analysis was meant to explain how it is possible to be acquainted with "the bare abstract relation itself" (p. 88), and Russell used it to delineate his previously published claims regarding acquaintance with universals. But why are some asymmetrical relations (like *earlier* and *later*) more equal than others (like *precedes*)? The answer to this particular question would emerge in the first chapter of Part II of *Theory of Knowledge*. Russell's strategy was to defend the position that mere acquaintance with a complex involving an asymmetrical relation could be analyzed in a manner which preserves the intended order of those terms. His tactic was to show how recalcitrant examples like *precedes* could be reduced to a type of asymmetrical relation having a formal property which he called heterogeneity. An asymmetrical relation Rt_1t_2 is heterogeneous with regard to its terms, t_1 and t_2 , when there is only one direction that its sense can have, that is, when its converse, Rt_2t_1 , is nonsense. In Russell's example of the complex in which *A* is earlier and *B* is later, *earlier* and *later* are heterogeneous relations, since it

⁸ *IMT*, p. 344. After a fuller examination of the question, Russell confirms this claim, "though with hesitation" (p. 347).

⁹ Repeating another pattern of argument found in *TK*, Russell remarks that, since "similarity will have to be admitted ... it seems hardly worth while to adopt elaborate devices for the exclusion of other universals", such as asymmetrical relations (p. 347). See *TK*, pp. 95–6, where Russell argues that acquaintance with (one-place) predicates, though there may be "no absolutely conclusive way" of proving it, is admissible on the basis of acquaintance with (dual) relations.

makes no sense to say that the complex itself is earlier in *A* or that it is later in *B*. Heterogeneous relations, then, are those which have inconvertible terms and thus a unitary sense. It is apparent that this formal property is not possessed absolutely by a relation but depends on the related terms belonging to incommensurable types.¹⁰ “*A*’s being earlier than *B*” does not differ in meaning from “*A* precedes *B*”. Consequently, even *precedes* itself is heterogeneous in the phrase “*A* precedes in the complex α ” (to use his own example). Russell’s analysis therefore required a certain type of term, the complex, in order to keep at bay the problem posed by homogeneous asymmetricals. Eventually this requirement would complicate his analysis of propositions, but in the meantime the threat of a vicious regress involving progressively higher levels of asymmetrical relations was avoided, as he certainly recognized: “*A* and α differ logically ...; thus there are not in this case two logically possible complexes, and the whole difficulty of ‘sense’ does not arise” (p. 112). In the fifth chapter of Part II, he would integrate this analysis into his revised formal account of judgment and then adapt to it his correspondence theory of truth.

Besides sensory particulars, pure relations were not the only items Russell claimed for the domain of acquaintance in *Theory of Knowledge*. What he called “pure forms” were also discoverable, not as curiosities but as ingredients essential to the understanding of propositions (as opposed to acquaintance with complexes). Among pure forms were included deductive inference patterns, whose treatment was scheduled for Part III. His immediate concern, however, was with non-inferential understanding. When someone tells us that Socrates precedes Plato, Russell reasoned, it is plain that we lack “acquaintance with the complex ‘Socrates precedes Plato’”. Since we grasp how the terms are to be ordered, he continued, it is difficult to understand this ordering “unless we had acquaintance with the form of the complex” (p. 99). How to discover these forms? Russell was able to provide only a generic signpost: “As a matter of introspection,” he remarks,

it may often be hard to detect such acquaintance; but there is no doubt that, especially where very abstract matters are concerned, we often have an

¹⁰ This point was not discussed by Russell in *TK*.

acquaintance which we find it difficult to isolate or to become acquainted with. The introspective difficulty, therefore, cannot be regarded as fatal, or as outweighing a logical argument of which the data and the inference seem to allow little risk of error. (P. 99)

Russell characterized this “inference” in the concluding paragraph of Part I. He thought of it as a presupposition of the possibility of thinking about a complex when the complex itself is not given. If we are acquainted with two objects and the relation of similarity, we can readily understand that they are similar “even if we cannot directly compare them and ‘see’ their similarity. But this would not be possible,” he maintained, “unless we knew how they are to be put together, i.e., unless we were acquainted with the form of a dual complex. Thus all ‘mental synthesis’, as it may be called, involves acquaintance with logical form” (p. 101). What Russell meant by “mental synthesis” was an act by which a subject, through acquaintance with (say) a pair of objects, *a* and *b*, a relation, *R*, plus the form of that relation, succeeds in uniting them all into something called “atomic propositional thought”.

Knowledge about complexes, then, was an even more complex phenomenon than acquaintance with complexes, and Russell clearly saw that his analysis led directly to the discussion of belief. Such was the framework in which his theory of propositions was brought to life, a framework of ironically idealistic leanings in which the understanding of propositions seemed a more pressing philosophical issue than that of their service to logic—to which an understandable reaction from a younger logician might be that logic “must take care of itself”.

Section 2.

In preparation for Part II, which was to go beyond acquaintance with complexes to the propositional understanding of them, Russell gave prominence to the most elusive items of acquaintance of all, logical forms. These are required even in the case of symmetrical relations (such as similarity) where apparently they enable us to relate the two terms but to remain indifferent about their conversion. In the symbolization of atomic propositional understanding that two things are similar, he represented this type of logical form as $R(x, y)$ (the general form of a symmetrical dual complex):

$$U \{S, A, B, \text{similarity}, R(x, y)\}$$

This was meant to capture the structure of understanding involving a subject, two objects, the given symmetrical relation between them and (lastly) the form of that relation, all bound together by the relating relation of understanding (U), which Russell described as “the most comprehensive and fundamental of propositional cognitive relations” (p. 110). Since the whole expression represents the understanding of a proposition, it may be wondered what corresponds to the proposition itself. This is not a single component of the structure but the substructure consisting of A , B , similarity and $R(x, y)$ which are united in S 's act of understanding. Rehearsing an old line of argument, Russell opposed treating propositions as objects of a dual relation, or indeed as objects at all, the stated target of his opposition being Meinong.¹¹ No intrinsic difference is detectable between a true and a false proposition; and since it is “repugnant”, he asserted, “to admit the reality of false propositions” (p. 107), his preference was to treat both sorts as “unreal”, that is, as incomplete symbols, whose meaning is completed by prefixing a phrase such as “ S understands”.¹²

Interestingly, although Russell thought it “easier to discover what is meant by ‘understanding a proposition’ than to discover what is meant by a ‘proposition’” (p. 107), and resolved to concentrate on the former, his discussion in much of the early part of Part II is really about the latter, and some of the questions listed for discussion suggest a critical badgering from without:

- (1) what is meant by the form of a complex?
- (2) can a proposition be reckoned as something able to “subsist on its own account, and not only as a fictitious constituent of certain mental complexes”?

and

¹¹ See *TK*, pp. 108–10. Russell also criticized Meinong's views in connection with acquaintance (pp. 41–4), memory (pp. 168–70) and truth (pp. 152–3).

¹² For related discussions of the point, see “On the Nature of Truth and Falseness” (in *Philosophical Essays and Papers* 6), *The Problems of Philosophy*, and “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (*Papers* 8: 196–7).

- (3) “How can we be sure that acquaintance with the ‘form’ is involved in understanding a proposition?” (P. 113)

The answers he gives are fascinating, tortured and unconvincing, except perhaps to anyone whose Platonic realism would make it natural, perhaps inevitable, to rely on the doctrine of acquaintance. The form of a complex “must be something exceedingly simple”, he commented, while the device of defining it with reference to some standard form to which it is similar would obviously yield a regress. On the other hand, it is evident that there should be one form for all complexes having the same form. What Russell proposed was to identify logical form with “the fact that there are entities that make up complexes having the form in question” (p. 114), a move which he insisted only sounds circular, because his real intention was to derive the form in question from an existing complex by a process virtually identical to existential generalization (for both particulars as well as the relation). For a dual complex, then, the form reads: “something has some relation to something”. Russell regarded the form itself as a simple entity, adding that while “it seems to have a structure, and therefore to be not simple, ... it is more correct to say that it *is* a structure” (p. 114). For good measure, he repeated the presupposition argument from the end of Part I: in order to understand a proposition involving a dual complex, “we must understand what is meant by ‘something having some relation to something’”.

It is hard to see how the young logician who objected to Russell's Axiom of Infinity could have been satisfied with this solution to the problem of pure form or with the related manoeuvre to define propositions themselves by generalizing over the Subject term and the U relation.¹³ Even Russell recognized that, on his account, “we cannot be sure that there are propositions in all cases in which logic would seem to need them;” it makes logic subject to the necessity of there being “some term and some relation by which a complex results having the requisite form and containing the objects in question” (p. 115). Admitting this to be a serious objection, he yet was unable to offer “anything better calculated to fulfil the purposes for which we want

¹³ See p. 115. Having given the generalization, Russell declared that “there was no formal obstacle to defining this as the proposition”.

propositions" (p. 116). Russell would return to this problem near the end of the third chapter of Part II, only then with graver concern whether what he had outlined for a theory of propositions could possibly be sufficient:

It seems plain that "*aRb*" has "meaning" provided *R* is the right sort of entity, and that the question whether *R* is the right sort of entity depends upon its logical character, and not upon the more or less accidental question whether instances of it actually occur. Also, when we say that "*aRb*" has "meaning", it seems impossible to maintain that we mean that somebody understands it. If it has meaning, it can be understood; but it still has meaning if it happens that no one understands it. Thus it would seem that we must find some non-psychological meaning for the word "proposition".

In taking up the third question, how it can be shown that understanding a proposition depends on understanding the form, Russell provides clear internal evidence that the analysis was designed to overcome a weakness in his earlier account of judgment, which we know independently to have been pointed out by Wittgenstein. "I held formerly", he says, "that the objects alone sufficed, and that the 'sense' of the relation of understanding would put them in the right order; this, however, no longer seems to me to be the case."¹⁴ Rather, he continued, "the process of 'uniting' which we *can* effect in thought is the process of bringing them into relation with the general form of dual complexes" (p. 116). While these comments help explain the importance to Russell of his new account, they do not answer the question itself, and the only indication of the kind of answer to be expected is a familiar one: "I must ... leave it to the reader's inspection, in hopes that he will arrive at the same conclusion" which Russell had reached already. Such a reply is at best no argument at all but an assurance based on privileged access, and at worst a circular argument by which Russell sought to explain how it is possible to understand a dual relation by citing our ability to understand such relations, as evidenced by the fact that we understand them. (A com-

¹⁴ Russell's problem was not with the different types represented by *a*, *b*, and *R* but with false propositions. The view "formerly" held is to be found in Chapter 12 of *The Problems of Philosophy*, and in "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood", in his *Philosophical Essays*.

promise opinion would be that his reply is merely unhelpful.) Nevertheless, Russell placed increasingly heavy reliance on this doctrine. Not only did he regard pure forms as expressing the essence of a proposition, he looked to them as exemplars of self-evident truths. Pure forms, such as "something is related to something", are the simplest though most abstract of propositions, and in light of this claim he was forced to recognize that the elementary division between acquaintance and understanding, which had provided the basis for dividing the subject matter of Parts I and II, had been fundamentally challenged. "[W]e began", he writes, "with dual relations, acquaintance, attention, etc.; and when we came to propositional thought, it seemed at first as if the change was due to the fact that here the cognitive relations concerned were multiple. This whole point of view, however, is erroneous. The classification of mental facts by the logical character of the objects involved turns out to be far more important than their classification by their own logical form." And he continues:

Understanding of "something has some relation to something" is a dual complex; understanding of "something has the relation *R* to something" is a treble complex; understanding of "*a* has the relation *R* to *b*" is a quintuple complex. The distinctive thing that groups these understandings together is the fact that they all involve the pure form of dual complexes among their objects. For this reason, the simplest possible cognitive relation to a pure form belongs to propositional thought, rather than to the kind of consciousness which we considered in Part I. (P. 131)

What Russell was confronting in this passage is a crucial consequence of his doctrine of pure forms: if they are simple and unanalyzable, then our relation to them, taken separately, resembles acquaintance, though of a simpler kind than acquaintance with complexes. The proper expression for a pure form therefore should be a name rather than a closed sentence; yet, as he had recognized, a pure form is really a structure which was supposed to capture, though in an abstract way, precisely what a proposition is. No wonder, then, that he had gone on to remark: "Language is not well adapted for speaking of such objects" (p. 114). But this double nature assigned to pure forms was bound to produce a new rash of questions. "[W]hat becomes of the opposition of truth and falsehood in such cases?", he asked himself. "How can an object be at once simple and a 'fact', in the sense in

which a 'fact' is opposed to a simple particular and is the sort of object whose reality makes a proposition true? Why, if pure forms are simple, is it so obviously inappropriate to give them simple proper names, such as John and Peter?" (p. 130). The latter questions Russell classified as "more purely logical" which, while he was sure they could be answered, were not as pressing as the epistemological ones related to acquaintance itself and were thus to be put aside. His primary interest in pure forms, however, sprang from a deep ontological commitment. Pure forms exist because they can be discovered by introspection, admittedly with difficulty—although that is a merely psychological matter, our habits of attending to objects being dominated by worldly considerations. "[L]ogical forms are not edible or hostile, and attention to them is not a cause of longevity. This sufficiently explains why it is only a few eccentric persons, unusually relieved from the struggle for existence, whose attention wanders to such unimportant objects" (p. 133). While Russell (or Wittgenstein) could fire more questions than could be answered in *Theory of Knowledge*, the commitment itself was unassailable.

Apart from their being needed to give determinate structure to our understanding of relations, I think that the main appeal of pure forms for Russell was their self-evidence, yet exactly here a great gulf widened in *Theory of Knowledge* between logic and epistemology which he seemed unable to cross. That acquaintance was the paradigm of absolute certainty had been one of his settled views and was repeated in the fourth chapter of Part I. In cognitive occurrences involving acquaintance, he wrote, "error is logically excluded" (p. 49).¹⁵ But where in such occurrences is self-evidence to be found? It cannot attach to the component terms or to the relation, since these are neither true nor false; however, as Russell recognized, the pure form of a proposition, being simple, resembles perhaps too closely an object of acquaintance. Self-evidence, then, must characterize the act of propositional understanding itself, and that indeed is the view he would settle on in the penultimate chapter of *Theory of Knowledge*. Self-evidence is finally defined as a property of judgments, consisting in the fact that,

¹⁵ In fact, Russell makes a stronger claim. His second "maxim" reads: "The possibility of error in any cognitive occurrence shows that the occurrence is not an instance of a dual relation" (p. 49).

in the same experience with themselves, they are accompanied by acquaintance with their truth" (p. 166).¹⁶ It follows that something's being related to something is certain only in the sense that the subject who apprehends this form cannot doubt its existence. That, however, will not tell us whether it is true that something is related to something and even if it did it would not be certainly true. Russell admits this last point with regard to less abstract forms (ones that contain at least one item of acquaintance, such as a dual relation). If a "non-psychological" meaning of "proposition" were found, he admitted, the R could be counted as a component of propositions like " aRb ", "even if there are no complexes of this form, and no one ever thinks about R " (p. 134). But in that event, he continued, the proposition "something has the relation R to something" would fail to have "the necessary truth" that belongs to "something has some relation to something". It is difficult to see why Russell did not immediately apply the same point to the words expressing the pure form itself. What is so different about the pure form of a proposition that would make it a necessary truth? Evidently it is because, unlike R , a or b , there is no other fact of which a pure form could be a component: it is a component of propositional thought alone, so that simply to be acquainted with it excludes error. The necessity of which Russell spoke, then, is not a formal concept at all.

Referring to knowledge of pure forms, he noted: "It is ... theoretically possible to preserve their self-evidence by continued attention. But even in such judgments as these, there are remote possibilities of error if we look merely to the words which express the judgments, for it is possible that we may forget the meanings of the words and, trusting to our memory that they once expressed a truth, interpret them now in a way which is false" (p. 168). The fact that he added that "such possibilities have little logical importance" reveals how little Russell was inclined to consider what a non-psychological definition of propositions would be like, and this seems to have been a source of discomfort. Alluding to what I assume was Wittgenstein's insistence on the need for an account of propositions in a non-mental sense,

¹⁶ See p. 166 and his discussion of "theories" (1) and (3) which lead up to that definition.

Russell declared that the matter belonged to logic but went on to acknowledge this view to be “the most serious” objection to his revised account of truth and “the hardest to meet” (p. 155). In rebuttal, however, he admitted that he could produce no arguments. Instead he took a stand based on principle which, for all its ontological common sense, gives us a glimpse of an untypically narrow conservatism. “[T]o me, personally, no such entities [as propositions] are visible, and the admission of such entities—which must be capable of falsehood as well as truth—runs counter to the rejection of unrealities, fictions, and mere possibilities which seems to me, on general grounds, necessary and vital to all sound philosophy.” He was convinced, therefore, that the arguments in favour of non-mental propositions “are fallacious, even if I cannot always detect the fallacy” (p. 17). Whether or not based on a clear and genuine intuition, his resistance is understandable to us, given that so much of the framework of his epistemology, embodied by *Theory of Knowledge*, was then at stake.

The conflict between logic and epistemology arose on another front also. The recognition of a pure form was guided by the perception of specific complexes represented by aRb . If Russell had difficulty characterizing simple forms, the problems with complex objects were even more awkward. Although he obviously thought he had found a method in Part I of analyzing dual complexes, the existence of asymmetrical complexes forced him to incorporate a reference to the dual complex itself in their analysis, as evident in the sentence “ a is earlier in its complex”. This in turn required further elaboration in Part II of a method for analyzing complexes. Russell devoted a good deal of time to a phenomenological appraisal of the letter “T” and to describing an act identified as “complex perception”, which involves non-inferential analysis of a given complex.¹⁷ For these purposes, the expression “ aRb ” itself was redefined as a “complex name”. Russell appears to have been badgered particularly about this last point; he mentions questions such as “How is the meaning of a complex name such as ‘ aRb ’ determined by the meanings of its simple components”, and “what is meant by saying that a is part of the complex aRb ?”¹⁸ These deceptively simple

¹⁷ See Chapter II, “Analysis and Synthesis”, esp. pp. 123–8.

¹⁸ See p. 128.

questions concealed deadly problems for his account, I believe. A complex name seems hardly less complicated, and certainly is no less puzzling, than a propositional thought. Wittgenstein may well have wondered whether there is a pure form for complex names too. In any case, isn't the expression “ a is part of aRb ” propositional in form? If so, then the analysis of our understanding of asymmetrical relations would require a further propositional component, which also expresses an asymmetrical relation, and which might also require its own pure form. This problem does not suggest a regress forming so much as an enormous complication in the whole analysis, which Russell seems to have acknowledged. The difficulties affecting the homogeneous relation *before* are eliminated, he says, “only by introducing the notion of a complex in which a is earlier” (p. 135). Worse still, the analysis depends on introducing the operator “and” in order to form a molecular proposition, although items such as these were supposed to stay in the background until Part III. (Russell was much puzzled by the asymmetry between the atomic complex, “ a -before- b ”, and the non-atomic proposition corresponding to it.¹⁹) So the concept of a complex, which Russell wanted to manage through analysis, ended up being retained in that analysis.

It is not surprising, then, that Russell lacked confidence in his analysis of the understanding of propositions, despite believing that it was “at least not logically refutable” (p. 135), or that he would soon turn his back on the theory he laboured to produce in *Theory of Knowledge*. It may have struck him as ironic, not to say frustrating, that the doctrine of acquaintance dominated his account of propositional thought to the point of making the very concept of a proposition as obscure and implausible as that of Meinong's, which he had set out to replace, and that the concept of acquaintance itself, so fundamental to his epistemology, proved to be increasingly less instrumental for the reconstruction of knowledge. The collapse of his enterprise in itself made the shift towards neutral monism virtually automatic, and Russell was still in need of an epistemology. Whether it is was the attractiveness of the new view, or the untenability of his old one, that

¹⁹ “It is not very easy to believe that such a difference can exist”, he observed, “and perhaps some other theory of ‘sense’ can be found which would avoid such a difference” (*TK*, p. 135).

made this shift desirable to Russell is difficult to decide, though his nearly complete silence on the topic of *Theory of Knowledge* carries, I think, tremendous weight. In any event, formal logic demanded an account in which propositions enjoy an objective status independent of psychological questions—above all, an account coordinating propositions with whatever facts make them true. Wittgenstein may well have personified these demands for Russell. But whether his severe criticisms, which echo still in *Theory of Knowledge*, were those of a Socrates or a Cassandra, the analysis of relations to which Russell devoted so much attention only ensured that his revised theory of judgment (together with the related definition of truth) were more complicated than he could have thought desirable, yet no closer to meeting the fundamental requirement of philosophical logic, a workable theory of propositions.
