PEARS' TWO DOGMAS OF RUSSELL'S LOGICAL ATOMISM

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INTRODUCTION[1]

In the first seven pages of his Introduction to the 1985 Open Court edition of Russell's *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*,[2] David Pears expounds what he takes to be Russell's "two main lines of thought, which must be kept in mind by anyone trying to understand Russell's logical atomism" (p. 7). He charges that any Russellian logical atomist would have to espouse one or the other to support what Pears thinks are two premisses of logical atomism. However, as we will see, Pears' argument to this effect fails because it is based upon false premisses.

In dealing with Pears' argument, I will show that a Pragmatic option, which Pears explicitly rejects in his argument, turns out to be far more condign than either of the two options Pears settles for.

Leaving aside, for the moment, consideration of the Pragmatic Approach, the two lines of thought Pears sees in Russell's work Pears dubs the Empirical and the Rationalist Approaches:

> The difference between them is not a difference of opinion about the nature of things, but only about the way to establish what their nature is.... A philosopher who uses the Rationalist Approach will claim that this conclusion is self-evidently true, or, at least, that it can be established from *a priori* reasoning. The

[1] William Demopoulos and Tim Kenyon, both at the University of Western Ontario, were invaluable in pushing my thinking on the issues discussed in this paper.

[2] The edition also includes "Logical Atomism" (1924).

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Empiricist Approach, on the other hand, leads to the claim that it is established by actual logical analysis. (P. 6)

One may ask how Pears justifies the claim that these "Approaches" are part and parcel of Russell's logical atomism. He does it by arguing from what he considers to be two basic "premisses" of Russell's logical atomism; correspondence realism and the existence of simples. He makes these premisses explicit in writing that, "there must be a general correspondence between the ways in which we divide up reality in thought and speech and the ways in which it divides up in fact" and, "the two ... processes of analysis do not continue indefinitely" (p. 2).

Having stated the putative premisses of logical atomism, Pears derives the two approaches (Empirical and Rationalist) by claiming that if we "start from the assumption that there is a general correspondence between language and reality", then, to show "that reality is composed of logical atoms which are not further analyzable" we must use either the Rationalist or the Empiricist Approach (p. 4). The two approaches, therefore, are alternative ways of showing the existence of simples, given (the assumption of) correspondence realism.

Rather than examine Pears' argument in detail, let us investigate the truth of the propositions upon which Pears bases his argument viz., that logical atomists have to be correspondence realists, and that they require the existence of simples.[3]

THE ONTOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM OF LOGICAL ATOMISM

In the opening paragraph of "Logical Atomism" Russell writes, regarding realism, "I could alter my view on this issue without changing my mind as to any of the doctrines upon which I wish to lay stress" (p. 157; *Papers* 9: 162). In light of this comment one would expect Pears to provide thorough support for his own claim that realism is a premiss of logical

[3] In showing both of Pears' premisses to be incompatible with Russell's own writings I limit myself to the contents of the Open Court edition of *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (La Salle, Ill., 1985) that Pears introduces. The Introduction replaces that of the original edition, titled *Russell's Logical Atomism*, ed. David Pears (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972). Both editions, incidentally, have an index to other writings by Russell in which key topics in *PLA* are discussed.

atomism. Surprisingly, though, Pears does not mention the difficulty, offers only a brief and unsatisfying argument and supports it with but a single footnote.

Pears' strategy is to quote Russell's description of logical atoms as particulars, qualities and relations, and to conclude that:

> ... he is evidently relying on the fact that, when we look at reality from a logical point of view, it seems to reduce to particular things possessing certain qualities and standing in certain relations to one another. (Pp. 1–2)

In an important sense what Pears concludes here is ambiguous; the ambiguity being what is meant by "reality". The two relevant meanings are the "reality" of sensa and the "reality" of physical objects. In claiming that Russell is a correspondence realist Pears seems to be settling for the second meaning. This is made evident when he makes claims such as that, "the divisions traceable in logic correspond to real divisions in the nature of things" (p. 2).

Perhaps Pears has in mind Russell's opening truism of the Lectures—the world contains facts (p. 40; *Papers* 8: 163). If so, however, Pears seems to have overlooked a central point of Russell's philosophy, for when Russell comes to discuss this "world" that facts are in, his conception of it turns out to be strikingly minimalist:

> The simplest imaginable facts are those which consist in the possession of a quality by some particular thing. Such facts, say, as "This is white". They have to be taken in a very sophisticated sense. I do not want you to think about the piece of chalk I am holding, but of what you see when you look at the chalk. (P. 59; *Papers* 8: 176)

So, when Russell talks about facts, he is talking about objects of sense and their arrangement (p. 62; *Papers* 8: 179) and not full-blown, out-there objects. Clearly, one who is a realist about their sense-data is a realist of some stripe. However, Pears appears to be using the word in a different and much stronger way when he sees the "realism" of a logical atomist as opposed to the stance of an idealist. After all, realism with respect to sensa is congenial even to solipsism.

We can see, therefore, that the only "reality" to which a logical atomist is strictly committed is the reality of sense-data; a position which does not entail correspondence realism.

Pears directs us to Lecture VIII where, he claims, logical atomism's correspondence realism is made "explicit". Given its title, "Excursus into Metaphysics", the lecture seems like a good place for Pears to seek support for his claim—notwithstanding that, coming at the end of the series of lectures, it is rather late in the day for Russell to be outlining a major premiss of logical atomism.

Upon reading the lecture, however, we find that it shows precisely how a logical atomist can avoid all commitment to correspondence realism. It is in this lecture that Russell explains how we can avoid postulating tables and such, by turning them into logical fictions.

In the process, Russell states his position with regard to realism once again:

> I want to make it clear that I am not *denying* the existence of anything; I am only refusing to affirm it. (P. 146; *Papers* 8: 237)

That Russell wishes logical atomism *per se* to be ontologically agnostic ought not be surprising given his mathematical background. In his introductory paragraphs to "Logical Atomism" Russell characterizes his philosophy of mathematics programme as the attempt to come up with a minimal set of logical propositions from which mathematics can be derived. His approach to epistemology is analogous—the task is to analyse our sensations out into simples and facts. In the process, any objects like tables and Socrates dissolve away as logical fictions, and, with them, any necessity for ontological commitment to such entities.

All this refers to Russell's commitment to real objects purely on the basis of his logical atomism. Russell makes it clear that, in ordinary life, he is just as much a realist as any other philosopher. However, that this is irrelevant has been part and parcel of understanding scepticism generally, ever since Descartes.

Having seen Pears' first premiss—that a logical atomist is, necessarily, a realist—dissolve as a logical fiction, let us examine his second premiss—that a logical atomist needs to show there are things which are absolutely simple. This examination is, strictly speaking, supererogatory since Pears' analysis of Russell fails the moment Pears' first, realist assumption is undermined. However, showing the falsity of Pears' second assumption will help in developing an alternative analysis of Russell—a re-evaluation of the pragmatic option which Pears, himself, discards.

THE ROLE OF SIMPLES

Again, Pears' opening argument is less than prolix:

> An atom is something indivisible or not further analyzable. A logical atomist, therefore, needs to show not only that the divisions traceable in logic correspond to real divisions in the nature of things, but also that the two corresponding processes of analysis do not continue indefinitely.[4] (P. 2)

The sense of "atom" upon which Pears relies is that in which it was originally used by the ancient Greek atomists and, much later, by Dalton. However, well before 1918, when he gave the lectures, Russell, a Fellow of the Royal Society and lecturer at Cambridge, was aware of the work of contemporary physicists in isolating and identifying electrons, i.e. sub-atomic particles (Clark, p. 213). There is no compelling reason to think that Russell would have thought atoms as indivisible and unanalysable; "atom" is no more univocal in logic than physics. More to the point, Russell offers a completely different reason for calling his position "atomism":

> The logic which I shall advocate is atomistic, as opposed to the monistic logic of the people who more or less follow Hegel. When I say that my logic is atomistic, I mean that I share the common-sense belief that there are many separate things.... (P. 36; *Papers* 8: 160)

The reason, therefore, that Russell talks about logical *atomism* is to differentiate it from varieties of monism, logical or otherwise, and not, as Pears concludes, to make any specific claims about the atoms.

Developing another line of argument to the effect that logical atomism requires indivisible atoms, Pears quotes both Russell's response to questions at the conclusion of Lecture II (p. 64; *Papers* 8: 180) and also certain comments in "Logical Atomism" (p. 173; *Papers* 9: 173). But neither quotation captures Russell's reasoning, in that neither presents the whole of the relevant section.

[4] Incidentally, that Pears thinks that logical and physical analyses must go hand in hand is further proof that he is talking about "realism" with regard to physical entities and not just sensory ones.

The section near the close of Lecture 11 that Pears quotes is:

> [T]hat is, of course, a question that might be argued—whether when a thing is complex it is necessary that it should in analysis have constituents that are simple. I think it is perfectly possible to suppose that complex things are capable of analysis *ad infinitum*, and that you never reach the simple. I do not think it is true, but it is a thing that one might argue, certainly. (P. 64; *Papers* 8: 180)

Pears argues that, if there were no simples, the connection between language and "reality" would be undermined, and this would add up to a "negation of logical atomism". Pears claims this is the reason why Russell thinks there are simples. Even what Pears does quote gives less than unequivocal support to this claim. However, what he fails to quote shows this is definitely not Russell's position. Continuing the quote with the very next question put to Russell:

> *Mr. Carr:* You do not mean that in calling the thing complex, you have asserted that there really are simples?
> *Mr. Russell:* No, I do not think that is *necessarily* implied.

Here, Russell's ontological agnosticism is unambiguous.[5]

What Pears sees as Russell's statement of what a logical atomist is necessarily tied to, must then be seen as only Russell's avowal of his own personal position. Just as we saw in the case of realism, Russell's personal ontological commitments go far beyond those which are necessitated by the philosophy of logical atomism. Thus, while Russell is happy to say that he *thinks* that there are simples he is also able to say that logical atomism does not *require* this to be true.

This also seems to be Russell's point in the passage from "Logical Atomism" that Pears quotes to further his claim that all logical atomists must believe in simples:

[5] After failing to fully quote Russell, Pears goes on to suggest that, when, years later, Russell referred back to that discussion to support his agnosticism on the issue of simples, there was "some confusion in [Russell's] recollection of his own earlier ideas" (p. 4). Pears' grounds for suggesting confusion on the part of Russell is simply to say that Pears' own Rationalist and Empiricist Approaches to logical atomism require that Russell must not have meant what he said. If nothing else this argument is clearly circular since Pears is supposed to be giving reasons to accept his analysis of Russell's work.

> ... I confess it seems obvious to me (as it did to Leibniz) that what is complex must be composed of simples, though the number of constituents may be infinite. (P. 173; *Papers* 9: 173)

Again, Russell merely asserts here that *he* thinks there are such atoms. In itself, however, this is no more interesting to the investigation of logical atomism than the fact that Russell was a realist (at the time he wrote "Logical Atomism"). The proposition Pears seeks to prove is much stronger than that—that simples are essential to logical atomism.

Pears may perhaps be able to argue against this distinction between what Russell believed and what he believed a logical atomist is forced to believe. However, this is not the only problem he faces here.

Thus far I have assumed that what Russell means by "simples" is unambiguous. But, as Pears himself observes, "simple" can be understood in at least two different ways: "There are things that are simple for us, and there are, or may be, things that are really simple" (p. 7).

In the first sense, a "simple" is just what is left when we've analysed our sensa far enough for our current purposes. To use a physical analogy, at this point in the development of physics, quarks are physical simples in just this sense. To state that there are such *apparent* simples in our understanding of our observations is to say that we have only analysed our observations to a finite degree. The existence (or not) of a limit to all possible analysis is irrelevant here.

In the second sense Pears points to, "simples" are the actual logically-ultimate building-blocks of our observations. As such, the claim that there are *actual* simples is equivalent to saying that the analysis of our observations can only be carried to a certain point and no further. It is in this sense, therefore, that Pears generally uses the term "simples" and it is in this sense that Pears claims logical atomism requires "simples".

One should ask then which of these two senses Russell employs when talking about logical "simples". Unfortunately, Pears, having recognised the possibility of the two ways of understanding Russell, brushes the issue aside, considering it unimportant. Therefore, the possibility that Russell is talking about apparent simples remains open and the relevance of the quotation is doubly questionable. This leaves Pears' assertion that logical atomism requires actual simples without support in Russell's writings.

We have seen both of Pears' fundamental assumptions dissolve under

examination. It is apparent that logical atomists need not be correspondence realists nor that they must assume some limit to all possible analysis. Without the support of the assumption Pears was making, the Empirical and Rational Approaches that Pears develops are unnecessary, as Pears only calls for them to solve what we have seen to be a non-existent problem. In itself, however, this is a purely negative judgement. I would close, then, with a very condensed suggestion as to what Russell's actual approach was. Doing this will also provide an example of a logical atomist position that need not assert either correspondence realism or the existence of actual simples.

THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO LOGICAL ATOMISM

As it happens, the paragraph from which Pears takes the last-mentioned quotation is instrumental in giving a positive understanding of Russell's approach.[6]

The picture of logical analysis Russell draws in the passage is one in which what is currently considered to be simple could later turn out to be complex and, thus, further analysable. The current position, therefore, is only a step in a ladder which, at its top end, hangs off our sensa and whose full length of descent is unknown to us. Russell pictures an analytical descent which, at each step, is self-consistent, so long as all simple symbols refer to objects of one type:

> A logical language will not lead to error if its simple symbols (i.e. those not having any parts that are symbols, or any significant structure) all stand for objects of some one type, even if these objects are not simple. (P. 173; *Papers* 9: 173)

The value in continuing our descent into the unknown comes in our being able to examine what we already have seen in greater detail:

> The only drawback to such a language is that it is incapable of dealing with anything simpler than the objects which it represents by simple symbols. (P. 173)

[6] I.e., p. 173; *Papers* 9: 173.

The question of the existence of a limit to all possible analysis does not enter into the picture and neither does the question of the relationship between the sensa we are analysing and the real world.

Given that this view of Russell's atomism can only be arrived at once Pears' assumptions are discarded, it is not very surprising that the view is quite similar to the Pragmatic Approach Pears rejects because it fails to agree with his assumptions.