

SEMANTIC EMPIRICISM AND DIRECT ACQUAINTANCE IN *THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOGICAL ATOMISM*

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In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Russell defends a version of semantic empiricism according to which direct acquaintance with logical atoms is the source of our semantic capacities. Previous commentators have construed Russellian acquaintance in one of two ways: either as an act of *de re* designation involving neither conceptualization nor propositional content, or as a species of belief *de re*, which does involve conceptualization or classification. I argue that two further, interim possibilities have been overlooked: that direct acquaintance involves purely phenomenal content or that direct acquaintance involves proto-conceptual content. I conclude, however, that on none of the four interpretations considered, can direct acquaintance with logical atoms be the source of our semantic capacities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philosophy of Logical Atomism is a text that sits at the intersection of three sub-fields of philosophy: semantics, or perhaps better *semiotics*, metaphysics, and epistemology. The thesis of logical atomism, the “common-sense belief that there are many separate things”, which Russell calls “logical atoms” (*Papers* 8: 160, 161), is at bottom a metaphysical thesis because it is a thesis about the ultimate nature of reality. But it is a metaphysical thesis that depends for its establishment on certain substantive semantic and epistemological presuppositions. In particular, it depends on two important premisses: (1) that there

is a general correspondence between words and things or, even more generally, between language and reality;¹ and (2) that the process of *analysis* is that by which we can come to know what these logical atoms are.

The second presupposition involves two additional and separable claims: (i) that the process of semantic analysis comes to an end in simple terms that are ostensively defined, and (ii) that simple terms depend for their ostensive definition on our being directly acquainted with the logical atoms that constitute the meanings of those terms. These semantic claims about the meaningfulness of terms in a language are related to another line of thought that appears in *PLA*. In addition to worrying about how terms in a language can come to be meaningful, Russell is also concerned with how language-users come to know the meanings of such terms. It is in his discussion of this latter point that Russell's concept empiricism, or semantic empiricism, is most evident. Though they are intimately related (as we shall see more clearly below), claims about the meaningfulness of terms in a language and claims about how language-users could come to know those meanings must be clearly separated. This task is made difficult by the fact that Russell himself consistently fails to distinguish the two points and characteristically moves back and forth between the two without marking the difference between them.

Some commentators have stressed the role of direct acquaintance in bringing the process of analysis to an end.² David Pears, for example, puts much weight on "the theory of forced acquaintance",³ a theory that Pears imputes to Russell. Without direct acquaintance with logical atoms to bring it to an end by providing ostensive definitions for simple terms, the process of semantic analysis could possibly continue indefinitely—a possibility that Pears argues Russell does not want to allow. In contrast, other commentators such as Wilfrid Sellars⁴ have

¹ David Pears makes much the same point in the Introduction to his edition of Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972; La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), p. 2.

² This line of argument can also be found in Pears, *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1967).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12.

⁴ Sellars, "Acquaintance and Description Again", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 46 (1949): 496–503.

tended to emphasize the independence of Russell's semantic empiricism and to focus almost exclusively on the role that direct acquaintance (and therefore experience) plays in explaining how we could come to know the meanings of simple words or terms and, thus, in turn, of complex propositions. I do not propose to settle the issue of the relative importance of these two lines of thought, nor do I mean to suggest that they are not importantly connected, for as Pears points out: "... a Russellian analysis of a word always follows a route which traces a possible way of learning its meaning" ("Introduction", p. 11). This latter claim suggests that one ought to keep in mind *both* of these reasons for appealing to direct acquaintance as one tries better to understand just exactly what Russell's semantic empiricism amounts to.

In keeping with this caveat, I shall begin by examining each of the two separate lines of thought. I'll begin with a brief statement of Russell's motivation for his semantic empiricism, and I'll then turn to the line of thought that originates in his commitment to the process of analysis. In *PLA*, the role of direct acquaintance in bringing analysis to an end by providing ostensive definitions for simple terms is predominant; so, in keeping with the text, I shall place some emphasis on that line of thought. In my discussion, I hope to accomplish two things: I want to clarify just what Russell's conception of direct acquaintance amounts to, and I want critically to evaluate the claim that direct acquaintance, so conceived, is the way we come to know the meanings of simple terms or words.

My specific line of argument has the following form. Previous commentators have interpreted Russellian acquaintance in, broadly, two ways. Pears argues that Russellian acquaintance is an act of *de re* designation that is entirely devoid of propositional content and involves nothing like classification, subsumption, or conceptualization.⁵ William Alston, in contrast, has argued that Russell was mistaken in claiming that knowledge by acquaintance does not involve knowledge of truths and suggests that Russellian acquaintance is best viewed as a species of belief *de re*, which, therefore, does involve the exercise of conceptual capacities.⁶

⁵ "Introduction", p. 29. Pears also discusses this issue in "The Function of Acquaintance in Russell's Philosophy", *Synthese*, 46 (1981): 149–66.

⁶ Alston, "On the Nature of Acquaintance", in *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*, ed. George Nakhnikian (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), pp. 55–6. As we shall see more

Sellars, famously, claimed that the doctrine of direct acquaintance is a species of the myth of the given and argued that irrespective of whether direct acquaintance is interpreted in either of the two ways above, it cannot play a role in explaining how we acquire our semantic or conceptual abilities.⁷ Sellars' argument can best be thought of as a dilemma with, very roughly, the following structure: either direct acquaintance involves conceptualization (subsumption, classification, propositions), or it does not. If it does (the Alstonian alternative), then it cannot be appealed to in an account of our coming to possess concepts, on pain of vicious circularity. If it does not (the Pears alternative), then it can account at most for our ability to respond differentially to instances of red with tokens of "red" but cannot explain how we could acquire the more sophisticated conceptual capacities that we clearly do possess.

In this paper, I argue that the disjunction on which the (alleged) Sellarsian dilemma depends is not exhaustive. I argue against both the Pears and Alstonian positions but claim, further, that there are two interim interpretations of Russellian acquaintance that must be explored before we abandon Russell's semantic empiricism entirely. First, I consider the possibility that states of direct acquaintance possess a certain kind of determinate *phenomenal* content that is somehow "available" to the cognitive agent whose state of direct acquaintance it is. Second, I claim that we might imagine Russellian acquaintance as involving acts of proto-conceptualization or quasi-conceptualization (or proto-conceptual content) rather than full-blown conceptualization. I develop and explore these two alternative possibilities, both of which have been overlooked in the literature to date. In the end, however, I conclude that, on none of

clearly below, Alston's proposal is more speculative than interpretive and arises specifically in response to Russell's concerns about acquaintance with the self. In "On the Nature of Acquaintance" Alston does not specifically discuss the account of direct acquaintance in *PLA*. Therefore, I will refer to the possibility that Russellian acquaintance (as conceived in *PLA*) might involve conceptualization as "Alstonian"—that is, as being in the spirit of Alston's proposal—rather than attributing that view to Alston directly.

⁷ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 128–30. The dilemma I limn below appears (among other places) in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as part of a much more general argument against the notion of direct acquaintance and its role in empiricist accounts of both concept acquisition and epistemic justification.

these four possible interpretations of Russell's concept of direct acquaintance, can direct acquaintance ground Russell's semantic empiricism.

II. THE ROLE OF DIRECT ACQUAINTANCE IN ANALYSIS

In *PLA*, one of Russell's objectives is the revitalization of empiricism in the face of the neo-Hegelian idealism of, most notably, Bradley and Bosanquet. A central part of this revitalization is the rejection of semantic holism⁸ in favour of an atomistic conception of the meaning of simple words and terms and an account of how we could acquire the meanings of those simple terms or words through experience. Russell argues that it is through experience, *via* the process of direct acquaintance with logical atoms, that we come to know the meanings of simple terms or words, and it is in virtue of knowing the meaning of these

⁸ There are two important and importantly different general accounts of the meaningfulness of terms in a language. These two views are typically called "semantic holism" and "semantic atomism". Semantic holists (Quine and Sellars, for example) typically deny that terms or sentences in a language are meaningful "in isolation". There are a number of ways to understand this claim, but perhaps the most familiar form of semantic holism holds that the meaningfulness of all individual sentences and/or terms in a language depends on the meaningfulness of all other terms or sentences in the language. One common account contends, for example, that an expression in a language is meaningful in virtue of the inferential relationships that obtain between it and the other expressions in a language. There are, of course, a variety of different versions of semantic holism. Arguably the most extreme form of semantic holism is Quine's, according to which "The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science" (Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in *From a Logical Point of View* [Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard U. P., 1953], p. 42).

In contrast, semantic atomism is, very roughly, the claim that terms or sentences in a language are meaningful "in isolation". The two most familiar atomist accounts are: (a) those which, like Russell's, claim that individual terms are the primary vehicles of meaning, in the sense that the meaningfulness of the individual terms is logically independent of and prior to the meaningfulness of any other terms or sentences, and (b) those which claim that an important class of sentences, typically called "observation sentences", are the primary vehicles of meaning (in the sense above). According to several forms of semantic atomism, the meaningfulness of sentences in a language is a function of the prior meaningfulness of simple expressions of which those sentences are composed. Semantic atomism is typically associated with a view about the nature of meanings according to which the meaningfulness of all the expressions in a language depends on the prior meaningfulness of a set of terms that are "ostensively defined". Russell's account is a version of just this kind of account, which we shall examine in detail.

simple terms that we come to understand the sentences in which these terms occur and, in turn, the propositions that these sentences express. The form that his commitment to empiricism takes is that of explaining how we could come to *acquire* the semantic capacities that we have by being directly acquainted in experience with the meanings of simple terms:

There is, as you know, a logical theory which is quite opposed to that view, a logical theory according to which, if you really understood any one thing, you would understand everything. I think that rests upon a certain confusion of ideas.... It is rather the other way round. In order to understand a proposition in which the name of a particular occurs, you must already be acquainted with that particular. The acquaintance with the simpler is presupposed in the understanding of the more complex.... (*Papers* 8: 181)

It is, however, the role that direct acquaintance plays in bringing analysis to an end that is most important to Russell's project in *PLA*. He remarks early on in Lecture 1, for example, that "... a considerable part of what one would have to do to justify the sort of philosophy [logical atomism] I wish to advocate would consist in justifying the process of analysis" (*Papers* 8: 160). Stated most generally, *analysis* is the process of breaking a thing down into its component parts; Russell uses the expression "cutting up [something] into its component parts" (*Papers* 8: 172). One analyzes complex *things* into their simpler constituents. We, human beings, do this by breaking down *language* into its component parts. We analyze complex linguistic symbols into their simple constituents, and we take the resulting simple symbols to stand for simpler *things*.⁹ Russell claims that, ideally, one ought to start from the complexity of the world and arrive at the complexity of the proposition.

⁹ Russell sometimes speaks of symbols as the objects of analysis, but it is clear that he is not referring with this terminology to what we might think of as mere symbols, such as an uninterpreted calculus might be thought to be. He is quite clearly referring to meaningful symbols; thus, Russell's term "analysis" really means something like "semantic analysis". Russell is speaking of the analysis of meaningful symbols. He writes: "Perhaps I ought to say a word or two about what I am understanding by symbolism, because I think some people think you only mean mathematical symbols when you talk about symbolism. I am using it in a sense to include all language of every sort and kind, so that every word is a symbol, and every sentence, and so forth. When I speak of a symbol I simply mean something that 'means' something else ..." (*Papers* 8: 166).

"The only reason for going the other way round is that in all abstract matters symbols are easier to grasp" (*Papers* 8: 175). The process of analysis is the process of reducing the meanings of complex sentences or propositions to their meaningful simple constituents. And it is in doing so that we come to know the logical atoms that make up the world.¹⁰

We analyze meaningful language by providing definitions of complex expressions in terms of their simple constituents. The process of analysis differs from the process of providing lexical definitions in several ways, however. He writes:

... here it is very important to distinguish between a definition and an analysis. All analysis is only possible in regard to what is complex, and it always depends, in the last analysis, upon direct acquaintance with the objects which are the meanings of certain simple symbols. It is hardly necessary to observe that one does not define a thing but a symbol. (A "simple" symbol is a symbol whose parts are not symbols.) A simple symbol is quite different from a simple thing.

¹⁰ Whether Russell countenanced *actual* simples—metaphysically primitive entities, awareness of which brings the process of logical analysis to an end—is a vexed issue. Pears argues both that he did and (something much stronger) that logical analysis *requires* their existence ("Introduction", p. 2). Konrad Talmont-Kaminski ("Pears' Two Dogmas of Russell's Logical Atomism", *Russell*, n.s. 18 [1998]: 117–25, at 121–4), Elizabeth R. Eames (*Bertrand Russell's Theory of Knowledge* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1969], p. 105), and others have argued persuasively, however, that Russell was in fact agnostic about the existence of such simples and, further, that the existence of actual simples is not required to bring logical analysis to an end, for the process of logical analysis could *at least in principle* continue indefinitely (though Russell did, in fact, *believe* that the process came to an end). On their view, simples such as sense-data are best thought of as *relative* rather than *absolutely* simple—sense-data are simple *relative* to a particular analysis.

The direct textual evidence seems to me clearly to favour the latter view; thus, although I will sometimes speak of simple things or constituents, the reader will bear in mind that simples are only relatively so. It is important to note that as a consequence of the rejection of "ultimate" simples, it seems to follow that the explanation of how analysis does in fact come to an end must appeal to facts about the simplicity of the symbols to be analyzed rather than to facts about the logical atoms in terms of which the simple symbols are analyzed. I take it that a central commitment of Russell's logical atomism, however, is that the process of semantic analysis *does in fact* come to an end in awareness of *simpler* particulars, namely sense-data.

Since my primary focus is Russell's semantic empiricism, settling this metaphysical issue unequivocally is somewhat outside the scope of the present paper. Moreover, the claim that simples are, for Russell, only *relatively* simple is consistent with my overall argument. I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Russell* for helping me to see the importance of this issue.

Those objects which it is impossible to symbolize otherwise than by simple symbols may be called “simple”, while those which can be symbolized by a combination of symbols may be called “complex”. (*Papers* 8: 173)

The important difference between the process of providing definitions and the process of analysis is that the process of defining terms in a language by using only terms in that language is circular, whereas the process of analysis terminates in semantically significant simple terms that are ostensively (and not lexically) defined. Analysis, unlike the process of providing lexical definitions, comes to an end. Russell says of “red”, for example:

... in the sense in which a correct description constitutes a definition [“red”] can be defined. In the sense of analysis you cannot define “red”. That is how it is that dictionaries are able to get on, because a dictionary professes to define all words in the language by means of words in the language, and therefore it is clear that a dictionary must be guilty of a vicious circle somewhere, but it manages it by means of correct descriptions. (*Papers* 8: 173)

Analysis is thus a process that we might think of as a process of “meaning reduction”, but it is a process that is *not* mediated by description. “Analysis is not the same thing as definition. You can define a term by means of a correct description, but that does not constitute an analysis” (*Papers* 8: 174). We do not analyze something by providing a true description of that thing. When we engage in analysis we reduce, *but not by a process of providing true descriptions*, complex meaningful language to its simple constituents, simple terms or words, which are ostensively defined and which we then take to correspond to (relatively) simple things in the world.

Russell’s commitment to analysis as a method for identifying logical atoms depends on the first important substantive presupposition identified above: that there is a general correspondence between language and reality.¹¹ For unless there were such a general correspondence, we would have no reason to think that by analyzing language we could arrive at logical atoms which are things and not symbols. Russell assumes, following Wittgenstein, who later articulated this view in the *Tractatus*,¹² that

¹¹ Pears, “Introduction”, p. 2.

¹² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F.

the logical structure of language mirrors and reveals upon analysis the logical structure of the world; language mirrors or pictures reality. Russell remarks: “I shall therefore in future assume that there is an objective complexity in the world, and that it is mirrored by the complexity of propositions” (*Papers* 8: 176).

In order better to understand what Russell has in mind when he speaks of “analysis”, it will be helpful to consider an example of how a complex proposition is to be analyzed according to Russell. Russell identifies two important properties possessed by propositions such as “Roses are red”: (1) they are complex,¹³ and (2) they *assert*, though they do not *name*, facts. Let us examine the second of these two properties first. To say that a complex proposition asserts a fact but does not name that fact, is to say that although facts are the kinds of things that are capable of making propositions true or false—“the sort of thing which is the case when your statement is true and is not the case when your statement is false” (*Papers* 8: 171)—facts are *not* the sorts of things to which propositions refer. The meanings of symbols are the things to which they refer, or, as Russell sometimes says, the things that they name.¹⁴ But since propositions do not, according to Russell, name or refer to facts, facts can *not* be the kinds of things that render propositions meaningful or (to put the point another way) that constitute their meaning, though, of course, they do render propositions either true or false. As we shall see, Russell thinks that propositions are complex abstract symbols.

Russell resists the claim that propositions refer to facts at least in part to avoid the conclusion that false propositions are meaningless.¹⁵ Equating the meaning of propositions with the facts that they assert would put Russell at risk of having to claim that a proposition such as the one expressed by the sentence “My mom is the current President of the United States” is not only false, since there is no fact to render it true, but meaningless, since it fails to have a referent because there is no such

McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.01–4.02 (p. 37ff.).

¹³ Russell leaves open the possibility that there are simple propositions but clearly thinks that, in general, propositions are complex.

¹⁴ In his early thought, Russell even flirted with the idea that terms such as “and” and “or”, the logical connectives, derived their meaning by referring to objects. He soon abandoned this view in favour of a truth-functional account of the meanings of the logical connectives.

¹⁵ He’s also worried about cases such as “The present king of France is bald.”

fact for it to refer to. This would be an obviously unacceptable consequence.

In accordance with what is sometimes called “the principle of compositionality”, Russell claims that propositions are complex abstract symbols¹⁶ that are composed of logically simpler constituents. The proposition expressed by the sentence “Roses are red”, for example, is composed, according to Russell, of the propositional components corresponding to the terms “roses”, “red”, and “... are ...”.¹⁷ It is thus terms or words that are, for Russell, the primary vehicles of meaning.¹⁸ Words acquire their meanings by naming or designating or referring to *components of facts*; thus, for an abstract simple symbol to be meaningful is for that simple symbol to name or designate or refer to a component of a fact. The proposition “Roses are red”, for example, will be made true by the fact that roses are red. This same proposition depends for its meaningfulness, however, on the logically prior meaningfulness of the words “roses”, “red”, and “... are ...”. And the meaningfulness of these constituents depends entirely on what they in fact refer to, viz. components of the fact *roses are red*.

But what are these components of facts that constitute the meanings of words or terms? Facts are not to be understood as collections or arrangements of ordinary objects or things in the world. Russell argues instead that particulars, and qualities, and relations are the components of facts, and these are not ordinary objects. Particulars are the sensible objects of sensory awareness. They are, for Russell, sense-data, which instantiate qualities and stand in relations to one another. Russell contends that sense-data are concrete particulars that actually instantiate

sensible properties or qualities. Because they are concrete particulars, sense-data are qualitatively determinate. A red sense-datum, for example, will instantiate a specific, qualitatively determinate shade of red. It will be useful to employ the convention of referring to the determinate character of a particular sense-datum by using the more determinable predicate with an attached subscript: “red₂₅₆”, for example.

Russell, then, holds a relatively unintuitive view of the nature of both the reference and the meaning of terms. Words refer to sense-data and/or their properties, and sense-data and/or their properties are, according to Russell, themselves the meanings of those words. As we have seen, the meaning of complex sentences and the propositions they express is a function of the meanings of their simple constituents which name or refer to sense-data. Russell identifies two types of simple terms or words: predicate terms such as “red₂₉”, or “red”, or “spherical”; and logically proper names such as “this”, or “that”, or “*x*”, or “*n*”. The distinguishing feature of simple terms or words is that their meanings do not depend on the prior meaningfulness of something else and cannot be adequately given by providing a true description.

Instead, simple terms or words are *ostensively* defined. Analysis comes to an end in meaningful simple terms that get their meanings by being ostensively defined. Ostensive definitions depend on some kind of “pointing” or “indicating”. A simple word or term comes to be conventionally meaningful in virtue of the fact that its meaning is “pointed at” or “designated”. Perhaps the clearest kinds of cases are logically proper names like “this”. The expression “this” comes to stand for something when a language-user tokens the expression and “points”, either mentally or literally, at an object. According to Russell, the things that are ostended in connection with meaningful logically proper names are sense-data. Predicate terms are likewise ostensively defined. The term “red₂₉” (or the simple propositional element corresponding thereto) comes to stand for red₂₉ by being connected to red₂₉ by an act of ostension. This is where direct acquaintance enters. For direct acquaintance with logical atoms (sense-data and their properties) is the kind of mental act in virtue of which ostensive definition is possible; it is, at least in part, a kind of mental ostending. Ostensively defined terms come to be meaningful in virtue of the fact that we are directly acquainted with the sense-data that constitute the meanings of such terms. Since we are directly acquainted with sense-data, we can

¹⁶ Russellian propositions are typically understood as sets of ordered *n*-tuples.

¹⁷ Russell fails consistently to distinguish sentences from the propositions that they express. Wherever possible, I have tried to sort out this confusion.

¹⁸ This is a tricky point. While Russell frequently and consistently asserts that words and terms are the primary vehicles of meaning, it is relatively clear that he does not (or at least ought not to) actually intend this claim to carry with it the implication, which it seems on its face to do, that it is sentences rather than propositions that are “primarily” meaningful. Moreover, Russell typically speaks of propositions as containing words as proper parts, a practice that further confuses the issue. Russellian propositions, notoriously, contain objects and not words as proper parts. These points should be borne in mind by the reader throughout the following discussion, in which I will sometimes follow Russell in speaking of words or terms both as the primary vehicles of meaning and as constituents of propositions.

ostensively fix the meanings of such terms.

In claiming both that the process of analysis terminates in direct acquaintance with sense-data and that direct acquaintance with sense-data is the way we come to know the meanings of simple terms in a language (his semantic empiricism), Russell makes evident his commitment to what might be called “semantic foundationalism”. On this view there are a set of primitive ostensively defined terms that form the basis or foundation for the meaningfulness of a system of language. Direct acquaintance plays a role in explaining how simple terms could be ostensively defined and, thus, plays a role in accounting for the meaningfulness of the primitive terms. Since direct acquaintance is also (and relatedly) the way we come to know the meanings of such primitive terms, direct acquaintance is a semantically primitive act—the foundation on which our semantic capacities rest.¹⁹ But what, precisely, is Russell’s account of direct acquaintance in virtue of which he thinks that direct acquaintance could play this role? This is the topic of the next three sections. Before attending to that issue, however, I want to spend a moment clarifying Russell’s semantic empiricism.

Russell’s commitment to analysis as a method for arriving at logical atoms is importantly connected to his general semantic empiricism, for as Pears remarks: “... a Russellian analysis of a word always follows a route which traces a possible way of learning its meaning” (“Introduction”, p. 11). Indeed, in many passages Russell seems to regard certain facts about how one could learn or come to know the meanings of linguistic entities as a test or criterion—or at least as a *symptom*—for whether or not a linguistic symbol is complex or simple and, therefore,

whether or not the thing it designates is complex or (relatively) simple. He writes:

I have made it clear, then, in what sense I should say that the word “red” is a simple symbol and the phrase “This is red” a complex symbol. The word “red” can only be understood through acquaintance with the object, whereas the phrase “Roses are red” can be understood if you know what “red” is and “roses” are, without ever having heard the phrase before. That is a clear mark of what is complex. It is the mark of a complex symbol, and also the mark of the object symbolized by the complex symbol. (*Papers* 8: 174)

Russell claims that we can *understand* the proposition “Roses are red” if we know antecedently what roses are and what red is (*cf. Papers* 8: 174). We understand or know the meanings of complex sentences and the propositions they express by knowing the meanings of the simple terms of which they are composed. In accordance with what is typically called “the principle of acquaintance”, Russell says that the understanding of such simple terms proceeds *by acquaintance*. “[W]hat one calls ‘knowing a particular’ merely means acquaintance with that particular and is presupposed in the understanding of any proposition in which that particular is mentioned ...” (*Papers* 8: 181). According to Russell, we come to know the meanings of simple terms by being directly acquainted with their meanings: the things to which they refer.

Unfortunately, however, it is not exactly clear how we are to understand this claim. Russell tends not to be precisely clear about what he means when he speaks of knowing or understanding the meaning of a term. On the one hand, Russell sometimes speaks as if “knowing the meaning of a term” involves something quite complicated—something which Russell sometimes expresses in the following way:

To understand a name you must be acquainted with the particular of which it is a name, and you must know that it is the name of that particular. You do not, that is to say, have any suggestion of the form of a proposition, whereas in understanding a predicate you do. To understand “red”, for instance, is to understand what is meant by saying that a thing is red. You have to bring in the form of a proposition. You do not have to know, concerning any particular “this”, that “This is red” but you have to know what is the meaning of saying that anything is red.... When you understand “red” it means that you understand propositions of the form that “x is red”. So that the understanding of a

¹⁹ It is important to note that acts of direct acquaintance seem to function only as a semantic foundation for an individual’s language. It is difficult to see how such acts would figure in an explanation of how a fully socially informed language arises. As Sellars points out, however, this is consistent with the traditional empiricist project of which *PLA* is a part. According to this view, Sellars claims, “a language is always *someone’s* language *at a time* ...” (“Acquaintance and Description Again”, p. 497). Robert Brandom also notes that a focus on individual acts of representation as the foundation for language use is characteristic of traditional empiricism (*Articulating Reasons* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 2000], pp. 24–5). In this paper, I will follow Russell in accepting this particular (if implausible) view of the nature of language and, thus, the function of semantic foundationalism. I am indebted to the editor for helping me to see the importance of this point.

predicate is something a little more complicated than the understanding of a name, just because of that. (*Papers* 8: 182)

This passage suggests that Russell thinks that even in the case of logically proper names the story is complicated. In order for one to know the meaning of “*x*”, for example, one would have to “know that [*x*] is the name of that particular” in addition to being acquainted with the relevant particular. One would have to have a certain kind of metalinguistic knowledge about the terms in one’s language if this view is the correct one. Indeed, such metalinguistic knowledge *is* essential for knowing the meaning of terms in a language such as English, German or French. But it is clearly not essential for our coming to possess a concept that is expressed by terms such as “red”, “rot”, or “rouge”. It is essentially the issue of how we come to possess such concepts in which Russell is interested, but he sometimes speaks as if his concern is with the broader issue of what understanding a language involves.

In contrast, Russell sometimes claims that to know the meaning of a simple term *just is* to be directly acquainted with the sense-datum that constitutes the meaning of that term. He writes:

... in order to understand a name for a particular, the only thing necessary is to be acquainted with that particular. When you are acquainted with that particular, you have a full, adequate and complete understanding of the name, and no further information is required. No further information as to the facts that are true of that particular would enable you to have a fuller understanding of the meaning of the name. (*Papers* 8: 179)

This passage might seem to suggest that “knowing the meaning of a term” involves nothing over and above acquaintance with a sense-datum which is the meaning of that term. So, to know the meaning of the term “red₂₉” would be simply to be acquainted with a red₂₉ sense-datum. The following passage, however, is symptomatic of Russell’s general failure to be particularly clear about what he has in mind when he speaks of “knowing the meaning of a term”:

I should like to say about understanding, that that phrase is often used mistakenly. People speak of “understanding the universe” and so on. But, of course, the only thing you can really understand (in the strict sense of the word) is a symbol, and to understand a symbol is to know what it stands for. (*Papers* 8: 182)

The expression “to know what it stands for” is ambiguous between the two different ways of understanding what it means to know the meaning of a term that I sketched above. While what Russell intended here is not precisely clear, it does seem radically inconsistent with his atomistic empiricism to suppose that knowing the meaning of a simple term would involve any kind of metalinguistic knowledge.

There is, of course, a difference between knowing of a particular symbol, say “red”, that it designates the colour red and/or e.e. cummings’ dog but not, for example, yellow or green. Particular symbols are meaningful only conventionally, in virtue of a set of rules or practices or in virtue of an interpretation. Thus, there is a sense in which to know that “red” means red one must possess quite a lot of other knowledge or information. But this does not seem to be the relevant sense of “knowing the meaning of a term” in which Russell is ultimately interested. He seems concerned with how we could come to possess the semantic or conceptual capacities that would enable us meaningfully to use symbols, whatever those might turn out to be. Thus I think it is much more plausible to construe Russell’s claims about “knowing the meaning of a term” as claims about how direct acquaintance with logical atoms could give us the semantic capacities (or the concepts) that would be required for us then to develop a system of conventionally meaningful symbols.

Thus, let us suppose that Russell does think that to know the meaning of a simple term is to be acquainted with the particular sense-datum or its properties that constitutes the term’s meaning. We must now explore Russell’s conception of direct acquaintance in more detail and determine whether or not it can play the role that he assigns it.

III. RUSSELLIAN ACQUAINTANCE: PEARS, ALSTON, AND SELLARS

In introducing *PLA*, Pears contends that Russell conceives of direct acquaintance as “pinpoint contact”. Pears writes:

There is a second question worth asking about Russell’s theory of acquaintance. Did he really regard it as a kind of pinpoint contact with reality? If so, acquaintance would not involve any selection or interpretation. A person could be acquainted with a sense-datum without being acquainted with it as an instance of a specific type of thing, and he could be acquainted with one of its qualities

without being acquainted with it as a determinate in a certain determinable range. ("Introduction", p. 28)

Citing textual support from both *PLA* and some of Russell's other works, Pears concludes: "Acquaintance is a kind of knowledge and yet it is a purely extensional relation between subject and object" (p. 29). While I think that Pears' suggestions are substantially in the right direction, I also think that it is possible to imagine a less restrictive, alternative account of direct acquaintance that Russell might accept, which I will examine in the following section of the paper.

There is quite a bit of textual support for the claim that Russell does not think that direct acquaintance involves any kind of subsumption of particulars under universals or awareness of items as being of one kind rather than another. He remarks, for example: "When you have acquaintance with a particular, you understand that particular itself quite fully, independently of the fact that there are a great many propositions about it that you do not know ..." (*Papers* 8: 181). It is helpful in connection with this point to recall that Russell contrasts "knowledge by acquaintance" with "knowledge by description". The latter, but not the former, is a kind of awareness that involves concepts. And the latter, but not the former, is a kind of awareness that seems to require that we be aware of a particular as being of one kind rather than another, or that we be aware of it as possessing one quality rather than another. If Pears is correct, then we ought to think of the relation of direct acquaintance along the lines of the reference relation: as an extensional relation between a subject and an object. If this is Russell's view, as Pears argues, it is not clear that direct acquaintance can fulfil the semantic role that Russell assigns it. It does not seem capable, that is, of accounting for how we could come to know the meanings of simple predicate terms in a language or, more precisely, to possess the concepts corresponding to such terms.

If we confine our attention to logically proper names for a moment, it does seem possible that we could come to understand such names (in the sense above) by being directly acquainted with sense-data. For, to understand a logically proper name, like "this" or "that" or "*x*" or "*n*", would be, according to this line of thought, merely to be acquainted with the particular to which that name refers. Since particulars *constitute* the meanings of such terms, to be acquainted with the relevant particular

would, after all, amount to being acquainted with the meaning of that term. There is a sense, then, in which this suggestion seems relatively unproblematic and straightforward: when one has a sensory experience, one senses a sense-datum. When one senses a sense-datum one is directly acquainted with that datum. Because one is directly acquainted with that particular, one can simply (or so the line of thought being explored here would suggest) "attach" a designator such as "*x*" or "this" to that particular, and hence name it. One can, that is, form an associative tie between the term "*x*" and that thing to which "*x*" refers, namely the determinate particular with which one is presently acquainted in experience—an object that also *constitutes* the meaning of the logically proper name "*x*".²⁰

There is a further question about predicate terms, however. We are supposing that to know the meaning of the term "red" or "red₂₉" is to be directly acquainted with the property red₂₉ that constitutes the meaning of such a term. And we are supposing also that to be directly acquainted with a sense-datum and its properties is to be in pinpoint contact with it. Again, while there is a *sense* in which we would know the meaning of the term "red₂₉" by being directly acquainted with the red₂₉ particular, this does not seem to be a sense of knowing the meaning of "red₂₉" that would be of much assistance to a language learner. In effect, what this proposal would amount to is turning tokens of predicate terms such as "red₂₉" into logically proper names. To see this point, it is helpful to point out the following:

Sensory experiences are occurrent; one has a sensory experience of *X* (where *X* is a sense-datum) only at a time, say *T*. Sensory experiences are also transitory in the sense that for any two different times *T*₁ and *T*₂, if *S* has a sensory experience *A* at *T*₁ and *S* has a sensory experience *B* at *T*₂, then, *qua* experiences, *A* and *B* are non-identical. When I experience a red₂₉ sense-datum at *T*₁, for example, I am directly acquainted with an occurrent particular and might be able on the basis of that awareness to "attach" the predicate term "red₂₉" to that datum (though the process by which I do so must not involve conceptualization or classification). Moreover, if at a later time *T*₂ I experience a red₂₉ sense-datum, I might even be able to "attach" the predicate "red₂₉" to it. Thus, I might devel-

²⁰ I am grateful to Cass Weller for help in formulating this point.

op a capacity to respond differentially to red_{29} sense-data with tokens of “ red_{29} ”. The difficulty is that this would not be a sense of knowing the meaning of the term “ red_{29} ” that would be of assistance to a language learner, for even if she could respond differentially to red_{29} particulars with tokens of “ red_{29} ”, such tokens would function only as names for occurrent red_{29} sense-data.²¹ This, however, does not seem to be the kind of knowledge that would assist Russell in his quest for semantic foundations, for it would not help a language learner to understand how even the determinate predicate “ red_{29} ” would function as a term for *classifying* red_{29} particulars.

The suggestion that direct acquaintance be understood as pinpoint contact seems to deprive direct acquaintance of the capacity to perform the general task of explaining how we could come to have certain semantic capacities. For, to the extent that direct acquaintance is conceived of as an act that can in some sense be assimilated to an act of *de re* designation, or reference, or pinpoint contact, it will seem plausible to claim that *sensory experience* should be analyzed as involving direct acquaintance. But, in so far as direct acquaintance is conceived of on the model of pinpoint contact, or *de re* designation, or reference, it will be inadequate to the task of explaining how experience could be the source of our semantic or conceptual capacities. If direct acquaintance is not understood as pinpoint contact, are there any alternative accounts of direct acquaintance that would be both acceptable to Russell (or at least a Russellian) and capable of playing the role that Russell assigns direct acquaintance?

One natural, though clearly less plausible, suggestion is that direct acquaintance *does* involve the exercise of concepts or classificatory capacities. In a discussion of how, according to Russell, persons can be directly acquainted with states of themselves, Alston argues that acquaintance should be understood as a species of belief *de re*, which he analyzes as follows: “We could say that a man has a true belief *de re* if there is some thing x and some property y such that (1) x has y and (2) x is believed by the man to have y ”, with the consequence that “whenever there is a thing of which a man is directly aware, then there is some property

²¹ This is, broadly speaking, a Sellarsian point. (See, for example, Sellars, “Acquaintance and Description Again”, p. 501.)

which is such that he is aware of that thing *as having that property*.”²² Since direct acquaintance, on this view, requires that an agent be aware of a particular *as being* (say) red, the account clearly supposes that the agent possesses classificatory or conceptual capacities. We can imagine someone adopting this line of interpretation of Russell’s account of direct acquaintance in *PLA*, someone whom I will call “an Alstonian”.

While this Alstonian alternative has the advantage of helping us to make sense of Russell’s claim that direct acquaintance is a form of *knowledge*, it cannot, on pain of vicious circularity, play a role in explaining how we could come to acquire our semantic and conceptual capacities. The very semantic and conceptual capacities whose acquisition Russell attempts to explain are *antecedently* required on this account. If I am to be aware of, for example, a red particular *as being* red (rather than merely responding differentially to it with “red”), I clearly must possess classificatory capacities. Thus, the Alstonian account presupposes the possession of the very capacities whose acquisition the view attempts to explain. As an interpretation of direct acquaintance that could play a role in Russell’s semantic empiricist project, the Alstonian alternative is a non-starter.

As part of his critique of both semantic and epistemological empiricism in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Sellars claims that the doctrine of direct acquaintance is a species of the myth of the given. Although the specific arguments presented there are extremely complex and detailed and do not focus explicitly on Russell’s work, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” provides the resources from which we can construct the following Sellarsian dilemma against Russell’s semantic empiricism. Either direct acquaintance involves conceptualization (subsumption, classification, propositions) or it does not.²³ If it does

²² Alston, “On the Nature of Acquaintance”, p. 56; my italics. Alston wants to deny that belief *de re* “involves” a propositional element. Though he says little about the nature of non-propositional belief, Alston perhaps has in mind a view according to which *de re* beliefs are individuated not in terms of their propositional content (as the typical account of belief supposes) but rather in terms of the objects the beliefs are about. While I am sceptical of the possibility of defending this, or indeed any other, non-propositional account of belief, I will not pursue the issue here. The most salient point for my purposes is that the Alstonian alternative supposes that the agent possesses classificatory or conceptual capacities.

²³ It is fairly clear that Sellars himself thought that the disjunction upon which the

(the Alstonian alternative), then it cannot be appealed to in an account of our coming to possess semantic or conceptual capacities on pain of vicious circularity. If it does not (the Pears alternative), then it can account at most for our ability to respond differentially to instances of, say, red with tokens of “red” but cannot explain how we could acquire the more sophisticated conceptual capacities that we clearly do possess.

Thus far, I have argued in favour of the truth of the two conditional claims in the above dilemma. If the disjunction on which the dilemma depends were exhaustive, we would seem to have a fairly decisive argument against Russell’s semantic empiricism. I do not think that the disjunction is, in fact, exhaustive, however. There are, I will argue, two additional interpretations of Russellian acquaintance available, both of which have been overlooked in the literature to date. Perhaps Russellian acquaintance is a state involving purely *phenomenal* content, or perhaps direct acquaintance involves proto-conceptualization rather than full-blown conceptualization. Is Russell’s semantic empiricism defensible after all, given one of these two new interpretations of direct acquaintance?

IV. A PHENOMENAL CONTENT APPROACH

Russell might be thinking of states of direct acquaintance with sense-data as states that, while having no conceptual content and involving no classification or awareness of the particular that is the object of acquaintance *as being* of one kind rather than another, are nevertheless states with a certain kind of determinate *phenomenal content* that is somehow “available” to the cognitive agent whose state of direct acquaintance it is. Like the Alstonian alternative, this possibility would help make sense of Russell’s use of the term “knowledge” in connection with states of direct

dilemma depends was exhaustive; indeed, in “Ontology and the Philosophy of Mind in Russell”, Sellars defends an interpretation of knowledge by acquaintance according to which it “is simply the effective exercise of the very abilities it is supposed to support” (*Bertrand Russell’s Philosophy*, ed. Nakhnikian, p. 100). In this work, then, Sellars attempts to move Russell toward the horn of the dilemma that construes acquaintance in more or less conceptual terms, though the argument for this conclusion is complicated and involves tracing the notion of acquaintance through much of Russell’s thought; thus, in so far as the present paper focuses exclusively on Russell’s view in *PLA*, Sellars’ argument, while suggestive, is not clearly directly relevant.

acquaintance, for it would give some content to the idea that the features of sense-data are *cognitively available* or *presented to* the person who is directly acquainted with the datum of sense. (Of course, this kind of knowledge would not be propositional knowledge, thus the use of the term “knowledge” in connection with the expression “knowledge by acquaintance” should be understood as a term of art—as it was undoubtedly intended by Russell.)

One way, though not the only way, to understand this kind of phenomenal content is to think of how there could be states with a determinate character to which we might refer using a special, artificial system. We might develop a certain kind of code.²⁴ Let us say, for example, that a state of direct acquaintance with a red₂₉ sense-datum has the content RED₂₉, where we indicate the specific character or content of the state of direct acquaintance by using a special font. In characterizing someone’s, say *S*’s, state of direct acquaintance with a red₂₉ sense-datum as a state of awareness of RED₂₉, we are not imputing to *S* any conceptual capacities, nor are we saying that in being aware of the red₂₉ sense-datum *S* is subsuming the red₂₉ sense-datum under any kind of universal or attaching to it any predicate.

Nevertheless, we may say that *S* is aware of the character of the sense-datum; this is just what we would mean when we say that *S*’s state of direct acquaintance with the red₂₉ sense-datum has the content RED₂₉. This suggestion jibes well with Pears’ earlier suggestion that:

... acquaintance would not involve any selection or interpretation. A person could be acquainted with a sense-datum without being acquainted with it as an instance of a specific type of thing, and he could be acquainted with one of its qualities without being acquainted with it as a determinate in a certain determinable range. (“Introduction”, p. 28)

This is an intuitively attractive idea, for it sorts well with our pre-philosophical intuition that in sensory experience we are aware of the determinate character of the “items” we experience in a way that does not involve classification or subsumption or conceptualization of any

²⁴ I owe this idea to William Talbott, who also helped me to see the need for understanding proto-concepts in terms of inference relations. This paper has been greatly enhanced by his suggestions.

kind. The character of the “items” is simply *there* before our minds, open to our mental gaze, as it were. (I am using the ersatz term “item” because I do not want to prejudge the nature of the individuable features of the experience.) One way to express the intuition that I am after would be to say that in having an experience I am aware of a field of seemingly infinite complexity, though, again, I do not want to put much emphasis on the exact character of the phenomenal content involved. (It is, rather, the fact that the cognitive content is non-subsumptive and non-conceptual that is of primary interest.) According to this line of thought, when we have a sensory experience—when we are in a state of direct acquaintance—we are in a state with a specific determinate content, but that content is non-conceptual content, *and* in the act of direct acquaintance we are not employing any concepts or applying any predicates, though we are *aware* of the objects of acquaintance. On this view, direct acquaintance is not mere pinpoint contact or *de re* designation, for, according to the account, an act of direct acquaintance involves a state with a certain kind of content; it is not, or at least it is not claimed to be, merely an extensional relation between a self or subject and an object.

I am not entirely certain whether Russell would accept this phenomenal-content characterization of direct acquaintance as his own; although, as far as I can tell, nothing that he says explicitly in the text would preclude this as a possible interpretation of his view. I am less uncertain, however, as to whether or not this account of direct acquaintance could play the role that Russell assigns it. (This may be an indirect reason to think that it is not his view.) The difficulties confronted by the view are as follows. We are supposing that Russell would, indeed, deny that acts of direct acquaintance, though rich in cognitive, phenomenal content, involve anything like subsumption, classification, or conceptualization. The problem, then, is to explain how such acts of direct acquaintance play a role in explaining our acquisition of certain conceptual capacities. How could states with wholly phenomenal content “give rise to” states with conceptual content? I want to argue that this account will only be plausible to the degree that it imports (illicitly by Russell’s lights) at least some capacities for classification or conceptualization, however rudimentary. The following line of argument supports this claim.

Imagine a properly functioning human being of average intelligence:

Darla. Imagine that Darla knows nothing about Braille. Imagine that Darla possesses no conceptual capacities at all, however. Now imagine that Darla encounters a large sheet of paper with Braille writing on it, perhaps a Braille coding of the US Constitution. Darla does not see this object but only touches it with her fingertips. It is tempting to say that Darla would have an experience with a very specific, determinate character. There is a fact of the matter, after all, about the nature or character of the object that she is experiencing. As a matter of fact, she is touching a determinate series of raised bumps arrayed in a determinate fashion. But remember that according to the account under consideration here, Darla possesses no classificatory or conceptual capacities whatsoever. Could she, in the absence of possessing any prior conceptual capacities for individuating her experience, come to be able, on the basis of the character of her experience alone, to discriminate “items” in her experience as bumpy, smooth or, even more generally, different or similar? I think the temptation to suppose so resides in the fact that we are already importing at least some capacities for individuation or classification, however primitive.

That is, if we really were to suppose (as we must if we take Russell’s semantic empiricism seriously) that Darla possessed no conceptual or proto-conceptual capacities, then it does not seem as if she could individuate her experience in any way at all. I would argue that if we really take seriously, as the version of direct acquaintance under consideration invites us to do, the claim that in being directly acquainted with an object we are employing *no* conceptual or proto-conceptual capacities and that the content of the experience is, itself, non-conceptual, then in acts of direct acquaintance we would not be capable of the kind or degree of individuation of our experiences that the view seems to require. The point might be put this way: from the mere fact that the experience has a determinate phenomenal content, it does not follow that we could individuate that content in any interesting sense in the absence of possessing antecedently at least some capacities which would enable us to differentiate or discriminate among its features. As the example of Darla suggests, it does not seem plausible to claim that we could, in the absence of any conceptual or proto-conceptual capacities, have an experience with a non-conceptual content that could by itself enable us to develop certain kinds of conceptual, or even proto-conceptual, capacities for making certain kinds of discriminations.

V. A PROTO-CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

The phenomenal-content interpretation of direct acquaintance, thus, cannot play a role in defending Russell's semantic empiricism, but perhaps the proto-conceptual approach will do better. What might an intermediate position—according to which direct acquaintance does not involve full-blown conceptualization but rather proto-conceptualization or quasi-conceptualization—look like? And could such an account be appealed to in explaining how we could come to acquire the full-blown conceptual capacities required for us to be meaningful language-users, thereby providing a defence of Russell's semantic empiricism?

We can again employ our code in order to help us distinguish between proto-concepts and ordinary concepts. On this account, we will still claim (as we did for the phenomenal-content approach) that in being directly acquainted with a red_{29} object, S is in a state whose content is RED_{29} , but we would attribute, further, to S the possession of some kind of proto-conceptual capacity. We would not say that she possesses the concept of red_{29} , but that she possesses the proto-concept of RED_{29} in order to draw attention to the fact that the kind of awareness involved is not fully conceptual. In addition, we could characterize the content of such a state as $THISRED_{29}$, to capture the idea that there is a certain kind of individuation of objects involved. We might thus suppose that S possesses the proto-concept $THIS$ in addition to the proto-concept RED_{29} .

We can mark the difference between possessing the concept red_{29} or red and possessing the proto-concept RED_{29} by noting that full-blown concepts such as red stand in complex inference relations to one another. Thus, possessing the concept red involves (among other things) the capacity to judge that an object is red, that if an object is red then it is not green, that an object is not red, that if it is red then it is shaped, and a variety of other things as well. In contrast, the proto-concept RED_{29} might not stand in such inferential relations to other proto-concepts. So, for example, possessing the proto-concept RED_{29} would not entail being able to judge that something is not $green_{20}$. Instead, one is only in such a state when one is either occurrently presented with a red_{29} sense-datum or when one is imagining or perhaps even remembering experiencing a red_{29} sense-datum. The leading idea would be that being in a state whose content is RED_{29} entails the presence of something of which that proto-

concept is true. Thus, for example, you could not form proto-judgments of the form $THIS$ is not RED_{29} . It might even be that there is no proto-concept corresponding to the concept of "not". Thus, there will be an important difference between possessing a concept and possessing a proto-concept. According to this view, there will be a necessary connection between the qualities of the sense-data that are the objects of acquaintance and the content of the state of direct acquaintance, for there will be a (real or imagined) sense-datum with the quality red_{29} when and only when one has a state of direct acquaintance with the content RED_{29} . (It would not be possible, therefore, to misapply a proto-concept.)

There are several interesting questions that this line of thought raises. One important question is whether or not Russell would have recognized his view in this alternative, but here we begin to stray onto rather speculative terrain. There is some textual evidence to suggest that Russell may have had something like this view in mind, but I don't think that the matter can be easily settled. Some of the passages quoted above in which he claims, for example, that "[w]hen you have acquaintance with a particular, you understand that particular itself quite fully ..." (*Papers* 8: 181), could be interpreted as suggesting that acquaintance ought to be understood as involving something like proto-conceptualization. I don't propose to settle this interpretive issue decisively; however, it is important to point out that acquaintance is contrasted with description, which clearly involves the employment of full-blown concepts. Instead, I want to examine whether or not this alternative could play the role that Russell assigns it of explaining how we could come to know the meanings of simple terms in our language, or, more generally, to have a set of semantic capacities that would enable us to employ a system of conventionally meaningful symbols.

Is Russell's claim that by being directly acquainted with sense-data we come to know the meanings of simple terms, any more defensible, given this alternative way of understanding direct acquaintance? Again, the case of logically proper names seems relatively unproblematic. For to be directly acquainted with a sense-datum will involve, we are supposing, that one is in a state of direct acquaintance whose content is (at least) $THIS$. Thus it does seem possible to claim that one could, in a manner similar to the one sketched above, designate the sense-datum using a logically proper name such as " x " or " n ". There is a sense, then, in

which one could know the meaning of a logically proper name.

But, again, the case of predicate terms is somewhat more complex. To know the meanings of predicate terms such as “red₂₉” will be to be directly acquainted with a particular sense-datum, and to be directly acquainted with a particular sense-datum will involve being in a state of direct acquaintance whose content is **THISRED₂₉**. The question we must ask is whether or not in virtue of being in such a state (or in having a series of such states) we could come to possess the concept red or red₂₉. Again, there is a rather trivial sense in which this does seem possible, for, according to the hypothesis under consideration, to know the meaning of a predicate term *just is* to be directly acquainted with the quality of a sense-datum that constitutes its meaning. But, again, there is reason to think that even if we grant this point, the sort of acquaintance involved would not be one that would be of much use in the acquisition of a concept as a constituent in a judgment.

The first difficulty is that it does not seem as if we could come to know the meaning of the term “red₂₉”—or, more generally, to possess the kind of semantic capacities that would be required if we could know the meanings of any full-blown predicates in our language—in virtue of being in a state (or a series of states) whose content is **RED₂₉**. Typically, semantic or conceptual empiricists claim that full-blown concepts are wrung from impressions or simple ideas of sense by some process of abstraction or association. The idea in the case we are considering is that an agent builds up her full-blown concepts from her proto-concepts through something like a process of abstraction or association.

The above suggestion is particularly attractive since, at least intuitively, there seems to be a certain degree of continuity between the kinds of proto-conceptual capacities that we are imagining and the sophisticated conceptual capacities possessed by language-users. The conceptual capacities that animals may possess might not be thought to be radically different from those possessed by (adult) human beings, for example. Thus, the suggestion that there is some way that the former kind of conceptual capacities could give rise to, or perhaps even evolve into the latter, more sophisticated sort, does not seem implausible. It is true that as a matter of *anthropological* fact, Russell sees no reason to “carry back your premisses further and further into the region of the inexact and vague, beyond the point where you yourself are, back to the child or monkey ...”, for “... you will find sufficient difficulty is raised by your

own vagueness” (*Papers* 8: 162). It is important to note, however, that in so far as Russell’s project is the articulation of a “theory of knowledge” for *us*, he will have to make at least an implicit commitment to what *we* are like. It is plausible to suppose that a distinguishing feature of human knowers is our ability to use concepts or fully formed language. Thus, in so far as the account of proto-concepts helps us to understand our possession of this sort of capacity, it will be congenial to Russell’s project. More generally, the problem of explaining how sensory experience alone can be the source of our linguistic or conceptual capacities requires, at the end of the day, imagining how creatures move from mere sentience (conceived as a capacity for a basic sort of awareness, perhaps the sort of awareness involved in Russellian acquaintance) to *sapience* (conceived as involving the exercise of full-blown concepts).²⁵ To the extent that the account of proto-conceptualization plays a role in this project, it is consistent with the broadly empiricist enterprise of *PLA*. What would explain how one could move from proto-concepts to full-blown concepts?

There are several things that can be said here. We can begin to get an idea of what such a process might be like by making clear what the process would have to involve, were it to be successful. One thing that would certainly be required is that one be able to abstract from the proto-concepts the descriptive content that is common to the proto-concept and the full-blown concept. In the case of **RED₂₉**, for example, one would have to be able to abstract the common descriptive content that red₂₉ also involves.

In addition, I pointed out that what distinguishes proto-concepts from their full-blown counterparts is that the former do not bear the same kinds of inferential relationships to one another that full-blown concepts do. So, the process of abstraction, whatever it turned out to be, would also have to involve acquiring certain logical concepts: in particular the concept corresponding to “not” and “inclusive disjunction”. (I focus on these two logical operators because the rest of the logical operators can be derived from these two, and one could then, presumably, arrive at the full set of inference relations in which our concepts stand to

²⁵ For a more thorough discussion of this issue and empiricism’s history in relation to it, see Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, Chap. 5, and *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1994).

one another in virtue of possessing these two logical concepts.²⁶) There are, thus, two general things that would be required of such an account of abstraction.²⁷

The project of explaining how we could abstract the descriptive content common to both RED₂₉ and red₂₉ is relatively straightforward. We can imagine, for example, that someone could come to see that if some item present in experience is RED₂₉, then that thing is red₂₉. In possessing the proto-concept RED₂₉, the agent is directly acquainted with the sensible features of the presented object to which the proto-concept applies (even though she does not possess proto-concepts corresponding to the logical connectives). And since the very same sensible features are those in virtue of which the concept red₂₉ can be correctly applied to the object, it is not at all implausible to suppose that on the basis of direct acquaintance with that feature or property she could abstract the descriptive content in virtue of which red₂₉ likewise applies correctly. We might say, that is, that (assuming we restrict ourselves to the common descriptive content) she could come to see that RED₂₉ implies red₂₉. Now this will not, by itself, give her the concept red₂₉, for she will still lack the further and more complex inferential relations in which the concept stands. Nevertheless, the abstraction of common descriptive content seems to be a necessary condition for her coming to possess the full-blown concept red₂₉. Given the plausibility of this account, it seems as if there might, in fact, be some truth to the kind of account being defended. That is, if direct acquaintance is understood as involving proto-conceptualization, then we (or Russell) would have at least a necessary condition for the acquisition of full-blown concepts.

An important interpretive issue, however, is whether Russell would countenance abstraction, even in the very weak sense that I have articulated above. While I do not think that this issue can be settled unequivocally, there are two important reasons for supposing that this

²⁶ The idea that we could come to possess concepts for the logical connectives *via* some process of abstraction or association involving direct acquaintance is of special interest in connection with the discussion of Russell, for at one time Russell claimed that terms for the logical connectives referred to logical entities and that we acquire the concepts corresponding to the logical connectives through direct acquaintance with these logical entities. See *Theory of Knowledge*, Pt. 1, Chap. 9 (*Papers* 7: 97–101).

²⁷ I owe this point to William Talbott and Cass Weller.

view of abstraction is at least consistent with Russell's empiricism in *PLA*: (1) the account of abstraction that I have in mind is suitably anti-psychologistic to be largely in the spirit of *PLA*; (2) there is some textual evidence to support the claim that Russell had something like an account of abstraction in mind.

Modern empiricists such as Hume typically hold an associationist psychology and interpret the process of abstraction in largely psychological terms.²⁸ Russell, in contrast, eschews psychological premisses in general, claiming, for example, that the reconstruction of the world from logical atoms can take place without "assuming the existence of the persistent ego" (*Papers* 8: 240). Thus, if the account of abstraction I appeal to were robustly psychological, it would surely be illegitimate. On the other hand, if the account were suitably anti-psychologistic, it would arguably be consistent with Russellian logical analysis, especially since there is some textual evidence to suggest that Russell had at least a weak commitment to abstractionism. In his discussion of how physical objects (logical fictions) are constructed out of experience, for example, Russell remarks that strings of experience are "put together by means of certain empirically given relations such, e.g., as memory" (*ibid.*). The weak form of abstraction from proto-concepts that I imagine working here is consistent both with Russell's anti-psychologism and his explicit remarks, since it imagines at most attributing a capacity for coming to be aware of a logical relation, e.g., RED₂₉ implies red₂₉, and the acquisition of concepts corresponding to (say) "not".²⁹ (The view does not require the

²⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1978), I.1.1 (p. 20).

²⁹ There are notorious difficulties with the notion of abstraction—arguably even with the very weak sense of abstraction I discuss above. One important source of arguments against abstraction in general and its role in Russell's philosophy in particular is Peter Geach's *Mental Acts: Their Content and Their Objects* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957). It is important to note, however, that the account of abstractionism I discuss above is entirely different from the account of abstraction defended by Russell in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), which is Geach's target in *Mental Acts*. There, Geach offers trenchant criticism of the claim that the meanings of the logical connectives (in particular "or" and "not") could be arrived at "through our performing abstraction upon experiences of hesitation [in the case of "or"], and 'not' is similarly related to experiences of frustration or inhibition ..." (p. 23). Consequently, Geach's arguments against abstraction, while important, are not directly relevant to the issue at hand. It remains true, however, that the account of proto-concepts is only as defensible as the

construction of abstract ideas from their more determinate counterparts, for example.)

The idea that a weak form of abstraction is at work in Russell's thought in *PLA* gains additional support when we examine his remarks in Lecture III. There, Russell articulates a truth-functional account of the logical connectives, according to which the truth-value of the molecular propositions that contain the connectives is entirely dependent on the truth-value of their constituent atomic propositions.³⁰ The meaning of all of the logical connectives is derived from the Sheffer stroke, which Russell interprets as "*p* is incompatible with *q*" (*Papers* 8: 186).³¹ While some of the remarks Russell makes in *PLA* suggest that he would exempt the logical connectives from having to be arrived at empirically, it is fairly clear that at least the meaning of the Sheffer stroke would have to be acquired "in experience". In the context of a discussion of a logically perfect language he says, for example, that in such a language "the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact, with the exception of such words as 'or', 'not', 'if', 'then', which have a different function" (*Papers* 8: 176).³² It is important to notice, however, that the discussion immediately following the introduction of the Sheffer stroke as the basic logical connective appeals to our knowledge of negative facts, whose existence Russell had not yet abandoned in *PLA*. Thus, despite having abandoned the stronger empiricist claim that the logical connectives refer to logical entities (parts of facts) with which we are acquainted, Russell continues to struggle with how we could come to acquire meaningful logical symbols *via* experience.

The notion that our account of direct acquaintance with proto-concepts could be appealed to in an explanation of our acquisition of meaningful logical connectives is, thus, at least largely in the spirit of Russell's

view of the nature of abstraction that it contains.

³⁰ Russell acquired the truth-functional interpretation of the logical connectives from Wittgenstein.

³¹ Russell regards the idea that the Sheffer stroke functions as the one primitive logical connective as an improvement over the account given in *Principia Mathematica* "where there are two primitive ideas to start with, namely 'or' and 'not'" (*Papers* 8: 187). But he concedes that one could "do business" either way.

³² I am indebted to an anonymous referee from *Russell* for bringing this point to my attention.

empiricist project in *PLA*.³³ In order to grasp how such an explanation might proceed, we can begin by imagining that someone who possesses the proto-concept **RED**₂₉ would also possess a series of other proto-concepts for determinate colours, shapes, etc. We are supposing, however, that she lacks the proto-concepts corresponding to the full-blown concepts of negation and inclusive disjunction. Thus, the same sort of straightforward story that was told about the shared descriptive content is not available in the case of the logical connectives. How could she come to possess the full-blown concept "not" from a basis in direct acquaintance understood as proto-conceptualization?

The first thing to say is that it is possible to imagine that someone could come to possess a *proto-concept* corresponding to the full-blown concept "not", but I think it is difficult to imagine how someone could come to possess the full-blown concept "not" (or disjunction) from a basis in direct acquaintance construed as involving proto-conceptualization. Imagine what the proto-concept **NOT** might be like. Suppose someone employs the proto-concept **RED**₂₉. The employment of the concept entails the presence of an object that is red₂₉. Now imagine that our agent is presented simultaneously with a green₂₄ sense-datum and thus employs her proto-concept **GREEN**₂₄. This individual could come to think of the red₂₉ sense-datum that it is **NOT GREEN**₂₄ or of the green₂₄ sense-datum that it is **NOT RED**₂₉. But since the correct circumstances in which these proto-concepts could apply would be circumstances that entailed the presence of both the green₂₄ and red₂₉ sense-data, the proto-concept **NOT** would differ significantly from the full-blown concept "not". That is, the full-blown concept is one that would enable someone possessing it (plus other concepts) to judge of a red object that it is not green₂₄, *even in the absence of a green₂₄ object*. In addition, one would be able to judge that if an object were red₂₉ then it is not green. But if, as we are suggesting, the proto-concepts do, in fact, lack the kinds of logi-

³³ More generally, this notion is consistent with and in the spirit of Russell's atomism. The project of supplying meaning for the logical connectives is particularly acute for semantic atomists in contrast to semantic holists, as Dummett points out. The semantic holist has "a right to adopt whatever logical laws" he chooses, subject only to the constraint of something like a principle of coherence (*The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1991], p. 227). Semantic atomists, and in particular atomistic *empiricists*, on the other hand, must arrive at meaningful logical connectives *via* a process that appeals at least in part to experience.

cal connections enjoyed by our other concepts, then the idea that we could abstract from states of direct acquaintance so conceived to concepts of the full-blown logical connectives is implausible.³⁴

The difficulty is the same whether it is repeatable determinates or determinables that are at issue. For we can imagine an account of how one might come to acquire the concept of the determinable red from a series of proto-concepts RED₂₉, RED₃₀, RED₂₈₆, etc. Perhaps one could come to acquire the determinable concept red *via* a process of abstraction. One could perhaps arrive at a determinable concept through a disjunction of more determinate proto-concepts. But even this would require the possession of a concept corresponding to disjunction, which we would not seem able to arrive at through direct acquaintance so conceived.

Thus, while it seems as if—through some kind of process of abstraction from direct acquaintance (understood as involving proto-conceptualization)—we could come to possess the shared descriptive content common to a proto-concept and a full-blown concept, it does not seem that we could, in similar fashion, come to possess the concept “not”. Thus, at best, it seems that a Russellian account of this kind could provide a necessary condition for the acquisition of our full-blown concepts. While not insignificant, this result is not as strong as one might like. Consequently, I think that one must conclude that the appeal to a proto-conceptual interpretation of direct acquaintance cannot, in the end, function in a defence of Russell’s semantic, or concept, empiricism.

V. CONCLUSION

I have examined four different interpretations of what Russell might have in mind when he speaks of direct acquaintance, and I have examined how each would fare in accounting for how we could come to possess concepts or come to be sophisticated language-users. Each of the four accounts of direct acquaintance faced considerable difficulties in accounting for our acquisition of these semantic capacities. Nothing that

I have said suggests that the notion of Russellian acquaintance (construed in any fashion) is untenable. All that I have attempted to point out is that there are significant difficulties that attend Russell’s attempts to employ direct acquaintance in service to his semantic empiricism.

³⁴ The discussion of proto-concepts was greatly enhanced by Cass Weller’s helpful suggestions.