RUSSELLIAN PROPOSITIONS

GIOVANNI DE CARVALHO
Rua Adriano, 102/801 cob
20735-060 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
GIOVANNIDUARTE@UOL.COM.BR

Guillermo Hurtado. *Proposiciones Russellianas.* Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autònoma de Mexico, 1998. Pp. 337. $120.00 Mexican pesos.

Given its scope and the amount of problems with which it deals, this book is not an easy one. Hurtado assigned himself the job of scrutinizing an old project Russell had put aside under severe criticism from Wittgenstein. I'm talking about the 1913 manuscript of *Theory of Knowledge.* Wittgenstein showed Russell that the theory of belief he presented in that manuscript was inconsistent. Hurtado was particularly intrigued by the fact that Russell was paralysed by Wittgenstein's famous objection. The problem was a hard one, he admitted, but it could be resolved, given enough effort. Then why didn't Russell resolve it? Hurtado's inquietude led him to proceed with an investigation, which resulted in the writing of this book.

The book provides a completely new and systematic account of Russell's early philosophy by focusing on its cornerstones: Russell's ideas of predication, propositional function and the proposition. Hurtado claims to have fully examined what Russell said about those subjects during the years 1900 through 1913, which are considered his most productive years. It turns out that these conceptions are far more profound and obscure than is currently supposed. His task was to examine them under a new light.

The book has a *hybrid* nature, in which historical facts are mixed together with Hurtado's own philosophical insights into Russell's ideas. In spite of Hurtado's efforts to separate things, this way of exposing Russell's viewpoint in contrast to his own, in my opinion, may bring some confusion, and at times it is hard to tell whether he is elucidating what Russell said or stating his own

ideas about it.

Hurtado divides the book into three parts, dealing respectively with (1) relations and predication; (2) denotation and propositional functions; and (3) descriptions, logical types and beliefs. In the epilogue he proposes what he claims to be his own contribution to "a neo-Russellian theory of predication".

The first part of the book deals with relations and predication. It is currently accepted that Russell vigorously rejected the idea that all relations are internal. But Hurtado shows that neither Russell nor the idealists were very clear about what an internal relation is. It is against this background that Russell's doctrines of external relations must be understood. And what about Russell's conception of predication? Here Hurtado sees Russell subject to apparently antagonistic intuitions. On pages 84–5 of *The Principles of Mathematics*, Russell supports the intuition that the copula is not a relation but has a relational nature. In Chapter IV of the same book he says that predication is logically a relation but is not a relation. This means that Russell recognizes the relational nature of predication but cannot accommodate this view in the framework of his ontology. The problem remains of finding a substratum for predication, something that relates without being a relation. In the epilogue Hurtado proposes a way of doing it.

The second part of the book deals with denotation and propositional functions. Hurtado is particularly intrigued by the fact that Russell's positions regarding propositional functions have always been ambivalent. It is true, he points out, that on occasions, in the *Principles*, Russell held the position that we have to take the notion of propositional function as primitive, but Hurtado thinks this position must be understood in the context of the Russellian logicist project in the *Principles*. To the specific ends of that project (mainly to reduce mathematics to formal logic without the theory of types), yes, we have to take the notion of propositional function as primitive. On the other hand, Russell also said many interesting things about propositional functions that go far beyond the necessities of the logicist project. If, according to Hurtado, we can find in the *Principles* the elements for a theory of propositional functions, then why did Russell say that we have to take this notion as primitive? Hurtado's interpretation is, in his own words, that "maybe Russell realized the extreme difficulties posed by the ideas he was about to advocate. Consequently, when he saw that it was not necessary to offer a precise doctrine of propositional functions, he thought it better not to venture, and took this notion as primitive" (p. 152[1]).

The third part of the book deals with descriptions, logical types and beliefs. In order to trace the antecedents of what came to be known as Russell's Theory

[1] The translations from Hurtado's Spanish are my own.

of Descriptions, Hurtado's attention is once again focused on Russell's conception of propositional function. What exactly was it that Russell said in "On Denoting" about propositional functions? Of course, when stating his theory of descriptions in that famous article, Russell took the notion of propositional function as primitive. But he also said a couple of things in "On Denoting" concerning the nature of propositional functions. "And what he said [and here enters the most provocative thesis of Hurtado's book] suffices for us to doubt that in OD he had a conception of propositional function distinct from the one he had in TPM [the *Principles*]" (p. 164).

Hurtado's conclusion is that the theory of descriptions might have been based on a conception of propositional function like the one presented in the *Principles*: "According to a standard reading of OD", he says, "the main difference between a propositional function in TPM and in OD is that the *variable* in OD is not defined by means of the denotative concept *any term*" (p. 167). Here, again, Hurtado is intrigued by yet another fact: he says on page 164 that when formulating his theory of quantification in "On Denoting", the first thing Russell stated was that his theory took the notion of variable as fundamental. Then he uses the expression "$C(x)$" to signify a proposition. This is incorrect. What Russell should have said was that "$C(x)$" is a *propositional function*, and, in fact, he corrects himself immediately in a footnote. "If Russell considered $C(x)$ to be a propositional function, then why didn't he state it in the text body?", Hurtado asks (p. 167). "If, in Russell's conception, $C(x)$ was a proposition or if it was both things—a proposition and a propositional function—then the theory of descriptions is not what we in general think it is", he adds (*ibid.*).

It is false, according to Hurtado, to maintain that Russell abandoned completely the notion of denotation after having formulated his theory of descriptions in "On Denoting". Hurtado shows that Russell, on various occasions, made use, in a rather explicit manner, of the notion of denotation after "On Denoting", to offer an elucidation of the propositional functions. "But how", he asks,

> can we find an explanation for Russell's conduct? How to explain that on one hand he said that the theory of denotation in TPM should be rejected and gave us an alternative to it by offering his theory of descriptions and, on the other hand, he went on accepting, in an almost furtive way, the explanation he gave in TPM about propositional functions as based on the notion of denotation? (P. 171)

Here is Hurtado's own explanation for it:

> My hypothesis is that Russell might have considered his arguments in OD as showing that his theory of denotation, as well as the fregean theory of sense are not the best way

to solve the semantical problems of empty proper names and informative identities, but this doesn't affect the far more logical use that is made of his theory of denotation in TPM to elucidate the notion of propositional function. (Pp. 171–2)

In the last chapter of his book Hurtado offers a critical examination of Russell's theory of belief as a multiple relation. In "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood" Russell rejected the existence of propositions. Consequently he affirmed that belief could not be a dual relation of the mind to a proposition, and considered it to be a multiple relation of the mind to the terms with which the belief is concerned. Wittgenstein pointed out that Russell's theory of belief faced serious difficulties, which were, ultimately, the result of his conception of predication. Hurtado sums up by stating that his treatment of Russell's ideas of predication, propositional function and the proposition may seem very severe; but, contrary to those who think that, when dealing with these subjects, one had better abandon Russell's conceptions and adopt a Fregean approach, Hurtado thinks that, adequately modified, the Russellian vision is preferable to the Fregean one.

Finally, in the epilogue, Hurtado provides some "Notes for an Ontological Theory of Predication". Briefly stated, his theory is as follows: propositional functions are abstract parts of propositions. This means that propositional functions are neither properties nor simple relations and, hence, are not genuine constituents of singular propositions. This thesis is based on a conception of predication as something similar to what the scholastics of the Renaissance period called a *mode*. Predication, according to Hurtado's theory, is a relational modification of the constituents of a proposition that provides the conditions for unity, predicability and logical form of that proposition. Hurtado believes that his theory is suitable for solving the problem of how it is possible that predication is relational without being a relation, and offers an elucidation of propositional functions that does not have the problems that the Russellian and Fregean theories have.

Overall, Hurtado's book is a very interesting one. Besides shedding new light on Russell's philosophical ideas, it has the potential to arouse interesting debates in the area. Not only those interested in Russell studies, but every one who can read Spanish and is interested in the ideas it raises, will find it very useful.