

A RELATIONAL DISPUTE

SÉBASTIEN GANDON
IUF/PHIER / U. Blaise Pascal
63000 Clermont-Ferrand, France
SGANDON@ORANGE.FR

Stewart Candlish. *The Russell/Bradley Dispute and Its Significance for Twentieth-Century Philosophy*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xix, 235. ISBN 978-0-230-50685-5. £49.99; US\$84.95 (hb).

Candlish's book aims at giving a "fair" description of the notorious Russell/Bradley dispute, that is, a more balanced one than the version that is usually told. The standard account is the one given by Russell, and, as Russell was a party of the debate, it is no surprise that he seriously misconstrued Bradley's arguments. Attempting to set the historical record straight, Candlish then opposes Russell's description of the dispute. The author is quite clear, however, on the fact that he does not himself endorse the Idealistic point of view (p. xi).

The two first chapters of the book are introductory: the first one is a presentation of the stereotypical picture that the author intends to demolish, while the second is an outline of Bradley's metaphysics. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to a confrontation between Russell and Bradley's theories of judgment and truth. Chapters 5 and 6 are dedicated to a rehabilitation of Bradley's writings about relation. In these four chapters, Candlish attempts to show that Russell's arguments against Bradley were not as devastating as they are supposed to be, and that Bradley's insights were quite powerful—so much so that they have been rediscovered by some later philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, for instance. The concluding chapter is an attempt to explain the decline of monistic idealism after Bradley.

Candlish does not only aim at offering a "fair" account of the Russell/Bradley dispute. This goal is extended by a more general plea for the introduction of an historical perspective in analytic philosophy. According to Candlish, "our implicit acceptance of a distorted version of philosophy's recent past has serious consequences" (p. 19): one of them is that, by misunderstanding our own history, we "misunderstand ourselves and the nature of what we are about" (*ibid.*); another is that, by being deprived of any way to connect what we do in philosophy

with what some of the philosophers of the past have done, “we may, as a result, fall under the impression that only we, and those obviously like us, are really doing philosophy, at least as it ought to be done” (*ibid.*). From this perspective, Russell’s confrontation with Bradley seems to represent a rather good topic: not only does it epitomize a turning-point in Russell’s intellectual evolution and in the emergence of the new tradition, but it also shows how easily the new and victorious analytic philosophy has misconstrued its own history.

If I entirely share Candlish’s conviction about the necessity of introducing an historical perspective in analytical philosophy, I am not convinced by Candlish’s own reconstruction of the dispute. In a nutshell, what I find very useful in the book is all that concerns Bradley, and some of the parts devoted to Russell (especially, the analysis of his theory of judgment). What I do not agree with is, first, Candlish’s way of doing history of philosophy; second, his treatment of Russell’s works; and third, his general conception of the use of logic in philosophy.

Candlish really succeeds in expounding to the modern eye both the coherence of Bradley’s thought, and the difficulty of grasping it. His analysis of the role Bradley gave to “intellectual satisfaction” (pp. 26–7, 33) and to the “principles of sufficient reason” (pp. 46–7) is very enlightening—it explains why Bradley, while endorsing a kind of methodological scepticism, denied that ultimate contingencies were given in experience (p. 48). Candlish also does a great job of presenting Bradley’s evolution on some key points of his doctrine. In Chapter 6, for instance, the author claims that Bradley endorsed the theory of internal relations only in *Appearance and Reality*, and for some bad reasons (p. 155). At last, Candlish manages to show how some of Bradley’s insights could find a form of modernity. In this respect, his presentation and defence of the identity theory of truth in Chapter 4 is very impressive. Not only does Candlish show how this doctrine could represent a way out of the Russellian dilemmas, but he also succeeds in defining the role this theory could play in the contemporary debate (pp. 98–100). Even if I am often not convinced by Candlish’s treatment of Russell (see below), his presentation of Russell’s theory of judgment in Chapter 4 seems to me rather clear and faithful. In particular, I like the way Candlish expounds Russell’s predicament about false propositions (see pp. 66ff.). To summarize, then, Candlish’s book contains many valuable clarifications of Bradley’s philosophy, and it really helps the reader to penetrate his thought. Moreover, the writing is clear and pleasant, the clash between Russell and Bradley providing an easy plot to follow.

Let me now explain the reservations I have about Candlish’s way of doing history of philosophy. The first one is methodological. Candlish explains to us at length that our view of Bradley is replete with stereotypes, and that only a history of the Russell/Bradley dispute can clear the ground. But I am not sure that Candlish succeeds in avoiding the use of some very common stereotypes in

the presentation of his project. First, I do not think that analytical philosophy is a tradition completely blind to its history. This judgment could hold for the analytical philosophy of the 1970s and '80s, but it is not true anymore: the studies of M. Friedman on Carnap and the neo-Kantians, those of D. Føllesdal (and others) on Husserl or those of A. Coffa on the heritage of Bolzano show that the history of analytic philosophy is something that is accepted today by the analytic community. Candlish's methodology is thus not as original as his author seems to believe. Second, Candlish exaggerates the disappearance of Bradley and idealism on the analytical scene. Since, at least, Armstrong's book *Universals and Scientific Realism* (1978), Bradley's regress has played a major role in the analytic tradition. Mertz's *Moderate Realism and Its Logic* (1996), for instance, discussed Russell, Bradley and Armstrong. Of course, the reference to Bradley is often made by people that have not really read Bradley—but the same is true of the philosophers who refer to Russell. Candlish refers to Armstrong only once, and he does not even speak about Mertz; why has he chosen to ignore this literature?

The least we can expect from an author who criticizes others for falling into easy stereotypes is to be cautious in his criticisms. Candlish is not careful enough in this respect. We could think, however, that this is a bit disappointing, but not too serious: so far as the history expounded in the book is not affected, the essential is preserved. Unfortunately, my concerns with Candlish's way of doing history do not stop here. I have indeed two further reservations: one about the treatment of Russell, the other about the neglect of all the followers of Bradley. Let me first say some brief words about the latter.

One cannot criticize an author for having clearly delineated his topic. But Candlish lets his reader believe that the Bradley/Russell dispute was a central turning-point in the history of analytic philosophy, a sort of mythological battle that engendered a new philosophical order. I doubt it was. First, the dispute was not only an opposition between Bradley and Russell. Some other characters, Joachim and Bosanquet for instance, played a role in the complicated relationship Russell had with idealism. N. Griffin has recently shown, in this journal,¹ that Joachim's book distorted Bradley's theory of truth, and that Russell assimilated Bradley's theory to Joachim's. Thus Russell's misinterpretations of Bradley's thought were as much the result of his desire to demolish idealism as the consequence of his reading of Joachim. To neglect the role played by Joachim in this debate hinders the understanding of the interaction between Bradley and Russell. Second, and more importantly, the decision to construe the Russell/Bradley dispute as the central event in the "historical shift in English-language philosophy away from ... monism and idealism towards pluralism and realism"

¹ "Bertrand Russell and Harold Joachim", *Russell* 27 (2007): 220–44.

(p. 4) has a consequence for our view of idealism. It is just not true that idealism did not survive Bradley's failure to convince Russell. What, indeed, about Colingwood? What about the logical discussions that W. E. Johnson and G. F. Stout still linked, in the '20s, to the logical works of Bradley and Bosanquet? Moreover, even at the end of the nineteenth century, Bradley's version of idealism was not the sole one. In America, Royce developed a rational idealism, more open to logic and mathematics, and explicitly opposed to Bradley's sceptical approach.

The sort of history Candlish obviously likes is the one in which you have dramas, great confrontations and big battles. That is why the commentator seeks (excessively, it seems to me) to personalize the confrontation between the new tradition (assimilated to Russell) and idealism (whose hero was Bradley). Even if this kind of history still has some things to teach us, it leaves many things out of the picture.

The second problem I have with Candlish's book concerns his treatment of Russell. In several places, the author contrasts the readability of Russell's writings to the difficulty of Bradley's texts. Here, Candlish has obviously in mind *The Problems of Philosophy*, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* or *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*—and neither *The Principles of Mathematics* nor *Principia*, which remain Russell's two masterpieces. Furthermore, Russell's clarity is often only apparent: many claims in the *Problems*, for example, can engender various contradictory interpretations. By construing Russell as a paradigm of clarity and rigour, easily opposable to the notorious fuzziness of Bradley's writings, Candlish missed some important aspects of Russell's thought—and some important facets of the Russell/Bradley dispute as well.

First, Candlish has chosen not to say much about the *Principles*, which is still the work in which the opposition to Bradley is the most significant. I think it is a wrong decision. The neglect of this work leads Candlish to oversimplify Russell's position. For instance, Candlish claims that, in 1903, Russell had "surprisingly little to say about negation" (p. 120). Russell said a little more than Candlish believes, however. Russell alluded to the issue of incompatibility at the end of §157, and he came back to the question of the nature of negation and of zero in §§177–8. What Russell claimed there is not easy to interpret, but, in §157 at least, he seems very close to Bradley's idea that the negative judgment derives from the judgment of incompatibility (see Candlish, p. 122). The same can be said of many other topics—in §451, the opposition between monism and monadism is related to the issue of causality; six pages before, in §444, Russell opposed Bradley's conception of time and fiction. Why has Candlish chosen to ignore these elements, which seems to allow a refining of our view of the dispute?

But, even apart from this decision to avoid the more technical parts of the *Principles*, I do not follow Candlish on his general interpretation of Russell's cri-

ticism of Bradley. Here is the way I see things. Russell had indeed a very serious problem with the unity of the proposition. His 1903 distinction between aggregate and whole was a consequence of a difficulty which was to occupy Russell until the end of his philosophical journey.² This problem was foreshadowed by Bradley, and, in this respect, Candlish is right to undertake a reassessment of the dispute. But it is one thing to see a difficulty; it is another to distinguish it from problems which can easily be confused with the original one. As I see it, Russell criticized Bradley, not for having raised the issue of the unity of proposition, but for having confused this question with some other ones—and thus for having muddled the whole issue.

In his desire to salvage Bradley, Candlish sometimes goes too far. For instance, Russell thought that the issue concerning the unity of proposition was not to be equated with Bradley's regress argument; as it is well known, Russell contended that the regress was endless, but not vicious, being merely one of implication. Candlish argues, however, that the Russellian reply "is based on the idea that the goal of the argument is to prove the internality rather the unreality of relations" (pp. 168–9), and that, when understood as an argument against the unreality of relations, the answer is not effective, since it aims at admitting "an infinite series of actual objects" (*ibid.*), which would be, says Candlish, an embarrassing concession for Russell in 1903. But . . . no! To admit "an infinite series of actual objects" is not embarrassing at all for Russell. The whole point of Russell's adhesion to Cantor is to admit that there is an actual infinity. This thesis is not a detail in the *Principles*, and Candlish's failure to grasp the point is surprising. This supports the idea that he has not understood that Russell attempted to distinguish the issue of propositional unity from various superficial issues (e.g. the question of actual infinity).

This kind of misunderstanding is, however, very rare in Candlish's book. The real problem is that the commentator tends always to rigidify Russell's thought. This is probably a consequence of his decision to focus on Russell's easiest works; but it is as well caused by the neglect of a whole section of the recent secondary literature on Russell's works. G. Landini and B. Linsky are not mentioned at all, even in the bibliography—G. Stevens is referred to, but only once. Now, these new works completely forbid saying things such as, for instance, "[in 1910, Russell is] dividing non-linguistic entities into fundamentally different kinds which somehow constrain how they can be put together" (p. 61). For Landini, this is clearly false. I do not want to defend Landini's reading here; I merely want to indicate that these new interpretations compel us to be more cautious in our reading of Russell, and that this fact could have some bearing on the story Candlish tells us.

² See G. Stevens, *The Russellian Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Let me take just one example. Candlish argues that, for Bradley, relations are not objects, and that, accordingly, “there are no names of relations” (p. 159; cf. 129–30). The commentator then compares Bradley’s position with Wittgenstein’s: “Instead of, ‘The complex sign “ aRb ” says that a stands to b in the relation R ’, we ought to put, That “ a ” stands to “ b ” in a certain relation says that aRb ” (*Tractatus* 3. 1432). Now, according to Landini, a relation, when appearing in a subject position, should be considered as a term, that is, it should be taken as a possible value of the universal variable. This means there is, for him, no typological difference between particulars and relations. On the other hand, “relating relations” (that is, relations occurring as verbs) cannot become a value of the unrestricted variable, because they are not, properly speaking, entities—“relating relations” are, in *Principia* (in 1903, the question is more difficult) propositional functions, which are, according to Landini, only expressions. Thus, according to him, a difference should be made between entities (particulars, relations, etc.) and propositional functions; propositional functions (like “ x loves y ” in “Nicholas loves Cecilia”) are not names. Now, with this in mind, let us come back to Wittgenstein’s assertion. Was Wittgenstein really opposing Russell’s theory here, as Candlish claims? I’m not so sure. Wittgenstein was perhaps just emphasizing the distinction between a relation as a term, which is symbolized in his language by a name of an object (“ a ”, “ b ”, ...), and a propositional function, which should not be regarded as a name, but as a way to put some names in a certain relation. In this perspective, Wittgenstein’s proposition would be read as a didactic effort to make explicit Russell’s conception, and not at all as a criticism of Russell’s view.

I am not saying that Landini is right here. Nor am I saying that the distinction between relation and propositional function could not be criticized from a Bradleian point of view. I am just saying that we cannot do as if Russell’s writings on relations, on truth, on judgment, etc., were very simple and straightforward. Once again, I find that Candlish should have put into practice what he’s professing: to go beyond stereotypes.

My last complaint is of a different sort. It is certainly the most important one; but, at the same time, it is of a purely philosophical nature, and one cannot reproach a writer for not being in agreement with what one thinks. As I believe it could be the origin of my previous criticisms, I will explain this disagreement as fairly and clearly as I can.

Candlish suggests several times that the real source of Russell’s break with Bradley comes from his project to give an account of mathematical truths. I agree. I think that one does not understand anything of Russell’s philosophy if one leaves this element out of the picture. Now, what is so special about philosophy and logic, to the extent that no one could do philosophy without being a logician? Why not defend another conception, close to Bradley’s, according to which, most of the time, logic and mathematics are irrelevant to philosophy?

Candlish seems to view philosophy as forming a domain, endowed with its own agenda—it has its own set of problems, its own ways to deal with them and its own traditions. To account for mathematics is an important task for philosophers, but only one among others; it is not the central one, and can be sacrificed on the altar of the “satisfaction of the intellect”, for instance. In Candlish’s view, the use of logic in philosophy appears as a mere technical trick, which can at best help to express our philosophical assumptions, but which cannot replace them. Thus, explaining why he has said “nothing directly about the details of Russell’s logic, and relatively little about his attempts to find technical solutions to philosophical problems”, Candlish claims that “Bradley’s concern, like Wittgenstein’s, was with the philosophical assumptions underlying technical solutions” (p. x). The picture here is the one I have drawn: a predefined field of philosophical problems is given, which should be dealt with in a purely philosophical way. The use of logic could not dispose us to undertake a proper philosophical treatment of the difficulties—actually, an increase in the use of logical techniques is often a headlong flight, aiming at hiding a lack of philosophical insight; such is, for instance, Candlish’s opinion about Russell’s changing theories of judgment.

On my view, Russell’s great achievement is precisely to have challenged the separation between philosophy and logic. Philosophy is not, for Russell, an autonomous domain, which has its own agenda and its own method. Logic can be used to reframe philosophical problems, so as to make them disappear. Let us take the example of Russell’s analysis of Zeno’s paradox. In *Our Knowledge of External World*, Russell shows that the source of Zeno’s antinomies comes from a reduction of all the various types of orders to the discrete orders, in which every element has a successor. If we let our imagination be enlarged by mathematics, we understand not how to solve the problem—but, more radically, that the problem does not even exist. As the position of an arrow has no successor on the trajectory, the question concerning the nature of the jump from a given position to the next can no longer be asked. Zeno’s paradox is eliminated. For Russell, logic and mathematics are not a tool-box that philosophers can use to make their ideas more precise, once they have elaborated them; logic provides us with a means to reshape our philosophical questions, and to dissolve our philosophical puzzles. And contrary to what Candlish suggests, I think Wittgenstein was, on this point, a follower of Russell. Of course, this is not the place to sustain such a reading.³ But it is the place to point out how surprising Candlish’s use of Wittgenstein is. He frequently uses him as an ally of Bradley—as a “real” philosopher, opposed to Russell’s merely “technical” solutions. This is a very risky interpretation. As the *Tractatus* is far from being a paradigm of clarity, it

³ See G. Landini, *Wittgenstein’s Apprenticeship with Russell* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2007).

would have needed a much more elaborated defence.

Of course, I am not saying here that Bradley was wrong to emphasize the fact that Russell did not solve the problem of the unity of the proposition. The symbolic and logical experiments made by Russell were not always successful, and the problem concerning unity is one he never succeeded in eliminating. The point I raise concerns the way we should look at Russell's philosophy. Russell attempted to dissolve the philosophical puzzles by bringing to light the logical forms of our syntax. His use of logic was then aimed at replacing philosophy, not as making it more technical—and this was, I think, a great philosophical insight, which Bradley did not understand.

Candlish portrays Russell as a great logician and as a great writer, but as a superficial philosopher; he portrays Bradley as a very bad logician, as a not very gifted writer, but as a good philosopher. I could agree with the picture Candlish gives of Bradley. But I strongly disagree with the description he makes of Russell. Here, however, we reach a purely philosophical disagreement—one which is such that no history of philosophy can smooth out.
