THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY'S CENTENARY

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Despite the over 100 years which have passed since its original publication in 1912, Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* remains, and will continue to be, a rewarding and productive subject of scholarly study for a variety of interrelated reasons. First, its enduring status as a popular textbook for introductory philosophy courses makes it a broadly available, and widely accessible, point of entry to both philosophical inquiry in general, as well as to Russell's complex, fascinating and challenging ideas in particular. Second, it marks an important, historical and thematic point of transition within Russell's philosophy. In particular, it marks a shift in emphasis from (though not a "clean break" between) the more technical, mathematical and logical work which characterized Russell's early career, and which culminated in *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13), toward the broader epistemological, metaphysical, and scientific inquiries that characterized Russell's work in the second decade of the twentieth century and beyond.

Finally, the text originates from a brief but exceptionally fertile period within the history of analytic philosophy, during which two of the twentieth century's most original and influential analytic thinkers, Russell and Wittgenstein, collaborated extensively upon a host of important questions, themes and topics (e.g., propositions, sense, reference, logic, truth, and meaning) which would occupy centre stage within the analytic tradition for many decades afterward. While Russell and Wittgenstein's names will be linked inextricably together for posterity, they only ever directly and actively collaborated for any extended period of time during the roughly two years intervening between Wittgenstein's arrival at Cambridge in fall 1911 and his departure for Norway in fall 1913. Russell completed the manuscript of the Problems in late summer 1911, just prior to Wittgenstein's arrival at Cambridge. The proofs were reviewed and revised by Russell in November, following Wittgenstein's arrival, and the book was subsequently published in January 1912. While Wittgenstein therefore had little if any direct influence on the composition of the text, the Problems doubtless had a substantial influence on Wittgenstein's philosophical development, and the views expressed in it formed part of the immediate philosophical context of Wittgenstein and Russell's enormously important and influential philosophical interchanges during this period. This is especially true with regards to the multiple-relation theory of judgment developed and defended by Russell in Chapter XII ("Truth and Falsehood"). Thus, on the basis of the many insights it promises to yield into these formative interchanges alone (but not only on that basis), the *Problems* is destined to occupy a place within the philosophical canon, for many centuries to come. As the editors of *Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Logic* assert succinctly: "... *The Problems of Philosophy* has entered the canon of History of Philosophy that is relevant to current issues" (p. 2).

Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Logic: New Essays on Bertrand Russell's The Problems of Philosophy, offers a critical survey of Russell's key epistemological, logical and metaphysical views, as espoused in this canonical philosophical text. The book consists of a series of eleven papers, authored by a variety of highly competent Russell scholars, including several of the leading contemporary scholars of early analytic philosophy. Each of the papers originated in a centenary conference held to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the *Problems*' publication, at the University of Mississippi, on 29 November–I December 2012. This may partly explain why the papers seem to coordinate, organically, so as to constitute a deep, informative, and highly integrated discussion of Russell's views and of their philosophical significance.

In the first contribution to the volume, "The Place of The Problems of Philosophy in Philosophy", Donovan Wishon and Bernard Linsky (who are also the book's editors) orient the reader by providing important historical, and especially immediate, biographical details concerning the context of Russell's writing of the Problems, and also provide a brief, chapter by chapter content summary, for each of the eleven chapters of the book. Along the way, Wishon and Linsky highlight several relevant thematic connections both amongst the views of the various contributors to the volume, but also between each of the individual contributions and Russell's text itself. For instance, Wishon and Linsky note that several contributors to the volume reject a common misinterpretation according to which Russell shared with Descartes the foundational aim of identifying that brand of knowledge "which enjoys absolute certainty" (p. 9). This rejection, championed by Peter Hylton, Linsky, Ian Proops and Russell Wahl, is deemed novel by Wishon and Linsky, since it runs "contrary to many previous interpretations of *Problems*" (p. 9). Where relevant, finally, thematic connections are drawn between Russell's work in the Problems and epistemological as well as metaphysical debates in recent and contemporary analytic philosophy. For example, Russell's analysis of the relationship between sense-data and physics in Chapter III of the Problems is alleged to anticipate both Jackson's¹ "knowledge argument", as well as more current debates about "the structural character of physical science" (p. 9), due to Van Fraassen,² Lewis,³ and others.

In the second contribution to the volume, entitled "Problems of Philosophy as a Stage in the Evolution of Russell's Views on Knowledge", Peter Hylton evaluates two well-known theses within Russell's epistemology, and more specifically locates Russell's views in the Problems upon them, relative to the broader evolution in his attitudes about them and to the role played by the Problems as a transitional point within that evolution. The first of the two theses is the so-called "principle of acquaintance", which is the idea that every proposition we can understand must be composed exclusively of constituents with which we are acquainted. The second thesis is the related notion that we are never directly acquainted, in this sense, with physical objects. According to Hylton, Russell's maintenance of these two theses leads him to grapple with two interrelated questions in the Problems, specifically, what reasons "do we have to believe that there are physical objects?" (p. 32). And second, "how can we form judgments about physical objects, and thus at least hope to know truths about them?" (*ibid*.).

Picking up where Hylton left off with regards to the second thesis, in the third contribution to the volume, entitled "Certainty, Error, and Acquaintance in The Problems of Philosophy", Ian Proops sets out to critically evaluate a particular view, due to Peter Geach,⁴ concerning Russell's motivations for coming "to deny that we are acquainted with material objects" (p. 47). Geach's account, which "tends to be the default interpretation among readers of Russell ... who would not necessarily describe themselves as Russell specialists" (ibid.), is that Russell was motivated by epistemologically foundationalist, Cartesian considerations. Specifically, Russell is characterized as arguing that, since one cannot doubt the existence of sense-data, but can doubt the existence of material objects, a person can only be directly acquainted with the former but not the latter. Though Geach's interpretation is "encouraged" (p. 48) by remarks which suggest that Russell "takes our beliefs about sensedata to be indubitable" (*ibid.*), it might nonetheless seem to be belied by other remarks, which indicate that Russell was instead a fallibilist concerning all beliefs, including those about sense-data: "It is of course possible that all or any of our beliefs may be mistaken, and therefore all ought to be held with at least some slight element of doubt" (ibid.; PP2, p. 25). In light of this apparent

- ³ LEWIS, "Ramseyan Humility" (2009).
- ⁴ GEACH, Mental Acts (1957).

¹ JACKSON, "Epiphenomenal Qualia" (1982).

² VAN FRAASSEN, "Structure: Its Shadow and Substance" (2006) and "Structuralism(s) about Science: Some Common Problems" (2007).

conflict, Proops sets out to address the question of how we are "to reconcile these two apparently opposed sets of claims" (*ibid.*).

Continuing in this vein, in the fourth contribution to the volume, entitled "Acquaintance and Certainty in The Problems of Philosophy", Bernard Linsky identifies some alleged limitations of Proops' approach to this question, specifically related to the following principle called the "Full Disclosure" principle, which Proops sees Russell as committed to: "Full Disclosure: Whenever a subject, S, is acquainted (in Russell's technical sense of that term) with an object, x, S is acquainted with every part of x" (p. 70)⁵ While Proops maintains that this principle is adopted by Russell "in order to avoid the situation in which objects of acquaintance happen ... to be involved in genuinely informative, true, identities" (ibid.), Linsky instead insists, that Proops' reading presupposes an interpretation of "aspects", or "perspectives", as "parts" of perceptual objects, which "is not in keeping with Russell's thinking about complex objects in his 'logical atomist' philosophy" (p. 71). Careful study of this illuminating debate between Proops and Linsky about Russell promises to shed light on, among other things, the question of why Wittgenstein, in his Tractatus, characterized simple names as standing for simple, that is indecomposable, or "part-less", objects. Indeed, Linsky himself notes (pp. 71-2) thematic associations between this debate and Wittgenstein's later critique of logical atomism in Philosophical Investigations §60.

Following up on the first of Hylton's questions, concerning the existence of matter, in the fifth contribution to the volume, entitled "Sense-Data and the Inference to Material Objects", Russell Wahl explicates the transition in Russell's philosophy from the "inferential" account of our knowledge of matter provided in the Problems to the "constructivist" account which Russell adhered to by 1914. In particular, Wahl sets out to "dispel the illusion" (p. 99) that Russell's preference for constructions of, over inferences to, matter was based in application of the "principle of acquaintance" as described by Hylton above. In other words, "coupled with the concept of knowledge by description" (p. 99) we can readily formulate judgments about things, such as physical objects, with which we are not directly acquainted. This is quite possible even on the earlier view according to which physical objects are inferred from sense-data, as opposed to constructed out of them. What instead motivated the transition, then, was Russell's preference for "horizontal inferences" (p. 98), in which the entities inferred are on an ontological par "to those whose existence is given" (p. 99). Such inferences contrast with "vertical inferences" such as that to the Kantian "thing in itself", in which we move from something given to something "wholly remote" (ibid.).

⁵ See PROOPS, "Russell on Substitutivity and the Abandonment of Propositions" (2011).

Building on this line of inquiry, in the sixth contribution to the volume, entitled "Seeing, Imagining, Believing", Rosalind Carey hones in on an important factor in the transition, identified but not fully explicated by Wahl (pp. 114-15), concerning "the problem of whether incompatible sense data can occur in the same place in space" (p. 115). In the Problems, Russell had criticized the naïve belief that the colour and shape of, e.g. a table, are where they appear to be. In order to account for the fact that different colours, for example, can appear to be at the same place depending upon the observer's point of view, Russell proposed to distinguish between sense-data and physical objects, construing the later as causing the former, via "perceptual causal chains (object, light, retina, brain, etc.,) unique to each observer" (ibid.). In that case, however, seemingly incompatible sense-data can be explained in virtue of their "having a distinct causal history with nothing in common but the object, which has no color" (*ibid*.). Since the object has no colour, obviously it cannot have two incompatible colors in the very same place. (Again, these considerations may shed light on Wittgenstein's claim that "objects are colourless" at TLP⁶ 2.023, and also upon on his concern with the so-called "colour exclusion problem" as described in TLP 6.3751.)

Later, however, and under the influence of Whitehead's critique of the *Problems*, Russell comes to recognize a "mistake in the above reasoning" (p. 115), according to Carey. The mistake in particular is to assume that "there can be something more real than objects of sense" (*ibid*.). Once the mistake is recognized, it is easy to see why colours cannot share the same place, without our having to assume "a place in a super real space from which they are excluded" (p. 116). On Russell's new view, by contrast, incompatible colours do not share the same place because "in moving around the table and observing it … 'no place remains the same as it was'" (*ibid*.). Finally, in undertaking the transition from an "inferentialist" to a "constructivist" approach to matter, Russell is "moving in two directions" (p. 126), one of which would eventually lead to *The Analysis of Matter* (1927), and the other which would lead to *The Analysis of the* external world" (*ibid*.), is also leading him "towards a deeper analysis of the internal, mental world" (*ibid*.).

A distinct but related transition in Russell's thinking is then discussed in the seventh contribution to the volume, by Michael Kremer and entitled "Russell on Acquaintance, Analysis, and Knowledge of Persons". The transition in question concerns Russell's key epistemological notion of "acquaintance", which starts out, in *The Principles of Mathematics*, as a "broad and intuitive" (p. 130) conception including other persons as possible objects of acquaintance. However, by the time of writing the *Problems*, "[t]he range

^o WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

of possible objects of acquaintance had become much narrower, encompassing sense-data, remembered sensibilia, universals, one's own mind, and (perhaps) the self" (p. 131). Russell's revised, specialized and technical usage of acquaintance thus came to "depart widely from that ordinary usage in which one can be said to be acquainted with Smith or the Emperor of China" (ibid.). Kremer notes that this vision of acquaintance generates certain counterintuitive consequences with regards to our knowledge of, and attitudes toward, other persons. Specifically, it might seem to imply, as Russell explicitly states in his unpublished 1905 manuscript "On Fundamentals",⁷ that "there can be no such thing as affection for persons other than ourselves" (p. 134). Kremer finds this consequence puzzling, and spends the remainder of the paper attempting to defuse it through the development of an alternative account of persons as "organic unities" (p. 138). Such "organic unities" more specifically embody the "narrative unities" in terms of which human lives, as well as "the actions and events that make them up" (p. 143), may come to seem intelligible.

The eighth contribution to the volume, entitled "Problems as Prolegomena: Russell's Analytic Phenomenology", affords an intriguing departure from the integrated, primarily epistemological line of inquiry which has been guiding the last several papers. In it, Robert Barnard sets out to demonstrate that Russell's work in 1912–13, in both Theory of Knowledge and the Problems, may "be profitably understood as a form of analytic phenomenology" (p. 154). Barnard begins by attempting to motivate his characterization of Russell as a phenomenologist, by developing an illuminating comparison between Russell's phenomenological description of a table near the outset of the Problems and a strikingly similar phenomenological description undertaken by Husserl in a passage from his Ideas. Barnard then moves on to identify three criteria of a "minimal phenomenology" (p. 156), and to show that Russell's work during the period of 1912-13 satisfies them. The first of the three criteria is the "suspension requirement", according to which there "must be a methodological suspension of presuppositions", of the sort which characterizes Husserl's distinction between "descriptive psychology and phenomenology". The second of the three criteria is the "description requirement", according to which "the project must be primarily descriptive" and "must seek to account for conscious experience as experienced in all its ... varieties" (ibid.). Third and finally is the "intentionality requirement", according to which "consciousness must be structured by intentionality". In other words, consciousness must be understood both as involving various distinguishable intentional states, such as "judging" and "imagining", as well as being "directed toward" (ibid.) certain targets through these intentional states.

⁷ Now published in *Papers* 4: **15**.

Above I noted the editor's characterization of *Problems* as "part of the canon of history of philosophy that is relevant to current issues." This characterization is perhaps best illustrated by the ninth contribution to the volume, which deals with the distinctively metaphysical topic of "The Importance of Russell's Regress Argument for Universals". In it, Katarina Perovic critically evaluates the prospects of various contemporary attempts to repudiate universals, in light of Russell's regress argument in favour of universals, as formulated in Chapter IX of the *Problems*. Among the various challengers are included "paradigm resemblance nominalists" who avoid

... postulating universal properties such as *whiteness* and *triangularity* and relations such as *north of* and *two feet apart* by analyzing them away in terms of resemblance of particulars (or *pairs* of particulars) to a given paradigm particular (or *pair* of particulars). (P. 177)

Also up for consideration are "trope theorists", who "tend to agree with nominalists in their rejection of universals, but unlike them ... take properties and relations to be ontologically real" (p. 176). Perovic considers attempts on the part of these and other sorts of theorists to respond to Russell's regress argument, and finds them wanting. This, she goes on to suggest, would tend to refute "the perception that Russell's regress argument is no longer relevant in contemporary ontological discussions" (p. 187).

After a series of papers dealing with an integrated, epistemological line of inquiry, we saw that both the eighth and ninth contributions to the volume departed from this line, first into phenomenology, and then into metaphysics. The tenth contribution, due to Kevin Klement, then specifically takes on logic as a theme within Russell's broader philosophy in general and the Problems in particular. Entitled "The Constituents of the Propositions of Logic", the paper courageously takes on the daunting philosophical question "What is Logic?" (p. 189). While the primary focus is to explicate Russell's attempts to answer that question in the Problems, Klement also aims to situate the position Russell developed in that text within the broader evolution of his views regarding logical propositions over the course of his philosophical career. In that context, an emphasis is placed on Russell's self-described "gradual retreat from Pythogaras" (MPD, p. 154), a retreat which eventually culminated, in the 1930s, in Russell's drawing the conclusion "that there is nothing at all in objective reality corresponding to logical particles" (p. 225). In this respect, Klement's contribution is not unlike that of Hylton's, Wahl's, and Kremer's, in attempting to elucidate some fundamental transition at work in Russell's philosophy, as evidenced by the Problems in its environs.

However, what is unique about Klement's contribution in this regard, is its locating Russell within the broader meta-philosophical, and meta-logical

debates which are especially distinctive of analytic philosophy during the first half of the twentieth century. Aside from Klement's highly sophisticated recounting and analysis of Russell's evolving views regarding the constituents and nature of logical propositions, perhaps the chief merit of his paper is its ability to convey the genuine and enduring philosophical disquietude provoked both by these seminal debates and by Russell's mature, reflective views upon them. As Klement explains:

I tell my students that logic studies relationships between the truth-values of propositions that hold in virtue of their form. But even this characterization leaves me uneasy. I do not really know what a "form" is, and even worse perhaps, I do not really know what these "propositions" are that have these forms. If propositions are considered merely as sentences or linguistic assertions, the definition does not seem like much of an improvement over the psychological definitions [which fail to capture logic's objective nature].⁸ Language is a human invention, but logic is more than that, or so it seems. (P. 189)

While, as Klement shows, Russell's later position on these issues was doubtless influenced by Wittgenstein's ideas, there can be no doubt that Russell's foundational reflections on the nature of logic in the *Problems* provided an initial stimulus to Wittgenstein, as well as to several other early twentiethcentury analytic thinkers (e.g., the logical positivists), to probe these deep, significant, and far-reaching philosophical issues.

The final contribution to the volume, due to Gregory Landini, then hones in on Russell's multiple-relation theory of judgment, along with the role it played in the "epistemology of mathematical logic" (p. 231), which "emerges in Russell's wonderful little introductory book, The Problems of Philosophy" (ibid.). In the paper, entitled "Types* and Russellian Facts", Landini attempts to counter the widely held perception that Russell's 1913 Theory of Knowledge manuscript amounts to a failed epistemological project. Landini focuses on "the problem of defining what it is for a fact to be permutative" (p. 233) in an effort to show that difficulties associated with Russell's multiple-relation theory "are not insurmountable" (ibid.). Specifically, he endeavours to show how type* distinctions, such as that between permutative and non-permutative complexes, are deployed by Russell in order to resolve the so-called "narrow direction problem", which "is the problem of determining what makes a given judgment-fact point to a specific sort of would-be fact when different such facts can exist consisting of the very same constituents in a different order" (p. 250). In other words, what makes the truth-conditions of the judgment that "the book is on the table" differ from the truth-conditions of the

⁸ The portion in brackets is my addition.

judgment that "the table is on the book"? According to Landini, the "narrow direction problem ... is adequately resolved by the position relations" (p. 158), as specified within the "position in a complex" analysis offered by Russell in Part II of Chapter v of *Theory of Knowledge*.

As Landini acknowledges, this reading is at odds with the widely held view that Russell abandoned Theory of Knowledge in response to objections of Wittgenstein's to the multiple-relation theory, which centre around the "direction problems". In addition to the narrow form of the direction problem as outlined above, Wittgenstein is also often thought to have identified a "wide" form of the direction problem, which concerns the possibility of excluding nonsensical combinations of judgment constituents in which, for example, the dyadic relation corresponding to a verb is replaced by a substantive standing for an object. Wittgenstein has both versions of the direction problem in mind when, in his "Notes on Logic", he insists that Russell's multiple-relation theory fails to exclude the possibility of nonsense judgments. Wittgenstein's example of nonsense, "this table penholders the book",⁹ is supposed to result from two substitutions performed upon the initial, perfectly intelligible sentence, "the book is on the table", one corresponding to each version of the direction problem.¹⁰ This suggests that Wittgenstein thought the two problems have a common origin, and a crucial June 1913 letter tells us what that origin was. Specifically, it was the "position in a complex analysis", with which Russell is alleged by Landini to have resolved the narrow version of the direction problem.

According to Landini, the difference between the judgment that "a loves b" and the judgment that "b loves a", is manifest in its being the case that each points to two different facts. This can be seen in the following two distinct "position in a complex" analyses of the truth-conditions of these two distinct judgments (cf. p. 253):

(1)
$$a \text{ loves } b \to E!(\iota f) (a C_1^{\text{loveso}} f \& b C_2^{\text{loveso}} f)$$

(2) $b \text{ loves } a \to E!(\iota f) (b C_1^{\text{loveso}} f \& a C_2^{\text{loveso}} f)$

(I) gives the truth-conditions of the judgment that "*a* loves *b*", and in essence says that if *a* does love *b*, then there exists a complex fact containing two distinct positions (CI and C2), which the individuals *a* and *b* may each occupy in the complex, relative to the relating relation "loves", and that *a* occupies the first of these positions while *b* occupies the second. (2) gives the truth-

⁹ WITTGENSTEIN, Notebooks 1914–1916, p. 103.

¹⁰ That is, it is supposed to result from first reversing the positions of "book" and "table", and then in turn replacing the prepositional verb "being on", with the substantive "penholder".

conditions of the judgment that "b loves a" and essentially says the same thing except that in this case b occupies the first position and a the second. Following Russell (TK, p. 146), Landini's analysis abstracts from concerns (of the sort characteristic of the "wide" form of the direction problem) about assigning the position of the relating relation "loves" within the form of the complex.

For our purposes, the important thing to note, however, is the "p only if q" structure of this "position in a complex analysis" (i.e., the antecedent is only true in case the consequent is true). In particular, this "p only if q" structure generates a "significance constraint"¹¹ upon the truth-conditions the analysis is meant to capture. And it is precisely this significance constraint which Witt-genstein refers to when he states his objection to Russell's theory "exactly" in the following excerpt from the June 1913 letter alluded to above:

I can now express my objection to your theory of judgment exactly: I believe it is obvious that, from the prop[osition] "A judges that (say) a is in the Rel[ation] R to b", if correctly analysed, the prop[osition] " $aRb.V. \sim aRb$ " must follow directly without the use of any other premiss. This condition is not fulfilled by your theory.¹²

In other words, if the judgment that "*a* loves *b*" has truth-conditions, that is, if "*a* loves *b*.V. ~*a* loves *b*" is true, then, on Russell's theory, that is contingent upon the truth of an additional assumption or premiss, specifically the significance constraint embodied in Russell's "position in a complex analysis" as summarized by Landini. Wittgenstein's point is that, if "*a* loves *b*", for example, is well-formed, then "*a* loves *b*.V. ~*a* loves *b*" (or indeed any tautology) *follows from it directly*, regardless of any such significance constraint. Russell's analysis thus violates certain basic intuitions about logical inference, and this problem applies equally to both the narrow and the wide versions of the direction problem.¹³

While we disagree on the viability of Russell's multiple-relation theory, I am happy to concede that Landini's treatment of it is of enormous sophistication and interest. Indeed, as is the case with each of the various contributions to the volume, there is substantial insight to be gained, for both novice and experienced scholars, with relevance not only to Russell's philosophy in particular but also to the broader philosophical environment and context of his thought. This is especially and explicitly true with regards to *The Problems of Philosophy* itself, but also and implicitly with regards to the seminal philosophical influence Russell had upon Wittgenstein (among others). Indeed, as

¹¹ Cf. GRIFFIN, "Russell's Multiple Relation Theory of Judgment" (1985).

¹² WITTGENSTEIN, Cambridge Letters (1995), p. 29; Wittgenstein in Cambridge (2008), p. 40.

¹³ For further explanation of this reading of Wittgenstein's objection, see CONNELLY, Wittgenstein and Early Analytic Semantics (2015), esp. Ch. 2, §§2.10–2.13.

someone whose point of entry into the study of Russell was the study of Wittgenstein, I have often felt that when, in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein alludes to the "philosophical problems" that his therapeutic methodology is intended to be applied to solve (or rather dissolve), his notion of what that term denotes and encompasses is heavily influenced, if not more or less circumscribed, by Russell's vision thereof as espoused in the *Problems*. This is not especially surprising, given that Wittgenstein's initial, and principal, formal philosophical training came directly under the supervision of Russell, during and immediately following his publication of the seminal *Problems*. For this and many other reasons, and as mentioned, Russell's *Problems* remains and will continue to be a popular and fruitful subject of philosophical study. I am happy to enthusiastically recommend *Acquaintance*, *Knowledge, and Logic* as an especially deep, integrated, and reputable scholarly companion to that endeavour.

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