

INTERPRETING RUSSELL'S PARALYSIS

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In 1913 Russell reportedly told Wittgenstein that he was “paralyzed” by Wittgenstein’s objection to the multiple relation theory of judgment at the heart of the book he was writing. Russell abandoned the manuscript, which was only published after his death. However, no clear record of the objection, fully stated, has survived. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there are a lot of competing interpretations of Russell’s paralysis. Given the amount of coverage it has received, a book-length study of the issue is maybe not a hard thing to produce. A good book-length study which does justice to all of these competing theories through a careful analysis of them while also carving out space for a new contribution to that field is far harder to achieve. James Connelly has achieved that here.

The multiple relation theory of judgment (MRTJ) was intended to eliminate Russell’s ontology of propositions by replacing them with judgment complexes. Ontologically speaking, judgments are not self-subsisting entities but formations out of constituents that are the true members of Russell’s ontology. The proposition that Desdemona loves Cassio does not exist as a unified complex, but Desdemona, Cassio and the relation expressed by the verb “loves” do. Othello’s belief unites these entities through an act of judgment. Wittgenstein’s objection is commonly thought to be directed at demonstrating that judgment (at least as construed by Russell) is not a suitable relation for securing something that meets the demands we have of propositional content. The starting place for the competing interpretations is the ingenious account offered by Stephen Sommerville and Nicholas Griffin. What made their interpretation such an improvement on earlier proposals is that they were the first to really take seriously Russell’s dramatic response. Previous interpretations had provided compelling accounts of how Wittgenstein’s objection fitted into

his wider philosophical project in the *Tractatus*, but gave no explanation for why Russell should be particularly troubled by it. Sommerville–Griffin argued that the objection exposes a fundamental incompatibility between the MRTJ and the ramified type theory of *Principia Mathematica*. Given that the MRTJ was intended to play a key role in the same work, this interpretation gives a very good explanation for the impact of the objection on Russell if he was persuaded by it.

Connelly recognizes the influence of the Sommerville–Griffin interpretation, labelling it “SR” (standard reading) and situating subsequent interpretations in comparison to it, including his own. The alternative accounts include my own, as well as those of Peter Hanks, Christopher Pincock, Gregory Landini, Samuel Lebens and Fraser MacBride, and other interpretations are often considered alongside these main targets of the book. An inevitable criticism one might be tempted raise at this point is that several other interpretations are excluded, at least from detailed scrutiny, although it is hard to see how any book on this topic could avoid that without becoming intolerably long.

Connelly’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s objection divides it into three “waves”: (1) a general complaint that the *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript was mistakenly prioritizing epistemology over logic in trying to solve foundational questions; (2) the specific attack on the structure of judgments in the MRTJ; (3) the appeal to logical forms in the theory. Really, (1) is something of a scene-setting device. As an objection it would be flimsy, as it just amounts to an opinion of Wittgenstein’s, not any sort of argument. But what makes it significant, Connelly suggests, is that Russell shared the same view, hence the force of the concern in his mind. While I agree with Connelly up to a point here, and he certainly provides evidence for the claim, I don’t think this issue can really point to an explanation of Russell’s paralysis. For one thing, the terms “logic” and “theory of knowledge” are being used in quite an antiquated sense by Russell and Wittgenstein: much of the time, what they are really focused on are questions about semantics and, in particular, the semantics of propositional attitude reports. Russell’s semantics in general became increasingly shifted towards psychology from 1910 onwards. So it is not obvious why Wittgenstein’s complaint that epistemology is just “philosophy of psychology” (*Tractatus* 4.1121) would bother Russell enough to explain his paralysis. Moreover, there is no specific objection to the MRTJ as an account of propositional attitudes present in the complaint.

It is when we get to (2) and (3) that things become more focused on the MRTJ. On Connelly’s “Logical Interpretation” (LI), the key element of (2) is Wittgenstein’s complaint that a tautology ought to follow from any proposition without the need for an additional premiss. This complaint was identified by SR but understood there as posing a problem for Russell because the theory of types demanded a further premiss that would confirm that the propositions

standing in the entailment relation were composed of constituents of the right logical type to form a propositional complex. According to SR, providing that premiss would be circular because the MRTJ is supposed to provide foundations for type theory in *Principia*; hence it cannot presuppose those distinctions in this way. Connelly rejects SR's claim that a clash between the MRTJ and type theory explains Russell's paralysis, however. On his view, the sorts of distinction in "type" required to secure propositional complexes are not distinctions in *logical* type but another kind of distinction applying to Russell's ontology that is independent of the real theory of types. The view that Russell recognized distinctions in "types" of entity that are not those introduced by the official type theory has been urged by a number of Russell scholars, most notably Pincock and Landini. Landini refers to these distinctions as "type*" distinctions, a term which Connelly adopts. If these are the distinctions needed, then SR cannot be correct, according to Connelly.

One might well wonder, at this point, why these type* distinctions cannot answer Wittgenstein's objection, and hence wonder why Russell would be paralyzed. If the constituents of judgments come loaded with types*, and these have no connection with types, then why don't these secure the propositional form needed for the relata of the entailment relation without any dubious or question-begging further premiss? This is where the third wave that Connelly's interpretation recognizes comes into play. Although type* distinctions can be recognized between entities, these distinctions collapse according to Connelly's interpretation once these entities are embedded under propositional attitude relations because they no longer occur as what Russell calls a *relating relation* in that context. Accordingly, Russell has to introduce a distinct mechanism to emulate type* distinctions for embedded relations. This mechanism was to be supplied by the logical forms that Wittgenstein objected to. And, furthermore, the reason for his objection to them should now be clear: introducing forms to emulate type* distinctions is an obvious case of trying to secure logical entailments by appealing to an additional premiss.

Connelly's interpretation is sophisticated, supported by textual evidence that is painstakingly researched, and makes a very welcome addition to the literature. He is to be especially commended on the charitable and generous approach he takes to previous interpretations. Something positive is taken from every one of the theories that he rejects, the result being that his own reading retains the insights of each even while rejecting something from them all. Reading this book reminds one that, despite the many disagreements over the interpretation of Russell's philosophy, making sense of it is something of a communal effort that every competing interpretation contributes to.

As my own interpretation of Wittgenstein's objection is one of those criticized by Connelly, I will take this opportunity to respond. In fact, my reading is closer to Connelly's than he recognizes, I think. On my reading, Witt-

genstein's criticisms forced Russell into a corner in a fairly simple way. On my interpretation of Russell, he had gone to great lengths to construct the theory of logical types as a theory of symbolism rather than something imposing on his ontology. But only an ontological theory of types could secure the unity of judgments. Unlike Connelly I am unconvinced that Russell would appeal to type* distinctions to secure the unity of complexes. I will not go into detail on this here,¹ but I think that tracing this idea back to the account of concepts in *The Principles of Mathematics* (which is where most defenders of this approach locate the origin of the doctrine) shows that Russell was never comfortable appealing to something like type* distinctions to secure the unity of propositions, and there is no good evidence that he changed his mind by the time of the MRTJ. But this difference of opinion between us is irrelevant anyway, because Connelly endorses my claim that the doctrine would not help for the specific case of relations occurring as subordinate terms embedded under a judgment relation. On this, then, there is no major disagreement between us.

There are two points, however, where Connelly finds fault with my interpretation. Firstly, he rejects my critique of SR. On my view SR mistakenly overstates the role of Russell's epistemology in explaining his paralysis. SR sees a circularity arising because the theory of types is needed to bolster the MRTJ, yet the MRTJ is itself supposed to explain how type distinctions arise in *Principia*. This, I have argued extensively, misreads the formal system of *Principia*. That system is a ramified type theory consisting of two distinct hierarchies: the hierarchy of types, and the hierarchy of orders. Only the latter is justified by the MRTJ through the production of a hierarchy of orders of *truth*. The former is justified by an argument totally independent of the MRTJ. Thus, there is no circularity in appealing to types in bolstering the MRTJ. Connelly objects that Russell explicitly appeals to the vicious circle principle as the source of both hierarchies; thus my account rests on a sharper distinction between them than Russell himself drew. I agree that Russell did not recognize the logical independence of types and orders in ramified type theory as clearly as we do now. Indeed, Ramsey seems to have been the first to disentangle the two. But that doesn't detract from the role that these two hierarchies play in *Principia*. It is surely evident that the way in which the hierarchy of truth features in the explanation of the ramified theory of types is to explain orders (in particular, restrictions on quantification), and this is the only sense in which the theory of types relies on the MRTJ in that work. So there is no threat of circularity in Russell recognizing a distinction in type between love and Desdemona, nor any reason to think that Russell would see such a threat. But this was what SR claims paralyzed Russell. Hence SR cannot be correct.

¹ See my "Re-examining Russell's Paralysis" (2003) and *The Russellian Origins of Analytic Philosophy* (2005).

Connelly's second objection to my approach is more concerned with my positive interpretation than my objection to SR. The problem for my interpretation is that, while it is "correct as far as it goes", it "does little to explain the wording of Wittgenstein's exactly expressed objection in the mid-June letter and to that extent misses crucial elements of the significance of this objection with respect to Wittgenstein's philosophical development" (p. 90). In other words, it seems that Connelly finds my account of what Wittgenstein had in mind when he made his objection less convincing than my account of why it paralyzed Russell. I think this is a fair point. Russell, I have always argued, was paralyzed by consequences for his philosophy that Wittgenstein was not aiming at. My account has focused more on Russell's paralysis than the place of the objection in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Quite what Wittgenstein had in mind, and where exactly it fits into his enigmatic project in the *Tractatus*, I have always felt less comfortable speculating about. Connelly's approach, by contrast, is almost as focused on the development of Wittgenstein's thought as it is on Russell's paralysis. The last third of Connelly's book is aimed at situating the objection within the context of Wittgenstein's philosophical development and making sense of it as a precursor to core themes that Connelly sees in the *Tractatus*. This is a commendable feature as it will make the book as relevant to Wittgenstein scholars as it is to Russell scholars.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature on this fascinating event in the history of analytical philosophy. It has the twin merits of offering a new interpretation while also engaging with the positions that have gone before in impressive detail. As a nearly exhaustive summary of the competing interpretations of Russell's paralysis, and the competing interpretations of his philosophy that generate them, it will be welcomed by all students and scholars of Russell's work. It should also establish Connelly's account as a serious new contender among those competing interpretations.

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