**Russell’s 1919 “Neutral Monist” Conversion?**

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Bertrand Russell’s so-called “conversion” to neutral monism occurred in 1919, between his *Lectures on Logical Atomism* and the paper “On Propositions.” Clearly for a time Russell had been interested in neutral monism as a theory of nature (in his external world program for example) and was struggling with it as a sort of competing theory to logical atomism. Problems with his theory of belief finally pushed him over the edge but in a strange, incomplete way.

This issue is important because neutral monism and logical atomism offer fundamentally different theories of reality and this is evident from the Logical Atomism lectures themselves. In the first lecture, Russell lays down the idea that the world somehow corresponds in its ontological features to the vocabulary of logic. The apparatus of names, variables, predicates, relations and quantifiers all find their correlates in real world objects, relations and properties, and propositions are correlated with facts of various sorts, either truly or falsely. Our understanding of the world, he says at the opening, *cannot* be limited to our mere experience of momentary particulars, like events and their relations, but must also be structured in cognitively significant propositions *about* them, correlated to real world facts about which these propositions can be true or false. Science consists in the ability to frame and order the true propositions and hence logic is the true system of science.

However, when Russell reaches his final lecture he presents a competing view whereby the world consists of momentary particulars (events) possessed of, or perhaps manifesting, certain real qualities and arranged by causal laws (functions) into classes and series in a four-dimensional continuum of “perspectives” as he had been exploring in his external world program. But in a world like that there is no such thing as linguistic meaning or representation, there are only real, causal (functional) links between individual events.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are no such things as propositions, let alone a proposition’s being able to picture or represent a fact in some intrinsic, logical way. The division of the world into linguistic facts is, on this view, arbitrary and language dependent and the structure of facts over the events and real relations making up the world is superficial and does not reflect the way the world is put together. The facts have no dynamic role to play and in a sense need not really exist at all (they can’t be pointed out or named concretely like physical events and causal relations, for example). For this view, which eventually became Russell’s considered view, the sum total of true propositions is just as unsatisfactory a description of the real world as the mere collection of particulars and causal relations was for the linguistic view. The contrast between these views is stark.

These are the stakes in Russell’s conversion to naturalistic neutral monism. I became interested in Russell’s change of view in hopes of understanding how he adjudicated this deep conflict and to seek reasons that could motivate such a change of view. Instead, I found “a tangle of interconnected alleys” (in Max Born’s phrase) and ultimately a sudden change of view without a clear set of intermediary steps.

My puzzlement concerns the essay “On Propositions” (1919) which Russell considered the turning point and which has a statement within to that effect (quoted in full below) But it is *not* the turning point because Russell was still committed to the idea of image (and word) propositions, albeit as concatenations of mental representations or *images* of things, relations, etc. Knowledge for him was still fundamentally belief *in* and knowledge *via* a mental proposition as the proposition relates the contents of the belief to the mind external facts or states of affairs that make the proposition true or false of “the facts.” This is still his logical atomist theory dressed up as psychology. True, the *Analysis of Matter* seems purged completely of the linguistic view of thought and knowledge once and for all but with no explanation why or how he got there. It seems like a quantum leap. In “On Propositions” and the *Analysis of Mind* the transition from the language-centric view of thought and knowledge to the naturalist neutral monist theory is certainly not made yet. So we may consider Russell a neutral monist in later works but it is an unsatisfying result since we don’t really have a set of arguments why the change was made beyond Russell’s “sense for reality” or ongoing retreat from “Pythagoreanism” (for which see Landini 2011). By contrast, we can see why he converted to a “quasi neutral monism” in 1919, in order to solve the problems related to his theory of belief (as Robert Tully has pointed out).

Here is the best I can do to reconstruct those reasons in a Russellian way (hopefully):

1. Russell says that he came to reject the idea of a relation of acquaintance, conveying a special certainty for example on those objects present to the mind and distinguishing for example sense data, like patches of color, from other sorts of physical events with which we are not directly acquainted. Russell realized that if minds and physical objects were simply different functional orderings of the same neutral events, as Mach and James held, there would be no further distinction and mental events could be said to give direct experience of events in the physical world (at least those events that occur in the physical brain, events which are experienced as sensations under their psychological ordering). Russell had already accepted aspects of this view in 1914 and had said that James and Mach had performed a “service to philosophy” in showing that “what is experienced may be part of the physical world and often is so.” (*Theory of Knowledge*, 1914, pp. 31, 22). However, for a time, he still held that certain particulars, called sense data, had a special relational occurrence to a mind that distinguished them from the same sensational content when considered as “part of physics,” and from unsensed sensibilia, i.e., physical events that never come into relations with an observer’s mind and which make up the event particulars in spatiotemporal perspectives of his external world program. He was halfway there already, but he still held onto the stubborn doctrine of acquaintance, he says, because he thought it could express the special role of words like “now” and “this” in referring directly to what a person experiences, as when I say “I see ‘e’ now” which seems to have no translation into third-person words, like “Erik experienced the event ‘e’ at 5pm.” The disappearance of the subject however would put those neutral events on equal terms, merely entered into different functional connections in the one case and the other, but the event ‘e’ can be the same in both expressions.
2. Russell’s ill-fated *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript of 1914 was based on the idea that belief was a relation between a believer and a “complex,” which had appeared in earlier work such as the *Problems of Philosophy* (1912). A belief is certainly a fact, if only the fact that the person believes it, which should be described as having a logical form. Russell’s was not a propositional theory because the complex the person believes in does not actually *assert* the state of affairs it maps or represents, as a proposition would. The complex is a static map of how the believer is related to the constituents of the belief, in order to show what it means for him to believe certain things which may or may not be the case, as in the case of Othello’s belief in Desdemona’s love for Cassio. This means Russell can (apparently) pull off the trick of asserting a relational proposition, Othello believes in Desdemona’s-loving-Cassio, without thereby entailing the proposition that *Desdemona loves Cassio*, or even that Cassio exists or Desdemona exists. And Russell does not need to adopt Frege’s device of reference in that-clauses to the customary sense of the proposition and the concepts that compose it. Russell thought he had dispensed with platonic Fregean senses earlier in “On Denoting.” The constituents of the complex are real things is some sort of arrangement revealed by the map.

Others here know a great deal more than I do about the multiple relation theory of belief so I will just paint in broad strokes. Russell came to think the theory failed because the verb “loves” in the complex lacked assertoric force and so could not represent the actual content of a person’s beliefs after all. For on Russell’s analysis of “Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio,” Othello stands in the relation of believing the complex of Desdemona, Cassio and the relation of loving, mapped out as it were timelessly. The relation is treated as just another individual “brick” (Russell, 1912) on a level with the slots filled in the relation of belief by the two names. The problem is that when the relation is treated as an individual, timelessly as it were, its structure, dLc versus cLd, is not evident, as GF Stout pointed out and which came to be known as the infamous “narrow direction” problem. In addition, when treated as an individual, or substantive like this, it is not doing the actual work of *relating* Desdemona to Cassio in the complex, as it would if it were being asserted in a proposition about those people, as Wittgenstein pointed out.

Landini (2007, 2011) writes that for Russell relations and predicates had both an individual and a predicative nature at this period and that this is the logical root of the problem pointed out by Wittgenstein. One cannot switch back and forth between these two without adding additional premises for how we are to understand these terms, as Wittgenstein aptly perceived. The problem gets even worse, for, when Othello believes that *Desdemona loves Cassio*, he is not contemplating the complex of things consisting of Desdemona, Cassio and the static relation of loving treated as an individual. Nor is Othello obsessed with some *other* relation of “believed loving” relativized to the context of his belief. He surely isn’t merely asserting the contents of his belief alone. Why would he be upset about that? To put it in the form of a dilemma:

1. the complex believed in *cannot* be a proposition because it will not behave truth functionally in entailments and will not retain the same truth value when coextensive substitutions are made for its terms, but, on the other hand,

2. The complex *must* be an asserted proposition because the content of a belief is that the situation believed in *actually obtains*.

Russell speaks about this “puzzle of belief” in the logical atomism lectures and says Wittgenstein had convinced him there was a “new beast” in the logical zoo, namely a complex in which the verb “believes” and the verb “loves” are both asserted with full force.

But this is *not* what Wittgenstein ended up doing in the *Tractatus* (although others may correct me on this?) There Wittgenstein says the proper logical form of A believes that p is to replace the proposition p completely with the construction: ‘p’ says that p. Here, the constituents of the sentence or mental data or complex of symbols ‘p’ *express* the proposition p, but don’t actually assert it. But then the proposition p doesn’t occur in the belief in an assertoric way either, and this isn’t the “beast” Russell thought Wittgenstein was preparing. This also doesn’t seem to be a very good account of belief because Othello does believe that *Desdemona loves Cassio* directly, assertorically, and without intermediary propositions or Fregean senses. As we shall see below, neutral monism did offer Russell a way out of this quandary.

1. Russell’s move in “On Propositions” and in the 1921 *Analysis of Mind* was to adopt a “psychologized” or psychologically realistic version of Frege’s platonic theory whereby, instead, the proposition believed is not made up of abstract concepts, but psychological mental images. These images however do have a kind of intrinsic intentionality and so the collection of images is still about something, an imagined state of affairs which would make it true, and in the case of knowledge, about a mind external state of affairs that does make it true. (Frege of course had objected that mental images could not make up real propositions, or everyone would have a different proposition in his mind based on his own peculiar images, but this objection seems not to have deterred Russell, the alternative being an intolerable Platonism. Perhaps behaviorism, which Russell talks about a lot in “On Propositions” comes to the rescue and it doesn’t matter if the imagery is different so long as the behavior makes disagreement impossible to detect?)

Now Russell plays the neutral monism card. Here is the money quote from “On Propositions”:

The theory of belief which I formerly advocated, namely that it consisted of a multiple relation of the subject to the objects constituting the “objective,” i.e., the fact that makes the belief true or false, is rendered impossible by the rejection of the subject. The constituents of the belief cannot, when the subject is rejected, be the same as the constituents of the “objective.” This has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages are those resulting from the gulf between the content and the objective, which seems to make it doubtful in what sense we can be said to “know” the objective. The advantages are those derived from the rehabilitation of the content, making it possible to admit propositions as actual complex occurrences, and doing away with the difficulty of answering the question: what do we believe when we believe falsely? (p27)

By giving up the subject, Othello, the larger embedding relation of belief (B(x,y,z)) vanishes and with it the “cement” holding the constituents together in the complex Desdemona’s-love-for-Cassio disappears. With that, the multiple relations theory is also destroyed at one stroke. The complex believed now becomes a collection of mental images. These are both real events (brain events) and are real psychological facts, and these images can also represent mind external facts or states of affairs. We can still speak of a subject as long as this is understood as a construction entirely reduced to the complex of events we call mental because of their peculiar psychological variations.

Russell then points out that according to neutral monism mental data are actually not exclusively mental but *neutral* because they have no special dependence on an apprehending subject. They are therefore also functionally connected with physical facts and are, in that sense, already part of the physical world. At the same time they are, of course, functionally related by psychological laws of association, memory and other psychical variations more closely related to the physiology of the brain which makes them part of the mental world. What neutral monism adds is that these options are *not* mutually exclusive. In neutral monism, the same images can be regarded as part of an image proposition or an imagined state of affairs, *and* they can be considered as physical events related to mind external physical events in a causal or behavioral way, as they will when the proposition is true and there is a real world state of affairs corresponding to it. Russell says the strange mental behavior of the images in the “image proposition” and their apparent “violation of physical laws” and their representation of non-existent states of affairs, is due to their being mental data under that one set of variations. However, when they succeed in referring to a mind external fact, they partake of physical variations, behavior and causal relations that connect them to the physical world. In the second case, the proposition can be taken to have full assertoric force and a truth value, as required. In that second case, there is no reason to think the proposition is about the believer’s mental states at all; it is about the mind external objects it seems to be about on its face. In the first case, however, the proposition is *not* asserted of mind external things and *is* simply about its own internal mental variations and the non-existent states of affairs imagined there.

Thus, the image proposition has a foot in both worlds and the two sets of variations are the explanation for how the proposition can have all of its strange mental features while still serving as a vehicle for direct mind-independent knowledge at the same time. The believed image proposition is simultaneously *two* different propositions depending on which variations one chooses to emphasize. So runs the neutral monist solution to the “puzzle of belief.” Hence, it is actually neutral monism that got Russell through the belief problem which destroyed the *Theory of Knowledge*, and this should probably be seen as the main reason for the 1919 conversion, as Robert Tully also claimed and I did as well in my 2014 book.

1. But this is not the end of the story. The problem is that the “image proposition,” or *any* proposition representing either mental situations or external states of affairs, is not actually consistent with neutral monism. Not in the pure version of Mach and James, anyway, and not in Russell’s later versions of the doctrine either in the *Analysis of Matter*. This is because neutral monism has *no use for propositions* as the vehicle for representative knowledge (it uses a causal theory) and none for *linguistically delineated facts* as the correlative of propositions (it proposes only particulars in causal laws and perspectives built up out of them). This is the basic conflict of metaphysical views I mentioned at the outset of my paper. Because Russell was still using the vehicle of propositions and representational relations in 1919, I see his neutral monism as an incomplete conversion at best, involving a rather opportunistic use of neutral monism to fix the immediate problems with his theory of knowledge and belief. Russell later freed himself completely of the representative linguistic view of reality and propositional knowledge but this must have come later in his development of his external world program, perhaps in the *Analysis of Matter* when he turned his attention more fully to physics, finally perhaps in *Human Knowledge*.
2. What is “real” neutral monism? One of the features of it that Russell apparently failed to embrace in 1919-1921 is one of its most important, i.e., that neutral events and complexes of them have *no intrinsic intentionality*. This point was made most forcibly by James in his original attack on Brentano, an 1894 address later published as “The Tigers in India” (see James 1977, Banks 2014 Chapter Three) where he suggested replacing representative theories with actual and potential causal links. In his famous Memorial Hall example, from the first of his radical empiricist essays, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” in 1904, James argued that it was no intrinsic feature of the mental image of Memorial Hall that makes it “about” the real Memorial Hall at Harvard, but the ability to carry out real practical and causal relations between the image and the hall itself. Mach made a similar point criticizing the term “sense illusion” often used about sensations and mental images. There are no such illusions because mental images represent nothing, truly or falsely, in themselves and are not propositional judgments. They exhibit mental variations peculiar to psychology (perhaps ultimately grounded upon brain physiology). But these mental variations are not really propositional an sich, because taken as a complex of mental events they do not intrinsically refer beyond themselves to any further states of affairs. Scrooge’s belief that he is talking to Marley’s ghost is not a propositional but false belief that he is talking to Marley, it is rather as Scrooge himself says, a causal relation to an undigested piece of potato and the mental accompaniments of that process. It has no propositional content.

Second, even when sensations and mental images are treated as full members of the physical universe by considering their physical variations, they do not form propositions that link to other events or complexes of events by means of the representative relations of truth or falsity. In logic, by contrast, a proposition can be true of a fact without a worldly connection of any sort; considerations of time, space and causality play no role whatever. In neutral monism, the link between the complexes of sensations and images and other events in the physical world must be a causal relation or supervene on a causal relation because only these are real. Error, incidentally, is also a real phenomenon and supervenes on the same causal links that knowledge does, as Mach pointed out in his famous 1905 book entitled *Knowledge and Error* (*Erkenntnis und Irrtum*) only this time to establish non-agreement rather than agreement between mental images and physical happenings. James showed this too in pointing out that “mental fire won’t burn real sticks” claiming that this (and only this) is what makes an experience of a mental fire an error rather than knowledge of a real fire. The Mach-James theory of knowledge *and* error thus does not require the belief in the non-existent state of affairs or anything like that, while recognizing that error is just as real as knowledge.

The world of neutral monism is not one of propositions and facts at all but of causally related “perspectives.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Russell’s own theory of perspectives is a very great example of that, beginning with his external world program. An “object” or a “state of affairs” is really a series of systematically linked perspectives of the object or the situation. The Star Sirius (to give Russell’s favorite example) is simply a collection of its manifested perspectival effects. Joining all of them gives you the object’s history in four dimensional spacetime and this is all there is to the physical object, including its historical traces and records left behind after the star burns out. Some of these perspectives are the sensations and mental images of observers and some are just natural events occurring out there in spacetime but all are the same sort of neutral events linked up in different ways we like to call mental or physical but really do not differ in themselves. I know many will harp on the apparent dualism of “mental” variations versus “physical” variations but it might be wiser to think of these divisions as provisional until a merger of psychology and physics which makes them all “natural” variations under the same roof. Russell refers to this possibility several times, including a footnote in “On Propositions.”

(This is by the way, but, as I have written in my 2014, chapter 3, I think perspectival “judgments” are what we really mean and assert when we say we think or that we judge such and such to be the case. Instead of saying that we frame true and false propositions or beliefs I would say instead that we suborder a particular perspective, made up of our own non-representative mental images or what have you, into a broader spatiotemporal system of perspectives that includes those of others and the physical world perspectives made up of its natural events. I think this kind of view could, and should, eventually supplant the idea that our “only real understanding of the world consists of propositions and facts,” the view of logical atomism. Unlike the tools we use to analyze our talk about the world in a second-order way, the system of perspectives (and its group structure) really *is* the world in all its actual dynamical composition and it would be interesting to make the theory of judgment reflect that more accurately. In my 2014 chapter three I analyzed intentionality a la James as a phenomenon of temporal perspective: beliefs that seem to “reach out” to external facts do so retrospectively. If a belief is tied to an external situation then, in the past, it exhibited the feature of “reaching out” to that fact through causal links all along, but if it was an hallucination then (despite what the believer may have thought then) it never had that phenomenology of “reaching out,” it was simply a collection of blobs and squiggles referring to nothing beyond itself.)

Russell eventually took the decisive step from a linguistic philosophy like logical atomism to a neutral monist naturalism. But this was not done in 1919 and not in the 1921 Analysis of Mind. Eventually perhaps in works like the Analysis of Matter he appears to have embraced such a view at least for the physical, and in Human Knowledge, he seems to have moved fully toward an inductive naturalized epistemology, which still wasn’t the real Mach-James view in my opinion. I think the clear break with his Logical Atomism, and with Wittgenstein’s language-centric work, could have been expressed more sharply. It is an issue that demands stark choices even for us today and we want reasons and arguments, instead of a steady “evolution” or “drift” away from one view and toward another. Russell never really justified the change in this way and the 1919 conversion was not really a conversion to neutral monism because Russell was still using propositions as the vehicle of knowledge and using it to fix up his theory of belief.

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1. How is generality (the idea of natural law for example) expressed in a world like that? This is a problem for neutral monism which the propositional view handles easily. I think the difficulty can be met by observing that elements and functions are like the positive phenomena around which we might delineate universals as the negative space, as in the “face in the vase” illusion. This view is not part of classic neutral monism however and needs much more development. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (In fact, something Russell doesn’t not say but which makes his position even stronger, systems of perspectives exhibit the mathematical group structure that makes them a firm foundation for our physical understanding of nature. I think this is the ultimate retort to the view that the world cannot be understood as a “collection of particulars” as stated by Russell in the beginning of the logical atomism lectures. It isn’t a “collection” or a bundle after all; not if the world is a perspectival system of causal laws with a group structure.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)