

Russell, Wittgenstein, and the Project for “Analytic Philosophy”

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The last three decades have seen the publication of a number of books (see, for example, Clark 1975, McGuinness 1988, Monk 1996) that have broadened our knowledge of the relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein in 1911-12. Unfortunately, the documents that these books present remain under-investigated. In this paper it will become clear that this is also the case as regards the history of the introduction of what was later called “analytic philosophy”. Despite the fact that Russell and Wittgenstein were in full agreement in their antipathy towards the old-style philosophy, for example, that of Bergson, each had his own conception of the New Philosophy. For Russell, it meant “examined philosophy”, or philosophy advanced through “scientific restraint and balance”, and resulted in a series of logically correctly constructed theories. For Wittgenstein, it resulted in syncopated, short logico-philosophical “discoveries”. In the years to come, the two conceptions of “rigorous philosophy” embraced by Russell and Wittgenstein often came in conflict.

1. Russell Meets Bergson

The claim of this paper is that the New Philosophy, later called “analytic” (in 1912-13 Russell often called it “scientific”), was formed during the first months of Russell’s acquaintance with Wittgenstein: October 1911-May 1912. In these months, Russell also met Henri Bergson, with whom he was engaged in a critical discussion. Russell’s attitude to Bergson was rather negative. Be this as it may, his discussion with Bergson nevertheless shaped in him the idea for a New Philosophy that is radically different from the conventional, Bergson-style philosophy.

To Russell, the main problem with the Old Philosophy, and with Bergson in particular, is that it

does not depend upon argument, and cannot be upset by argument. His imaginative picture of the world, regarded as poetic effort, is in the main not capable of either proof or disproof. Shakespeare says life’s but a walking shadow, Shelly says it is like a dome of many-colored glass, Bergson says it is a shell which bursts into parts that are again shells. If you like Bergson’s image better, it is just as legitimate. (Russell 1912, p. 336)

In other words, the insufficiency of the Old Philosophy is connected with the fact that its results are not apodictic. You can agree with the philosopher - if you are sympathetic to his style of thinking - but you can also disagree with him.

2. Rigorous Philosophy

In contrast to Bergson’s philosophy, the New Philosophy produces “solid results” (Russell 1913, p. 38) - results that do not disintegrate when subjected to the “test of reason”. In this connection it is interesting to notice that Wittgenstein himself criticized Russell’s paper “Free Man’s Worship” (1901) in that there is not “something solid” behind it.

(# 387¹) Apparently, this paper was still not a part of the New Philosophy - not for Wittgenstein, at least.

This characteristic of the New Philosophy explains the penchant of the future “analytic philosophers” for taxonomies: for preparing lists of grammatical categories, or of other ontological “nomenclatures”, which were often presented as philosophical products.² If nothing else, such practices yield solid results that cannot be disproved. Russell, incidentally, arrived at the idea that “the study of grammar ... is capable of throwing far more light on philosophical questions than is commonly supposed by philosophers” (Russell 1903, p. 42) long before he met either Bergson or Wittgenstein: he already espoused it in *The Principles of Mathematics*.

On the face of these facts, it appears that the most appropriate name for the New Philosophy would be “rigorous philosophy”. Ironically, this term was first used by Husserl in the title of his book *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* (1910/11). It is ironic since “analytic philosophy” was for decades considered to be opposite to phenomenology.³

Besides having solid results, the main characteristic of the rigorous philosophy is that it discusses the *fundamentals*. In a letter to Lucy Donnelly of 28 October 1911, Russell wrote: “Bergson’s philosophy, though it shows constructive imagination, seems to me wholly devoid of argument and quite gratuitous; he never thinks about fundamentals, but just invents pretty fairy-tales” (Russell 1912, p. 318). In contrast, the New Philosophy is theoretical philosophy; it does not produce essays.

3. The New Philosophy as Examined Philosophy

We can arrive at a rigorous philosophy that studies the fundamentals in two ways: (i) Russell’s way, using the “harmonizing mediation of reason”; (ii) Wittgenstein’s way, by “unearthing” “solid thoughts”. We shall underline right now that these two approaches to studying fundamentals also conditioned the different types of “analytic” philosophy Russell and Wittgenstein practiced: a difference that resulted in an open conflict between them in the years when they were together in Cambridge again, i.e. 1944-1947.

Russell believed that the New Philosophy achieves solid results by, above all, being an “examined philosophy” - philosophy examined by reason. He provided its best description in his paper “Mysticism and Logic”: the New Philosophy is a philosophy which uses “the harmonizing mediation of reason, which tests our beliefs by their mutual compatibility, and examines, in doubtful cases, the possible sources of error on the one side and on the other” (Russell 1918, p. 17). This is a philosophy of “scientific restraint and balance”. (ibid., p. 20) Its products are tested

¹ Here and later in the text such three digit numbers, put in brackets, signal the number of a letter from Russell to lady Ottoline Morrell, as indexed by the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

² This characteristic of “analytic philosophy” was best described, as regards Austrian analytic philosophy, by Kevin Mulligan: “Description of a domain must have priority over every type of explanation that refers to how a phenomenon comes into being” (Mulligan 1986, p. 87).

³ In Milkov 2004 we have already shown that this was not the case.

by reason. Conversely, the Old Philosophy produces theories and ideas that are not examined this way. (In this sense, Russell also complained of Bergson's "dogmatic, pontifical style" [# 360]). As a result, they are consistent only to sympathetic minds. Seen from another, unsympathetic perspective, they quickly disintegrate.

Following this method, Russell adopted the practice of constructing philosophical theories: a practice developed to the full in Carnap's *Aufbau*. This kind of New Philosophy suggests ever new hypotheses (or models), the only objective of which is to better present (or order) the facts available. It does not claim to discover truths. A typical example of this approach is provided in Russell's *Theory of Knowledge* (1913), where he set up a new system of epistemology with the help of the apparatus of the New Logic, starting from a single epistemological premise - acquaintance.

4. The New Philosophy as Consisting of Discoveries

Russell claimed that this mediation of reason by establishing philosophical theories could be best achieved by the power of argument. He, however, was not such an ardent supporter of argument that he failed to notice that the New Philosophy could also be pursued in other ways. As the following quotation from Russell's letters shows, he also tolerated lack of arguments, for example, by his student Wittgenstein:

I told him he ought not simply to *state* what he thinks true, but to give arguments for it, but he said arguments spoil its beauty, and that he would feel as if he was dirtying a flower with muddy hands. ... I told him I hadn't the heart to say anything against that, and that he had better acquire a slave to state the arguments. (Monk 1996, p. 264)

Wittgenstein developed his version of New Philosophy following an approach that was rightly considered by some historians "Kantian": it fuses philosophy with logic. Thus strengthened, it produces rigorous thoughts that do not disintegrate under critical analysis. This variant of New Philosophy treats the fundamentals even more consistently than Russell's does. In this sense Wittgenstein sought to give "another and more fundamental account of the fundamentals of *Principia* itself" (McGuinness 1988, p. 104).

In this way, Wittgenstein produced above all some discoveries in the area of philosophical logic. A very good collection of such discoveries is presented in Wittgenstein's "Notes on Logic". Here is an example: "Frege said 'propositions are names'; Russell said 'propositions correspond to complexes'. Both are false; and especially false is the statements 'propositions are names of complexes'" (Wittgenstein ²1979, p. 97). Three years later, in 1916, Wittgenstein found that this method could help him to produce solid philosophical results in ethics as well: "The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*" (p. 83). In fact, Wittgenstein's logical-philosophical method could be applied not only to logic and ethics but also to any other philosophical discipline.

Elsewhere, we have called this method of working of Wittgenstein's the "sculpture method". This was a method of systematic parting away all the raw material from the "ultimate" philosophical truths (cf. Milkov 1997, i, pp. 355 f.). From a different perspective, this method was that of

step-by-step "sculpturing" - or monolithic building - of all those "ultimate" philosophical truths which Wittgenstein himself believed he had access to. This approach accepts that every happy philosophical discovery is ultimate, so that it settles the problem under scrutiny once and for all; we do not need to return to it again. It produces crystals, the purest of which was the *Tractatus* itself.

Wittgenstein himself described his idiosyncratic method also using other metaphors. Sometimes he felt that his task "was something to be discharged, not by patient and cumulative removal of partial problems but by some great insight achieved as a result of effort" (McGuinness 1988, p. 172). Intriguingly enough, this method of working was not completely foreign to Russell, that adept in arguments and systems, either. On March 22, 1912, he wrote to Lady Morrell: "[Wittgenstein's] attitude justifies all I have hoped about my work ... he has even the same similes as I have - a wall, parting him from the truth, which he must pull down somehow. After our last discussion, he said: 'Well, there's a bit of wall pulled down'" (Clark 1975, p. 172).

In general, however, it should be said that Wittgenstein's talent for philosophy, when compared with that of Russell, was of a rather different kind. In short, Wittgenstein was simply not good at systematic reasoning. In this sense Russell reported that "when there are no clear arguments but only inconclusive considerations to be balanced, or unsatisfactory points of view to be set against each other, he [Wittgenstein] is not good" (23.4.13⁴). This means that Wittgenstein was no good at constructing series of logically impeccable philosophical theories, which was, however, Russell's forte. On the other hand, when Russell was confronted with "philosophical walls" which were to be destroyed, he felt that even when he "put out *all* [his] force" he was "only just equal" to Wittgenstein (17.3.12).

Wittgenstein did his kind of philosophy using the method of concentration - he needed to concentrate in order to make his ultimate philosophical discoveries: "Prolonged concentration was his usual method" (McGuinness 1988, p. 154). Indeed, "[t]his was work for Wittgenstein - the effort of concentration on problems that he saw plastically before him. [...] His notebooks were the distillate of long periods of concentration" (p. 181).

5. Wittgenstein's Theoretical Aestheticism

The practice of discovering philosophical truths, of removing "philosophical walls" that shadow the truth in a fit of deep concentration, led Wittgenstein to aspire "to be creative", an attitude well documented in Carnap's "Autobiography":

When [Wittgenstein] started to formulate his view on some specific philosophical problem, we often felt the internal struggle that occurred in him at that very moment, a struggle by which he tried to penetrate from darkness to light under an intense and painful strain, which was even visible on his most expressive face. When finally, sometimes after prolonged arduous effort, his answer came forth, his statement stood before us like a newly created piece of art or a divine revelation. (Carnap 1963, pp. 25-6)

Carnap, of course, was unfair to Wittgenstein when he compared him to "a religious prophet or seer". Wittgen-

⁴ Here and later in the text, such tripartite digit numbers indicate the date of a letter of Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell.

stein's objective was not to invent religious truths but philosophical ones. His truths were rigorous and threw light on the fundamentals. In this sense he was a New Philosopher. Wittgenstein's singularity consisted in the fact that he was "the [passionate] artist in intellect", a characteristic which, as Russell emphasized, "is so very rare" (27.5.12).

This type of philosophy was creative, very difficult to do and exhaustive in the extreme. Russell, in particular, often reported to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "Wittgenstein is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, not far removed from suicide, feeling himself a miserable creature, full of sin" (31.10.12). "He strains his mind to the utmost constantly, at things which are discouraging by their difficulty, and nervous fatigue tells on him sooner or later" (5.11.12).

This practice of philosophy made Wittgenstein's relationship with Russell in 1912-13 rather dramatic. "Both men agreed that 'logic was hell!'" (McGuinness 1988, p. 154). Furthermore, the belief that only honest philosophy reaches the fundamentals, while the Old Philosophy is phony, or "bourgeois",⁵ was of central importance for both philosophers. This was indeed what connected Wittgenstein's logic with ethics, a tendency that led him to Tolstoy in the first days of the First World War.⁶

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⁵ Wittgenstein meant this designation literally. To be sure, it was planned that he should lecture at the Working Men's College, London. (McGuinness 1988, p. 170)

⁶ See on these developments Milkov 2003.