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WHITEHEAD AND RUSSELL: ODD COUPLE?

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Christoph Kann and Dennis Sölch, eds. *Whitehead und Russell: Perspektiven, Konvergenzen, Dissonanzen* (Whitehead Studies, Vol. 8), Freiburg am Breisgau: Karl Alber, 2023. Pp. 332. ISBN: 978-3-495-49026-6 (pb); 978-3-495-99583-9 (ebook), €74,00.

This collection of ten chapters, published in 2023, is based on the fourth annual meeting of the German Whitehead Society¹ held in January 2015 in Düsseldorf. The Society itself was set up in 2010 (unfortunately, there is no “German Bertrand Russell Society”). The anthology *Whitehead und Russell* (the anthology’s editors make two thirds of the board of the Society) is the eighth of ten volumes already published in the Whitehead Studies series of Karl Alber Verlag—a publishing house of repute in Germanophone philosophy.

As declared in the introduction, the anthology’s objective is not to deliver a new inventory or new evaluation of the two philosophers and logicians. The fields in which Whitehead and Russell worked are too complex and too broad for this purpose. Instead, the book discusses selected themes, mainly of their theoretical philosophy (p. 22). Moreover, it does not follow chronological but systematic priorities—its objective is the “systematic reconstruction of the scientifically oriented metaphysics” of the two philosophers and logicians (p. 23).

It is not difficult to notice, however, that the anthology is Whitehead oriented. Suffice it to say that in the list of abbreviations (p. 7ff.) twenty works of Whitehead are cited and not a single one of Russell. My general impression is that many of the authors of the volume have difficulty orienting themselves in

¹ <https://whitehead-gesellschaft.de>.

Russell's philosophy. They are often biased in favour of Whitehead at the expense of Russell. For example, one of the editors of the book, Christoph Kann, states in the introduction: the fact that "in the biggest part of their reception history Whitehead remained in the shadow of his longstanding friend and colleague [Russell, can be simply explained by . . .] the enormous commercial success, in particular, of Russell's works in popular philosophy" (p. 9). Furthermore, for Dr. Kann, "Russell, with his penchant for stylistic niceties and popularization, did not prove himself to be an epitome [*Inbegriff*] of analytic philosophy—but rather as an occasionally unusual representative of this movement" (p. 11). In particular, Dr. Kann claims that Russell's "constructive analysis" (apparently, he means here Russell's use of the concept of "logical constructions") is not without alternatives in analytic philosophy. For example, there is also a "connective analysis" accurately described by Peter Strawson (p. 13). Of course there are alternatives to Russell's constructive analysis. However, Russell adhered to it only for a short period of time. Moreover, today, Strawson's connective analysis is anything but mainstream analytic philosophy. Finally, Russell's constructive analysis is not reductionist, as Dr. Kann maintains, but eliminativist.²

It is also difficult to understand why the author of the introduction sees George Stout as a Hegelian, along with John McTaggart, and so speaks of "Hegelians in Cambridge" at the *fin de siècle* (p. 15). In fact, there was only one Hegelian in Cambridge at that point in time and this was McTaggart. Stout was more of an "analytic psychologist" of Brentanoesque style. Next, Dr. Kann maintains that "Russell and Whitehead's orientation to English idealism went *gradually* down and was replaced by Russell's turn to the philosophy of common sense" (p. 17; my italics). As a matter of fact, Russell had great problems with Hegel's philosophy already when he read his *Science of Logic* for the first time in March 1897. Moreover, he radically—not gradually—broke with Hegelianism in April 1898.³ In the following years Russell did not orient himself to the English idealists at all—despite the fact that he often discussed the arguments of F. H. Bradley. Besides, Russell never adopted the philosophy of common sense. His friend G. E. Moore did this, but only after 1925. Furthermore, the author maintains that among the particulars in Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* (1903) are points of space and time and sense-data (p. 20). We all know, however, that Russell introduced the concept of sense-data in his writings only nine years later, in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912).

Even more critical of Russell is the chapter by Manuel Bremer: "Did Whitehead and Russell Share a Philosophy of Mathematics? *Principia Mathematica* as a Dead-end and as a Bridge". According to the author:

² BEANEY, "The Analytic Revolution" (2016), p. 245.

³ MILKOV, *Hermann Lotze's Influence on Twentieth Century Philosophy* (2023), p. 114ff.

The deeper one gets into [Russell's philosophy and logic], so split is one between recognizing Russell's tenacity [*Hartnäckigkeit*] to pursue difficult questions, and astonishment at the lack of ability to judge [*fehlende Urteilskraft*] which presents bizarre assumptions as fundamental, so that what was obvious a short time ago is soon afterwards denounced as absurd. (P. 320)

I could scarcely read words more deprecating of Russell as a philosopher.

Dr. Bremer sees the *Principia* program as leading to a dead end. Its logicism did not succeed—above all, it failed in the theory of types (p. 324). But why does it enjoy its good name? The author maintains that *Principia* per se did not play an important role for the mathematicians. Its reputation among them is due, first of all, to the “idiosyncrasy” of its axioms, compared with those of Peano, Pieri and Hilbert. Secondly, it is based on the “working mathematician” policy, followed, above all, by Whitehead. This saved *Principia*'s reputation (p. 325)—despite the fact that Frege's *Basic Laws of Arithmetic* were not really disproved by Russell's discovery of the paradoxes and that *Principia* “is not the foundation of (formal) mathematics” (p. 319). Quite the opposite—Russell and Whitehead's book is full of confusions and the question is why it was thus influential.

According to Dr. Bremer, *Principia* has a good name, above all, among philosophers. This is the case, firstly, since it serves as a bridge to the “good” books on logic of Church, Carnap, and Hilbert and Ackermann. Secondly, it (merely) “propagandistically and pedagogically [*propagandistisch/pädagogisch*]” surpasses Frege's *Basic Laws of Arithmetic* (p. 326). Besides, *Principia* made popular a new notation that was easier to follow than that of Frege.

Dr. Bremer criticizes the received view that Russell worked on the philosophical part of *Principia* while Whitehead carried out the technical part. In fact, Russell and Whitehead were both engaged with the philosophical and technical work. However, the received view is not entirely false. The point is that Whitehead's own contributions in the book were poorly developed and rather unclear. According to Dr. Bremer, this is the case since, in the process of their work, Russell bombarded Whitehead with his new discoveries while the latter readily rejoiced [*bejubelt*] in them, hardly keeping pace, at that, with the speed in which they were produced. Ironically, something similar happened “at that time” (p. 323) in Russell's collaboration with Wittgenstein—he hardly kept pace with Wittgenstein's ever new “illuminations”. The latter statement is clearly mistaken, at least, because Russell didn't work together with them “at the same time” but in different periods—with Whitehead from 1901 till 1910, and with Wittgenstein in 1912 and 1913.

In his chapter, “Dragon Logic: On the Construction of Matter by Whitehead and Russell”, Reiner Zimmermann underlines the importance of creativity in Whitehead's ontology. According to Zimmermann, the ontology of Whitehead's *Process and Reality* was an alternative to the “ontology of functions” adopted in *Principia*. Whitehead moved to it after the “break down” [*Scheitern*] of the

attempt to derive the geometry from the calculus in *Principia* (p. 270). To be more specific, Whitehead criticized the conception of the received view that the contents of experience are static elements like objects. As a replacement, he maintained that we perceive portions of becoming.⁴ Instead of ontology of objects, he now embraced a dynamic picture of events that are mutually connected. They build in this way a systematic uniform structure. In contrast, the relation between objects is not uniform (p. 275).

From this position Whitehead criticized Einstein's two theories of relativity. Since Einstein kept the static picture, he could not "save the phenomena", to reveal "the real meaning of the geometrical or [*bzw.*] temporal concepts" (p. 275). In particular, Einstein's theories of relativity violated the uniformity of the Universe—they adopted false abstractions. I would like to note here that Whitehead's metaphysical criticism of Einstein ran parallel to the criticism of the theory of relativity by many German philosophers of the time, in particular, from the camp of the neo-Kantians and the phenomenologists. In other words, on this point, Whitehead shook hands with continental philosophers.

Dr. Zimmermann also asks the question, what is the link between *Principia* and the later Whitehead? Apparently, it is the linear algebra that was also the basis of Whitehead's *A Treatise on Universal Algebra* (1898). Whitehead oriented himself on the works of William Hamilton, George Boole and Hermann Grassmann (p. 268ff.), not so much on Frege and Cantor. Based on them, he interpreted the points of nature as complexes. To be more explicit, Whitehead replaced them with the set of lines that go through them (p. 278). Dr. Zimmermann further maintains that Whitehead's program for logical construction of the observable world, of space, time and matter out of observable events, is rather topical today. In particular, it is related to the cosmology of Roger Penrose and Max Tegmark (n. 26). Furthermore, the author agrees with the judgment of some contemporary philosophers of science that "the causal hierarchy is based on metaphysical ultimate reality. Metaphysics precedes TOE [theory of everything]" (p. 280). This claim fully agrees with Whitehead's continental philosophy of nature.

My impression is that the only author in the anthology who demonstrates good knowledge of Russell's writings is Sébastien Gandon. In his chapter, "Russell and Whitehead's Logicism",⁵ Dr. Gandon argues, similarly to Dr. Bremer, against the assumption that Russell wrote the first, more philosophical parts of the book (till *56) while the rest of the book was mainly composed by Whitehead. However, his argument rests on different reasons. Dr. Gandon's claim is

⁴ Russell correctly noticed that Whitehead's books in philosophy of physics published around 1920 "employ the methods of realists in defence of a more or less Bergsonian metaphysic" (1924; 83 in *Papers* 9: 451). To remind the reader, Bergson was for Russell an epitome of a continental philosopher.

⁵ This chapter was previously published in English as "Russell and the Neo-Logicians" (2017).

that “you can find philosophy everywhere in *Principia*” (p. 288). In particular, the so-called “Whiteheadian parts” of *Principia* discuss the inner organization of mathematical knowledge; and these discussions clearly pertain to philosophy of mathematics (p. 289).

Further, Dr. Gandon states that, in contrast to Frege, Russell and Whitehead were not defenders of the arithmetization of mathematics. It is true that in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* Russell maintained that mathematics, including geometry, can be defined in terms of arithmetic. However, he made this remark only for pedagogical reasons, radically simplifying the matter (p. 300). To be sure, in *Principia*, arithmetic, theory of real numbers and geometry are not ordered in a hierarchy. In support of this claim, Dr. Gandon refers to an unpublished letter of Whitehead to Russell of 14 September 1909 in which he wrote: “*The modern arithmetisation [sic!] of mathematics is an entire mistake*” (p. 299). As a matter of fact, in *Principia* the two philosophers and logicians did not support the arithmetization of mathematics. On the contrary, they maintained that mathematics is not homogeneous. It consists of at least three disciplines: arithmetic, theory of real numbers and geometry. The real philosophical problem is to connect them together. This is an architectonic problem—how is mathematics to be organized? (p. 310). Indeed, there is no consensus in the mathematical community as to how to answer such questions. Mathematicians coming from different traditions often talk past each other on the subject. Significantly, Russell agreed that one cannot prove which architectonic is best. The pursuit of proof in this region leads either to scepticism or dogmatism. He simply believed that “facts and arguments on various sides of the architectonic dispute can be cautiously apprehended and *rationaly weighed to reach a fair and considered judgment*” (p. 312; my italics). This is really a philosophical task.

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In a review paper “Russell’s Studies in Germany Today”, published almost twenty years ago,⁶ I reminded the reader that in the first third of the twentieth century, German philosophers were leading in creatively assimilating Bertrand Russell’s philosophy. In 1929, Hans Reichenbach’s friend Kurt Grelling published the well-informed paper “Realism and Logic: an Investigation of Russell’s Metaphysics” in the *Monist* and in 1936 “The Logical Paradoxes” in *Mind*. At the same time, Grelling translated four books by Russell into German. Rudolf Carnap provides another example of the creative reception of Russell’s philosophy in Germany during this period. Today the situation is different. It is true that for decades now serious efforts have been made to revive analytic

⁶ In the *Bertrand Russell Society Quarterly* (2005).

philosophy in the country. Unfortunately, Russell is not among the authors who are seriously studied.

Apparently, in the last two decades the situation did not change for the better. As I have shown above, many of the authors of the book under review are not well informed on Russell's philosophy. Significantly, I see the interest of some German philosophers in Whitehead today as an expression of the endeavour to find a leading Anglophone philosopher of the twentieth century who is close to the German philosophical tradition—as it is often understood today, though.⁷ In particular, Whitehead's discussion of "becoming", which is close to Hegel's "*Werden*", and his direct interest in the line of thought of Spinoza and Schelling (p. 267) elicit sympathy in many German scholars with continental leanings. At the same time, Whitehead worked for years together with, arguably, the founding father of analytic philosophy, Russell. They are both famous for their joint authorship of *Principia Mathematica*. Russell also readily acknowledged Whitehead's influence on him, in particular, for "inventing a method of constructing points, instants, and particles as sets of events".⁸ Thus, for some philosophers in Germany today, Whitehead appears as a reliable bridge between analytic and continental philosophy. I do not believe that it is the case, though. However, I shall set out my reasons for it elsewhere.

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⁷ For an alternative understanding of the German philosophical tradition, see MILKOV, *Early Analytic Philosophy and the German Philosophical Tradition* (2020) and *Hermann Lotze's Influence* (2023).

⁸ RUSSELL, *MPD*, p. 103.