RUSSELL AS A PRECURSOR OF QUINE [[1]](#footnote-1)\*

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AT THE END OF HIS CONTRIBUTION to a panel on Bertrand Russell’s philosophy at the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia in 1966, W.V. Quine draws attention to Russell’s “increasing naturalism”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unsurprisingly given Quine’s belief that “it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described”,[[3]](#footnote-3) he applauds Russell’s move to neutral monism and the subsequent “drift” in his thinking towards a more comprehensive naturalism. He only regrets that Russell’s “neutral particulars are on the side of sense data” and his later epistemology falls short of “the physicalistic pole, even in *Human Knowledge*”. On his interpretation, “Russell had stated the basis for [the naturalistic] attitude already in 1914 [in *Our Knowledge of the External World*, one of Russell’s earliest forays into epistemology]”.[[4]](#footnote-4) He observes that in *Our Knowledge* Russell says: “There is not any superfine brand of knowledge, obtainable by the philosopher, which can give us a standpoint from which to criticize the whole of knowledge of daily life. The most that can be done is to examine and purify our common knowledge by an internal scrutiny, assuming the canons by which it has been obtained”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Quine’s account of Russell’s developing philosophical views is not uncontroversial. It is questionable whether Russell advanced a “frankly phenomenalistic form” of “logical atomism” and developed his more naturalistic version of neutral monism by “warping” his atomism.[[6]](#footnote-6) And questionable too whether he came to favour the naturalism Quine attributes to him only in 1928 and whether his philosophy became increasingly naturalistic in the years that followed. Naturalism makes an appearance in the 1914 lecture Quine refers to, and Russell’s epistemology of the 1940s is not significantly more naturalistic than his epistemology of the 1920s. Quine is surely right, however, about the naturalistic cast of Russell’s thinking. Early and late, Russell rejected the possibility of justifying our knowledge of the external world without assuming anything whatsoever about the world itself and never attempted to seek out “superfine ... knowledge”.[[7]](#footnote-7) However much Russell changed his views between the early 1910s and the late 1950s, he took the methods of epistemology to be the methods of science and everyday life. He shunned the idea of a first philosophy and demonstrated, as Quine notes, “a readiness to see philosophy as natural science trained on itself and permitted free use of scientific findings”.

In what follows I take up Quine’s hint and defend his conception of Russell as a naturalistic epistemologist. I argue that Russell approaches the problem of our knowledge of the external world in much the same way as Quine approaches the problem and the difference between them regarding the relationship of our knowledge to the evidence on which it is based, though important, is one between philosophers in the same naturalist camp. Nobody needs reminding that Russell does not agree with Quine on everything – that, for instance, he has a different view of the nature of necessity and the *a priori* and thinks of analysis as getting at hidden meanings rather than as a clarificatory enterprise. My contention is that Russell advances his epistemological speculations in as scientific a spirit as Quine, occasional appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. He intends his discussion of our knowledge of the external world to be understood as a contribution to science and is far better viewed as a precursor of Quine than as the traditionally-minded philosopher he is usually taken to be – and Quine correspondingly better viewed as a follower of Russell than as a lapsed logical positivist. I start by noting some important similarities between Russell's thinking and Quine’s.

IT NEEDS NOTICING RIGHT AWAY that Russell is as antipathetic as Quine to the dream of a foundation for scientific and commonsense knowledge firmer than and prior to science and commonsense. He does not discuss our knowledge from a standpoint beyond what we know but scrutinises it given what we know. It is, he thinks, no part of the philosopher’s task to demonstrate once and for all that belief in the existence of the external world is justified, and he devotes his efforts to critically examining and organising our beliefs to reveal their relative strengths and how they are interrelated. Thus in 1927 in *Outline of Philosophy* he writes: “Philosophy involves a criticism of scientific knowledge, not from a point of view ultimately different from science, but from a point of view less concerned with details and more concerned with the harmony of the whole body of special sciences” (p. 2). And still earlier, in 1912, he writes in *Problems of Philosophy*, his first major work in epistemology: “Philosophical knowledge ... does not differ essentially from scientific knowledge; there is no special source of wisdom which is open to philosophy but not to science, and the results obtained by philosophy are not radically different from those obtained from science” (p. 149).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Time and again Russell declares that he takes epistemology to be a science combining logic and psychology. In *Theory of Knowledge*, for instance, he avers that “it is impossible to assign to the theory of knowledge a province distinct from that of logic and psychology” (p. 46) and in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* he underlines that “[e]pistemology involves both logical and psychological elements” (p. 18). On his reckoning, as he explains in *Inquiry*, epistemology is psychological insofar as it concerns “the relation of basic propositions to experiences, the degree of doubt or certainty that we feel in regard to any of them, and the methods of diminishing the former and increasing the latter”, logical insofar as it concerns “the inferential relation ... between basic propositions and those we believe because of them; also the logical relations which often subsist between different basic propositions, ... also the logical character of the basic propositions themselves”. For all the differences between Russell and Quine regarding experience, basic propositions and the character of the “inferential relation”, their general stances are much the same. Both are concerned with “the central logical structure of empirical evidence” and both persuaded that the “essentials” of “the relation of evidential support ... can be schematized by little more than logical analysis”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

When Russell turns to the specific problem of the external world, moreover, he states without qualification that he is engaged in a scientific endeavour. Thus in ‘Professor Dewey’s “Essays in Experimental Logic”’, a review he wrote for the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1919, he says: “The chief thing that I wish to make clear is that in discussing the world as a logical problem, I am dealing in a scientific spirit with a genuine scientific question, in fact a question of physics” (p. 21). (The reason Russell refers to the problem of the external world as a “logical problem” is that he takes it to concern the question of “[w]hat, apart from argument and inference ... surviv[es] a critical scrutiny [and] what inferences will then be possible?” (pp. 20-21).[[10]](#footnote-10)) Here Russell not only anticipates Quine’s question: “Whence then the strength of our notion that there is a physical world?”, he also anticipates his view of the question as one “for the natural science of the external world, in particular, for the psychology of human animals”.[[11]](#footnote-11) (Incidentally, Russell also agrees with Dewey regarding the nature of the problem. He is not, as followers of Dewey frequently assume, committed to the idea of a first philosophy.[[12]](#footnote-12))

Russell avails himself of scientific results whenever he can. He would have had no quarrel with Quine’s claim that “it is a finding of natural science itself, however fallible, that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors” or with his conception of “the relation of science to its sensory data [as] a relation open to inquiry as a chapter of the science of [an antecedently acknowledged external] world”.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Russell explicitly notes in his review of Dewey, in observing that “the conception of a ‘datum’ becomes, as it were, a limiting conception of what we may call scientific common-sense”, he is “proceeding along ordinary scientific lines” (p. 21). And as he explicitly says in his 1923 article on ‘Vagueness’ he thinks that “if you are going to allow any inferences from what you directly experience to other entities, then physics supplies the safest form of such inferences” (p. 154).[[14]](#footnote-14)

More striking still, Russell’s picture of those doing the knowing is reminiscent of nothing so much as Quine’s picture of them. Like Quine, he conceives the knowing subject as a physical object acted upon by external forces and reacting from time to time by disturbing his or her immediate surroundings. It was Quine who said: “I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back emanating concentric airwaves. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil”.[[15]](#footnote-15) But it could have been Russell. Certainly Russell had no compunction about writing in *The Analysis of Matter*: “In the last analysis, all our knowledge of matter is derived from perceptions, which are themselves causally dependent on effects on our bodies. ... What we hear, and what we read in books, comes to us entirely through a flow of energy across the boundaries of our bodies” (pp.27,28).[[16]](#footnote-16)

To picture knowers as surfaces across which energy travels, as Russell – and following him Quine – does, is to opt for the physicist’s view of them and to refrain from describing them in intentional or mentalistic terms. The thought is that each of us comes up with our knowledge of the world from the slenderest of data, specifically physical, sensory data, and it falls to the epistemologist to explain how we can know about the world beyond our surfaces given that we only have (according to natural science) what crosses our surfaces to go on. Though it is hard to imagine Russell declaring in so many words: “All I am or ever can hope to be is due to irritations of my surface, together with such latent tendencies to response as may have been present in my original germ plasm”,[[17]](#footnote-17) he is as committed as Quine to regarding the knowing subject as a system governed by the laws of physics. In his 1927 book *The Analysis of Matter*, for instance,he stresses the “physical significance” of his conception and treats the individual knower as “an oval surface, which is liable to continuous motion and change of shape, but persists throughout time”, a surface across which energy flows, “sometimes inward, sometimes outward” (pp. 27-28). He even writes in ‘Vagueness’: “People do not say that a barometer “knows” when it is going to rain; but I doubt that there is any essential difference between the barometer and the meteorologist, who observes it” (p. 154).

HAVING DRAWN ATTENTION to important similarities between Russell and Quine, I turn now to what may be thought to be stumbling blocks to grouping them together, starting with the seemingly awkward fact that Russell avails himself of the method of Cartesian doubt, something Quine never does. It is tempting to object that no naturalistic philosopher would appeal as brazenly as Russell to such doubt, never mind invoke it as he does in *Our Knowledge of the External World* to isolate data “which resist the solvent of critical reflection” (pp. 77-78).[[18]](#footnote-18) This objection, however, labours under the difficulty that Russell does not invoke the method of doubt to determine what is “completely indubitable”, only deploys it in the course of his logico-psychological investigations, as he says in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, to determine a set of propositions “not wholly derived from their logical relations to other propositions” (p. 125). It is no coincidence that he emphasises in *Human Knowledge* that he is “expounding part of Descartes’ argument”, not the whole of it, and troubles to note that Cartesian doubt has “value as a means of articulating our knowledge and showing what depends on what” (pp. 188, 196).

Russell does, it is true, say in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* that “the whole subject [of epistemology] is a product of Cartesian doubt” (p. 16; also p. 117). But Quine, a naturalistic thinker if ever there was one, believes the same thing, his view being, as he puts it in ‘The Nature of Natural Knowledge’, that “the theory of knowledge has its origin in doubt” (p. 67). Moreover, as Quine immediately goes on to note, the crucial question is not whether “[d]oubt prompts the theory of knowledge” but whether “knowledge, also, was what prompted the doubt”, i.e. whether the doubts are “scientific” rather than independent philosophical doubts (pp. 67, 68). And in any case Russell himself is motivated by doubts that arise within science, not by ones imported from the outside. To his way of thinking, epistemology would be an idle pastime were it not for the fact that, as he says in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, science undermines “the doctrine that things are what they seem”, indeed is “at war with itself” (p. 15). He takes our knowledge to be worth scrutinising, criticising and reorganising for the simple reason that whenever he ponders the external world from within the framework of science he finds himself “full of hitherto unquestioned assumptions, for many of which [he has] as yet no adequate reason”.[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words for him the method of doubt is a method of science, one that scientists help themselves to from time to time, for instance when they submit their own scientific beliefs to “internal scrutiny”.

Nor is it a problem for the interpretation of Russell’s philosophy I am defending that he stands foursquare against the Quinean view that behaviourism is mandatory for a properly scientific epistemology. Russell does, to be sure, criticise behaviourism by arguing that psychologists may be deceived in much the same way as “the animals [they are studying] are deceived by mirrors” and that “[w]hen the behaviourist observes the doings of animals, and decides whether these show knowledge or error, he is not thinking of himself as an animal, but at least as a hypothetically inerrant recorder of what actually happens”.[[20]](#footnote-20) For Russell the behavioural scientist “gives a false sense of objectivity to the results of his observation[s]” because he “omit[s] the fact that *he*—an organism like any other—is observing”.[[21]](#footnote-21) None of this, however, shows Russell to have been less than fully consistent in regarding the problem of our knowledge of the external world as a scientific problem. To the contrary, far from repudiating naturalism and opting for first philosophy, he simply draws what he takes to be a consequence of our present-day scientific knowledge. His attack on behaviourism is an attack from within the naturalist’s framework, not from outside it.

Russell's central point about behaviourism is, as he put it in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, that it fails to acknowledge an important item of scientific scripture, “scripture [that], in its most canonical form, is embodied in physics (including physiology)” (p. 15). He holds that a “serpent [has been introduced] into the behaviourist’s paradise” once “the fallibility of the observer” is noticed, a serpent that “has no difficulty in quoting scientific scripture [to prompt doubts about the external world]”. It is, he would have us appreciate, a consequence of science itself that we must start from sensory data rather than from overt behaviour and consider how we manage to obtain our knowledge of the world from our perceptions. The epistemological problem concerns our knowledge of human behaviour (and human physiology) as well as our knowledge of the physical world, and only by considering the antecedents of behaviour and what goes on in our heads from a scientific standpoint can we hope to clarify how human knowers know anything at all.

In this context it is also important to notice that Russell’s remarks about acquaintance in *Problems of Philosophy*, *Theory of Knowledge* and other early epistemological writings do not cause trouble for my line of interpretation. Though his conception of knowledge by direct, unmediated acquaintance is foreign to Quine, his epistemological project, early and late, is not fundamentally different. There is for one thing more than a slight echo of Russell’s view that “the meaning we attach to our words must be something with which we are acquainted” in Quine’s view that “all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence”.[[22]](#footnote-22) And for another the principle of acquaintance – “E*very proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted*”[[23]](#footnote-23) – is not in and of itself antithetical to naturalism. Nor, contrary to what is often supposed, did Russell himself regard the principle as an independent constraint on analysis, one that precedes scientific investigation. In good Quinean fashion, he took it to stand and fall with his theory of the world and treated the question of what we are (directly) acquainted with, if anything, as a scientific question.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Again it is no objection to the present line of thought that Russell contrasts his brand of “‘theory of knowledge’ ... or ‘epistemology’, as it is also called”, with “theory of knowledge [that] accept[s] the scientific account of the world ... as the best at present available”.[[25]](#footnote-25) To insist, as Russell does, that the first kind of theory of knowledge is “deeper and [of] much greater importance” than the second kind of theory is not to come down on the non-naturalist side of the fence. The distinction in question is a distinction between two types of naturalistic theory of knowledge, the sort Russell aims to develop and the sort a psychologist or sociologist might attempt to provide, i.e. one that recognises that “the world ... contains a phenomenon called ‘knowing’, and ... consider[s] what sort of phenomenon this is”. In fact there is no discernible difference between the sort of “theory of knowledge” Russell favours and the sort Quine envisions in point of depth and importance. Both philosophers are occupied with what in *Pursuit of Truth* Quine characterises as “central to traditional epistemology”, namely the job of clarifying the relation of our knowledge as a whole to the sensory information on which it is based (p. 19). And both philosophers take the epistemologist’s main task, as Russell says in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, to be one of arranging “what we think we know in a certain order in which what comes later is known (if it is known) because of what comes earlier” (p. 16).

Finally to allay another possible worry, I should stress that nothing I have been suggesting runs counter to Russell’s conception of logic in *Our Knowledge of the External World* as “the essence of philosophy” ( Lecture II) or his view in ‘On the Scientific Method in Philosophy’ that “*philosophy is the science of the possible*” (p. 84, italics in the original). These remarks, as Russell intends them, are perfectly compatible with the naturalistic attitude Quine discerns in his thinking, even required by it. He takes logic to be at the heart of philosophy because, as he says in Lecture II, it “enlarg[es] our abstract imagination” and “provides a method which enables us to obtain results that do not merely embody personal idiosyncrasies” (pp. 68, 69). And he takes philosophy to deal with “the possible” because, as he immediately goes on to note in ‘On the Scientific Method in Philosophy’, it deals with “the general”, the possible and the general being “indistinguishable” (p. 84).[[26]](#footnote-26) Moreover I am persuaded that when considered in context, other seemingly troublesome remarks – e.g. Russell’s claim in *Theory of Knowledge* that “*[a] knowledge of physics and physiology must not be assumed in theory of knowledge*” (p. 50; italics in the original) – are no less readily accommodated within the framework of the interpretation I am promoting.

MY ARGUMENT HAS BEEN that however much Russell differs from Quine about the nature of natural knowledge, he agrees with him in taking epistemology to be a branch of natural science and in regarding the problem of our knowledge of the external world as a scientific problem. He is an empiricist in the Quinean mode, one who takes the doctrine that there is nothing in the mind about the world not first in the senses to be a finding of science (as opposed to a result of pure inquiry prior to scientific research). His empiricism is integral to his naturalism and he intends his claims about the evidence of the senses and our knowledge of the external world to be understood as hypotheses open to criticism and improvement.[[27]](#footnote-27) Where he disagrees with Quine is over what science tells us regarding the data and how the rest of our knowledge is related to them, his epistemological naturalism being one of sense and sensibilia, Quine’s one of neural receptors and their stimulation.[[28]](#footnote-28) One can summarise how Russell differs from Quine, not too misleadingly, as stemming from the fact that whereas Quine takes the epistemologist’s task to be one of shedding light on the transition “from stimulus to science”, as the title of his last book has it, Russell takes it to be, as he puts it in his final important philosophical work, one of clarifying “the transition from sense to science”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The picture I have been sketching of Russell as a naturalistically-minded epistemologist in the Quinean mould is very different from the usual picture of him. He is not engaged in a none too successful quest for certainty (over and above the certainty provided by science) or trying to answer the sceptic who aims to put the whole of science into question. The object of the exercise, as Russell understands it, is to develop a genuinely scientific account of “hard” and “soft” data and the relationship between them, and nobody should be fooled by the question he raises at the beginning of *Problems of Philosophy*, his most widely read book: “Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?” (p. 7). The reasonable people he has in mind are scientifically-informed thinkers, not sceptics, and he does not mean to suggest his conclusions are immune to sceptical doubt. Rather the opposite. He allocates to philosophy “the more modest function” of providing “an orderly systematic organisation of our knowledge” and allows “it is ... *possible* that all our beliefs may be mistaken” (pp. 26, 25; italics in the original). In fact he thinks “the sceptical philosophy is so short as to be uninteresting”.[[30]](#footnote-30)

I hope I have said enough to show that Russell’s post-1912 epistemological writings deserve more attention than they are usually accorded and it is a mistake to dismiss them as dull, lacking in substance or without lasting importance. Russell pioneered an important approach to the subject, one that is nowadays commonly endorsed, not least by Quine and philosophers influenced by him. Though perhaps not the first to turn his back on *a priori* philosophical speculation about our knowledge of the external world, Russell is one of only a few philosophers to have attempted, using all the resources of modern logic and modern psychology, to provide a detailed, scientific account of what we know and how we know it. In resisting the lure of *a priori* (non-scientific) conceptual analysis, he can be seen in retrospect at least as attempting to rescue epistemology from what in ‘Things and their Place in Theories’ Quine calls “the abyss of the transcendental” (p. 23), indeed as paving the way for Quine’s own naturalistic epistemology. One can debate whether Russell succeeded in reconstructing epistemology as a branch of natural science and whether he proceeded in a genuinely scientific fashion just as one can debate whether Quine managed to pull off the trick. But there can be no denying his exceptional contribution to naturalistic epistemology as a going concern in the twentieth century.

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1. \* The main ideas of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society held at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, May 2005. Thanks to Lynne Cohen, as always, for her help and to Paul Forster for detailed comments on an earlier draft of the paper and frequent discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Russell’s Ontological Development’, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Things and Their Place in Theories’, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Russell’s Ontological Development’, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. p. 71 in the edition of *Our Knowledge* that Quine quotes, pp. 73-74 in later editions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Russell’s Ontological Development’, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also compare *Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 25-26, *Our Knowledge of the External World,* p. 74, and Quine’s quotation from the same work cited earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 18 and pp. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Also compare *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Lecture III. In this lecture Russell speaks of himself as “apply[ing] the logical-analytic method” to the problem (p. 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quine, ‘The Scope and Language of Science’, p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In ‘Professor Dewey’s “Essays in Experimental Logic”’, Russell writes: “I suppose [Dewey] would say, what I should agree to in a certain fundamental sense, that knowledge must be accepted as a fact, and cannot be proved from the outside” (p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Pursuit of Truth*,p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Also compare *Our Knowledge of the External World*, pp. 75-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. These are the opening sentences of ‘The Scope and Language of Science’, the paper in which Quine lays out his epistemological project for the first time. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Burton Dreben, perhaps Quine’s closest associate, told me that when he asked Quine about the similarity of his view to Russell’s, Quine assured him – much to Dreben’s surprise – that he had not read *The Analysis of Matter* before writing ‘The Scope and Language of Science’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Quine, ‘The Scope and Language of Science’, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Russell also describes his task in this work as one of “discovering what sort of world can be constructed by ... means [of hard data] alone” (p. 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘Professor Dewey’s “Essays in Experimental Logic”’, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, pp. 14-15. Also compare *An Outline of Philosophy*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, p. 58; Quine, ‘Epistemology Naturalized’, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, p. 58 (Russell’s italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A full discussion of this point is out of the question here. I shall only say that I believe Russell is best read as revising his views about acquaintance along with his understanding of the deliverances of natural science (in this connection see the references in footnote 7 and the accompanying text). Also I would argue that Russell eventually dispensed with the notion of acquaintance because he came to think it scientifically problematic and superfluous. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, pp 15, 14. The following quotations are from p. 14 and pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Compare Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 18. It is, I fancy, hardly accidental that Quine writes: “In the fused phrases of Kant and Russell, [I am concerned with] a question of how our knowledge of the external world is possible”. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See especially *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 94, and *My Philosophical Development*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Compare Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *My Philosophical Development*, p. 153. See also *ibid*,p. 80, and ‘The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics’, pp. 111-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Vagueness’, p. 154. See also *An Analysis of Matter*, p. 28, *An Outline of Philosophy*, p. 234, *Human Knowledge*, pp. 9, 196, and *My Philosophical Development*, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)