

Introduction

The work of Bertrand Russell had a decisive influence on the emergence of analytic philosophy, and on its subsequent development. More than any other single figure, Russell set the tone and the agenda for anglophone analytic philosophy in at least the first half of the twentieth century. Frege takes precedence in the development of something resembling a modern system of logic, and in the use of that logic to resolve philosophical problems. Russell's version of logic, however, was far more influential than Frege's. More important, Russell completely rejected the views of Kant and of the post-Kantian idealists, deploying his logic to bolster this opposition. In particular, he completely rejected the idea of necessary structures of thought which impose an *a priori* form upon our knowledge. Russell came to see mathematics as the crucial test-case. Like Frege, he argued that mathematics is reducible to logic; in Russell's hands, however, this claim was part of a general argument against Kant and the idealists.

In other ways, too, Russell's ambitions for the use of logic in philosophy were greater than Frege's. Two related points are particularly worth stressing. First, it is in Russell's work that one can first clearly see the application of modern logic to empirical knowledge. According to Russell's view, the foundation of all knowledge is a kind of direct and unmediated contact between the mind and the known entity, which may be either abstract or given in sensation. This direct contact is what Russell himself calls *acquaintance*. He claims that logic is the means by which something like the rich and far-ranging knowledge that we take ourselves to have can be assembled out of the simple constituents given to us in acquaintance. Showing how this could happen is then an extremely ambitious and far-reaching philosophical programme. Many philosophers, of course, have rejected this programme. Many have also rejected the underlying idea that our knowledge is based on a fundamental kind of direct sensory knowledge. But Russell's influence is manifest in the extraordinary tenacity of his ideas—the frequency with which they were, and are, disputed and rejected—as well as in their occasional revivals.

The second point I wish to stress is that Russell articulates the idea of a *logically perfect language*. (The idea is, again, foreshadowed in Frege, but in Russell it is full-blown.) The syntax or structure of such a language would be given by logic; its vocabulary would be terms which have a meaning in virtue of the speaker's being acquainted with the corresponding entities (which may be abstract). The logically perfect language would thus fully reveal the structure of our thought and our knowledge. It would give us the solutions to metaphysical

problems: we could read the nature of the world off from the language, so to speak. More modestly, the idea of a logically perfect language goes along with a view which, in one form or another, has run through much twentieth-century analytic philosophy: that in philosophy we are misled by the apparent structure of our language. (So-called ordinary language philosophy is an ironic reversal of this, with its insistence that it is only the philosopher's misunderstanding of ordinary language, or his distortion of it, that leads to philosophical problems.)

The essays reprinted here concern Russell's work in what I take to be its most influential and important period, namely the two decades following his break with Idealism in 1899. All of them to some extent relate it to the work of other philosophers, but in most it is Russell's thought that is at the focus of attention. (Exceptions are Chapters 8 and 9, where important themes are the work of Frege and of Wittgenstein, respectively, and Chapter 6, which ranges somewhat more widely.)

In 1990 I published a book on this period of Russell's work and on its background.¹ Like the book, the essays chiefly aim at recapturing and articulating Russell's philosophical vision. (Partial exceptions are noted in the previous paragraph.) This is clearly a historical task. It requires that one strive for interpretations which are soundly based on Russell's texts, and which take account of the intellectual background against which they were written; it also requires a sensitivity to ways in which Russell's aims and assumptions differ from ours, even when they are articulated in an idiom which seems familiar. But my reasons for undertaking this work are by no means disinterestedly historical. I think of my motivation, rather, as philosophical. The idea of philosophy, however, is not one to be taken for granted here. The challenge is to explain how the striving after historical accuracy can be in service of something that can plausibly be thought of as philosophical understanding. To do so would be to explain how there can be history of philosophy in which the goals of being historically responsible and of being philosophically enlightening work together, rather than in opposition; it would be to explain how the history of philosophy can be truly part of philosophy, in a way in which the history of biology, say, is clearly not part of biology.

I have spoken of the essays as concerned to recapture and articulate Russell's philosophical vision. In doing this, one sees something of what it is to have a philosophical vision, as opposed merely to expressing opinions about this or that topic. One sees how ideas can interact to support each other. One idea lends credibility to others which in turn lend credibility to others, and so on; the whole forms a system which is more powerful and perhaps more plausible than any of its parts. But it is not just credibility which is at stake here. It is also the meaning

¹ *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

and the significance of the claims which are under consideration. The assertions of philosophers are, for the most part, so abstract that their meaning—even their meaningfulness—is always in question. Understanding such an assertion is, very largely, a matter of seeing how it functions in context—seeing what the philosopher concerned takes to tell for or against the claim and, again, seeing how various claims interact to form a system. One result which may be achieved by serious historical engagement with a philosopher such as Russell is thus that one sees what a serious system of philosophical thought amounts to, and what gives it power and coherence. (And this may form a yardstick against which to measure one's own attempts.) One also sees the crucial role of the context of philosophical thought, including aspects which are often unarticulated. In seeking to understand Russell's thought it is often crucial to appreciate not only which doctrines he tacitly assumed but also which problems he found minor and which he found pressing, how he conceived of those problems, what he counted as possible answers, and so on—what we might think of as the substructure of his thought. (This might also lead one to ask what presuppositions are taken for granted in one's own thought.)

In the case of Russell, in particular, there is something else to be said. His thought is recognizably continuous with that of later analytic philosophy. In seeking to understand his thought, and what gives it its coherence, we—at least those of us who are analytic philosophers, or their intellectual descendants—are not seeking to understand something alien to us. The continuity means, for one thing, that anything that we come to understand about the nature of the philosophical enterprise by studying Russell is likely to be applicable also to our own attempts at philosophical understanding. However different his thought may be from ours, he is, for the most part, clearly engaged in the same general sort of enterprise. More important, perhaps, is the role that Russell played in the formation of analytic philosophy. In thinking about his philosophy we are thinking about one of the major formative influences on analytic philosophy; seeking to understand his philosophical thought is thus one way of seeking an understanding of the context in which our own philosophical thinking takes place, and so of understanding our own philosophical position.²

Three of the essays in this collection were written before the completion of the book mentioned above. Two of the three, Chapters 1 and 3, articulate very general themes of the book in relatively concise fashion. Another, Chapter 4, goes into a more or less technical aspect of Russell's work which I decided to omit from the book. The others all represent work that is new since the book appeared.

² I revert to these ideas in the last few pages of the first essay in the collection; see also the introduction to *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*.

Apart from the last of them, the essays fall into three groups, and I have arranged them accordingly (rather than chronologically). I shall say a little more about each of them, and about the order in which they appear.

The first group, made up of the first two chapters, focuses on the notion of a proposition. This notion played a central role in Russell's thought in the period with which I am concerned. The first essay seeks to explain this fact; in particular, it seeks to explain why the issue of the *unity* of the proposition loomed so large for him; it thus traverses some of the same ground that is covered in the book mentioned above but from a somewhat different direction and far more rapidly. The explanation proceeds partly in terms of the background to Russell's thought, his wish to combat the views of Leibniz and, more especially, of Kant and the post-Kantian idealists. (Russell tended to interpret Kant as an idealist, and to make little distinction between him and his idealist successors.) I conclude by drawing a more general moral: the significance of Russell's thought depends upon its historical context. The same is, presumably, true of our own philosophical thought; and, Russell's work plays an important role in forming that context.

The second essay critically discusses the idea, explicit in Russell but by no means confined to him, that philosophical thinking can and should *begin* with an analysis of propositions. Russell sometimes presents the idea of a proposition, and of the analysis of propositions, as fundamental, as starting points for philosophy. I argue, to the contrary, that they cannot be taken for granted in that way. My claim here is a general one: supposedly fundamental philosophical ideas have presuppositions, and one way to reveal those presuppositions is to see how the ideas develop and change over time. The essay argues for this claim, and tracks some of the relevant changes, in the particular case of Russell's conceptions of a proposition and of the analysis of propositions.

The second group of essays all relate to Russell's logic. Chapter 3, like Chapter 1, articulates a major theme in Russell's thought: his conception of logic and of the philosophy of logic. It begins by raising the question of the philosophical significance that logicism, the reduction of mathematics to logic, had for Russell when he first developed that doctrine. The answer is that it was part of a complex argument against Kant and post-Kantian Idealism. For this argument to work, logic must be thought of as made up of absolute and unconditioned truths. A certain conception of logic is thus implicit in the philosophical use that Russell makes of logicism. The essay articulates this conception and contrasts it with a widely held modern conception according to which the central notion is truth in an interpretation, rather than truth *tout court*; the notion of an interpretation is alien to Russell's thought. Given his general conception of logic, I argue, it is natural, perhaps inevitable, that logic will be higher-order logic, equivalent to set theory. Russell's use of logicism, however, is cast in doubt by the need to

accommodate the paradox that bears his name. The theory of types undermines his conception of logic as consisting of universal and unconditioned truths. The infinitude of objects can no longer be proved, but is taken as an explicit assumption when needed; this threatens the idea that it is indeed *mathematics* which is being reduced to logic. The magnificent intellectual achievement of *Principia Mathematica* is thus, I argue, cut off from the philosophical motivations that lay behind Russell's initial formulation of logicism.

Chapter 4, the second essay in this group, deals with an approach to logic that Russell worked out between 1905 and 1907 in the attempt to avoid some of the problems of the theory of types. Rather than assuming the existence either of classes or of propositional functions (in terms of which classes may be defined), Russell attempted to achieve the same effects by means of what he called the substitutional theory: he assumed only propositions, and the idea of substituting one entity for another within a proposition. But in the end, I argue, the new approach raises difficulties precisely analogous to those raised for Russell by the assumption of propositional functions. To avoid paradox he has to make distinctions of type among propositions, just as the other approach requires him to make distinctions of type among propositional functions; the former are no less damaging than the latter. Hence the added complications of the substitutional theory are not worthwhile, and Russell abandons that approach.

Chapter 5 takes up the subject of the vicious-circle principle. Russell frequently invokes this principle as part of his justification of his version of the theory of types (i.e. what has become known as 'ramified type theory'). But exactly what the principle is, how it is meant to justify type theory, and whether it can succeed, are issues which have been the subject of much controversy; the essay is an attempt to resolve these issues. I argue that much of the controversy over the vicious-circle principle has been misdirected. The principle itself is a relatively straightforward claim about what follows when one entity presupposes another—a principle that might, indeed, be taken as partially definitive of the vexed notion of presupposition. What requires discussion, I argue, is not so much the principle itself as Russell's use of it, which is based on claims about relations of presupposition among propositional functions and between propositional functions and propositions. It is to these claims that we should look for an understanding of the basis of his type theory.

Chapter 6 is perhaps something of an anomaly in this group. It is an extended review of Michael Dummett's book *The Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. I include it in a group of essays relating to Russell's logic because the chief ground on which I criticize Dummett is that his account of the formation of analytic philosophy neglects the role of logic (and, largely in consequence, it also neglects the contribution of Russell).

Each of the essays in the third group emphasizes the significance of the distinction between Russellian propositional functions and functions in the ordinary mathematical sense. As Chapter 7 points out, propositional functions are fundamental to Russell's mature theory of types, the theory set out in the early portions of *Principia Mathematica*. But what are propositional functions? And what is their relation to the more general notion of function (more or less the ordinary mathematical notion)? It would perhaps be natural to assume that propositional functions are simply a kind of function—that is, that Russell takes for granted the more general notion of function and then distinguishes propositional functions as a special case. But in fact this is not what he does in *Principia Mathematica*. Rather, he takes propositional functions for granted and then introduces ordinary functions (descriptive functions, he calls them) as and when needed. Technically this procedure is unproblematic; the interesting question is why Russell proceeds in this fashion. The essay argues that ordinary functions inevitably give rise to complex referring expressions, and that an explanation of how such expressions function requires some analogue of Fregean *Sinn*—some intermediary between the person who understands the expression and the object which the expression is about. But Russell has an overwhelming reason, of a quite general philosophical kind, to want to avoid invoking such intermediary entities; they would violate the direct realism implicit in his idea of acquaintance. Hence he has every reason not to assume (ordinary) functions. Propositional functions, however, are not vulnerable to the same sorts of objections, from Russell's point of view. The crucial consideration here is that propositional functions are complex structured entities, and that the result of applying such a function to an object is a proposition which contains that object, and shares the structure of the propositional function. It is because propositional functions are complex structured entities that Russell's theory of types (ramified type theory) makes sense. And it is for this reason that Russell's logic has something of the appearance of intensional logic—not because he has an interest in formulating a logic for dealing with intensional notions such as belief.

Chapter 8, the second essay in the group, takes up an important and disputed issue in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and uses ideas articulated in the previous essay to shed light on it. What we call truth-functions are central to Wittgenstein's thought; they play the crucial role not only in accounting for logic but also in explaining the possibility of any language or thought beyond the most elementary. Yet his account of the truth functions is by no means easy to understand. In particular, Wittgenstein calls them *operations*, and insists that they must be sharply distinguished from functions; yet most of what he says about them seems to apply equally to functions. I suggest that when Wittgenstein uses the word 'function' he is following Russell, and speaking of Russellian *propositional* functions. Reading him in this

way can make sense of the contrasts he draws between functions and operations. This enables us to achieve a better understanding of his notion of an operation. On the basis of this understanding, I argue that operations in his sense cannot be identified with ordinary mathematical functions or with Fregean functions. The account that Wittgenstein gives of them cannot be separated from his general project of reconceiving the way in which language and thought represent the world; we cannot understand it in other terms.

Chapter 9 compares and, more especially, contrasts Frege with Russell. Again, a crucial role is played by the distinction between Russellian propositional functions and ordinary functions, and by the fact that Russell takes the former as fundamental. Frege takes the function-argument method of analysis as fundamental, and the conception of a function which he employs is an extended and clarified version of the ordinary mathematical notion. Russell, however, denies that there are functions in this sense. Expressions which appear to refer to such functions can be defined, in terms of propositional functions, as needed. In the course of a general comparison of the two thinkers I attempt to show that this apparently rather minor difference is directly connected with differences between their philosophical views on quite general issues, including their understandings of philosophical analysis, their ontological views, and their conceptions of logic.

The tenth and final chapter of the volume does not fit neatly into any of the groups that I have distinguished. It deals with one of the most frequently discussed topics in Russell's philosophy, namely his theory of definite descriptions, first set forth in one of the most celebrated essays of twentieth-century anglophone philosophy, the celebrated 1905 essay 'On Denoting'. In the first and the last sections I discuss the theory of definite descriptions, and objections to it, more or less independently of Russell. The bulk of the essay, however, deals with the way in which the theory fits into Russell's philosophy. His thought in the period before he wrote 'On Denoting' gave rise to a certain problem which he attempted to solve by means of what I call the theory of denoting concepts. This theory, and its solution, were, however, unsatisfactory to him in various ways. So, when he had the central idea of the theory of descriptions, he discarded his earlier view. This change had far-reaching effects on his philosophy in general, and I discuss these at some length.

The essays are reprinted here almost without changes from their original form. (Chapter 5 is the sole exception, for reasons explained in a footnote to that chapter. Even here the changes only amount to the excision of a few lines.) I have corrected typographical errors, and have in a few cases removed infelicities of style. I have not made substantive changes, or added notes to indicate points at which I would now put things differently. I could find no sharp line between points I now think are mistaken and those which merely emphasize matters

differently from the way I now would. In the absence of such a sharp line, it seemed best to leave the essays unchanged. In a few places it would have been possible to cut some material and replace it with a reference to one of the other essays, but here again I decided to leave them unchanged. There is no place at which more than half a page or so could be cut in this fashion, and for so small a saving it did not seem worth interrupting the reader, or the flow of the essay.