

# The limits of thought and world in Russell and Wittgenstein

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**Abstract.** In this essay, I will try to compare Russell's view on the limits of thought and solipsism, especially as presented in "*Theory of Knowledge*", to Wittgenstein's view on the same issues, as presented in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. In order to do so, I shall divide my work into two sections. Section one is an exposition of Russell's train of thought, mainly based on James Levine's account in "Logic and Solipsism" (2013). Section two, in turn, is the attempt to develop a personal interpretation of Wittgenstein's perspective on the matter, starting from his notion of "object" in the *Tractatus*.

**Keywords.** Language, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, World.

## 1 Russell

The question of the limits of thought, for Russell, is really the question of what is required to think of, or apprehend, a proposition. An immediate answer is that in order for a proposition to be apprehended, the thinking subject must be acquainted with each of its constituents. But the question then shifts, or better it splits in several other questions. What is acquaintance? And what are to be considered the constituents of a proposition?

In his paper “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, Russell defines the relation of acquaintance as follows:

I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgment, but the sort which constitutes presentation. In fact, I think the relation of subject and object which I call acquaintance is simply the converse of the relation of object and subject which constitutes presentation. That is, to say that S has acquaintance with O is essentially the same thing as to say that O is presented to S (“Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, p. 152).

Acquaintance, as it is presented here (and not only), is a dual relation between a subject and an object. This relation is then characterized as one of *direct awareness*, and assimilated to presentation; in other words, being acquainted with an object means being immediately presented with it. As Russell points out in *The Problems of Philosophy*, this direct awareness of things has to be conceived as completely independent of any inferential process whatsoever and any knowledge of truths (*The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 25). Now, Russell holds that one can have such immediate awareness of: particulars, universals, abstract logical facts, and maybe of oneself. He believes that these are the possible constituents of propositions, and that every understanding of a proposition must rely on the acquaintance of a thinking subject with whichever of them figures in it. For the purpose of my present work, I shall mainly focus on particulars, since Russell maintains that they are the objects with which we are acquainted in the most immediate sense.<sup>1</sup>

For Russell, particulars are designated by proper names. Thus, for what we have seen, in order to apprehend or entertain the proposition expressed by a

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<sup>1</sup>Acquaintance with universals, in fact, is only derived from acquaintance with particulars. In “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” Russell gives the example of the universal yellow, with which we can be acquainted only if we have seen a sufficient number of yellow particulars. It is also for this reason, probably, that Russell uses a different technical term for the kind of acquaintance one can have with universals: “conceiving” (“Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, p. 154).

sentence that contains a proper name, one must be acquainted with the particular designated by that name, which will figure among the constituents of the proposition. More generally, if one wants to name a particular, he must be acquainted with it. Russell expresses this thought in his "Theory of Knowledge", when he writes:

There is [...] at any given moment a certain assemblage of objects to which I could, if I chose, give proper names; these are the objects of my "awareness", the objects "before my mind", or the objects that are within my present "experience" ("Theory of Knowledge", p. 8).

If proper names designate particulars, then the objects I can name at any given moment can only be the particulars with which I am currently acquainted, the "objects of my awareness". In fact, I cannot name any particular thing which lies beyond the boundaries of my "present experience" or awareness, for in order to name a particular object I must be aware of it, and, since this is the case, that object, if named, lies *within* the boundaries of my experience. Put another way, if person *s* can entertain the proposition "I am not acquainted with *a*", where *a* is a proper name that stands for a particular, then person *s* is acquainted with the particular (designated by) *a*. Here we find a limit of thought: we cannot truly and directly think of a particular we are not acquainted with, or, as Russell puts it, we can never point to an object and say "*This* lies outside my present experience" ("Theory of Knowledge", p. 10), where "this" is a proper name designating a particular. Now, by 1911 Russell maintains that the only particulars with which we are acquainted are *sense-data*, at least in a wide sense.<sup>2</sup> It is easy, from here, to see the connections between the issues considered above and solipsism. The rigorous and coherent solipsist draws an extreme metaphysical conclusion from the self-refutation of every proposition of the form "*This* lies outside my present experience", namely that no *sense datum* can be beyond what is part of his present experience, which he considers all-embracing. But is he authorised to draw such a conclusion? Is it right for him, in other words, to infer from the fact that no instance of a non-acquainted particular can be truly and directly thought of, that such a particular does not exist at all? Russell really believes it is not.

In his "Theory of Knowledge" Russell tries to reject the solipsist's conclusion. To be sure, he admits that no instance of a particular with which we are not ac-

<sup>2</sup>Sense data taken in a wide sense include the objects of both "outer" and "inner" awareness, i.e. both sense-data *proper* given in sensation, and private mental items (such as thoughts and desires) given in introspection ("Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", p. 154, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 28). In 1912, Russell also specified that we may have acquaintance in memory, but in this case the objects of acquaintance would be either data of the "outer" awareness or data of the "inner" awareness, and thus again sense-data taken in a large sense (*The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 28). I leave aside the question of the acquaintance with the Self, since Russell was never sure of its possibility, and constantly changed idea on the matter.

acquainted can be truly and directly thought of; which is to say: the *singular proposition* "I am not acquainted with *a*" cannot be both understood and true. But Russell also points out that this does not prevent us thinking – without contradictions – of the *general proposition* that there is something that is not currently part of our experience. This proposition is of the form  $(\exists x) \sim Fx$ , and through it we may *indirectly* denote particulars with which we are not acquainted. What is interesting, is that Russell argues that entertaining this kind of general proposition does not necessarily require acquaintance with particulars, but only with the universal *F* and the logical form subject-predicate.<sup>3</sup> In other words, if we take *F* to be the universal *acquaintance* (or being *acquainted with*), for Russell it will be sufficient to be acquainted with the universal *acquaintance* and the logical form subject-predicate, in order to entertain the general proposition "There is something I am not acquainted with". This proposition can be both entertained and true for Russell, unlike its singular instance "I am not acquainted with *a*", which cannot be true when entertained, as we have seen. In order to prove the logical possibility of the truth of general propositions, independently of acquaintance with the particulars involved in their singular instances, Russell gives the following example:

We may know Jones, paternity and the fact that every man has a father. Then we know that there is "the father of Jones", although we may never have experienced him ("Theory of Knowledge", p. 34).

Which is to say: the general proposition "There is the father of Jones" – a proposition of the form  $(\exists x)Fx$  – can be true whether we have experienced or not the father of Jones. Here Russell maintains that we can be acquainted not only with universals (paternity) but also with people considered as particulars (Jones), something he denied in "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description". But he does so only to show the type of logical possibility of the truth of the general proposition, one that – he argues – does not require acquaintance with any *particular* contained in its singular instances (here the actual father of Jones). It is worth noting that, as Jones' father can be met, acquaintance with the particular (indirectly denoted by the description) "the father of Jones" is logically possible in this case, although unnecessary for the logical possibility of the truth of "There is the father of Jones". On the other hand, if we maintain that the only particulars with which we can be acquainted are sense-data, and if we consider the general proposition "There is something I am not acquainted with", we see that acquaintance with an instance of such a thing becomes logically impossible.

Nevertheless, the point made with the example of Jones' father is still valid

<sup>3</sup>Unlike a proposition of the form  $Fa$ , which would also require acquaintance with the particular designated by the proper name *a*.

for Russell, namely that, as it is logically possible (and indeed extremely likely) that "there is the father of Jones" even if I do not know directly Jones' father, it is logically possible as well that "there is something I am not acquainted with", even if I do not – and cannot – know directly any instance of such a thing. Which is to say: the logical possibility of the truth of a general proposition does not depend on the conceivability of any of its singular instances. As we shall see, this is a main difference between Russell's account of generality and Wittgenstein's one. But more on that later.

For now, we may summarize the conclusion of this discussion as follows. Taking himself to have demonstrated the logical possibility of the truth of the general proposition "There is something I am not acquainted with", Russell also claims to have demonstrated that the solipsist is not authorized to draw his metaphysical conclusion, and suggests, on the contrary, that we should assume as a working hypothesis the existence of other people's minds and of unperceived physical things.

## 2 Wittgenstein

In order to understand Wittgenstein's view on the limits of thought, it is important to begin by noticing the commonalities with Russell's view. Wittgenstein inherits from Russell the conviction that the only symbolic function of a proper name is standing for an object (*T*, 3.22). As a consequence, in order to understand a sentence containing a proper name, one has to *know*, or be acquainted with, the object the name stands for.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, by accepting this Russellian thesis, Wittgenstein is also committed to accepting, as Russell does, the view that the proposition "I am not acquainted with *a*" can never be entertained and true at the same time, for one has to be acquainted with the object designated by the

<sup>4</sup>Following Levine, in this paragraph I will equate Wittgenstein's use of "to know" [kennen] in the *Tractatus* with "to be acquainted with" ("Logic and Solipsism", 190, fn.35). Levine is aware that, in a 1922 letter to Ogden, Wittgenstein himself resisted translating the German "kennen" (and cognates) as "to be acquainted with" (and cognates), and rather preferred the verb "to know". However, Levine quotes Wittgenstein's very reason to do so, which runs as follows: "'To be acquainted with' – I think – hasn't exactly the meaning I want, because it seems to me to imply somehow that one knows a lot about an object, while 'to know' here just means: I know *it*, but I needn't know anything *about* it". As Levine argues, this would suggest that Wittgenstein likely wanted to maintain and strengthen the Russellian distinction between *knowledge of things* (for which Russell reserves the term "acquaintance") and *knowledge of truths*, and that his choice of translation was just made to avoid an unwanted connotation of the phrase "to be acquainted with", namely the empiricist one (on this point, see also "Use and Reference of Names", p. 30). This is of course related to the problem of the objects of acquaintance. In Russell's case, they are sense-data; but in Wittgenstein's one, as I shall argue, they are not, since Tractarian objects are given a priori. We may however continue to use "to be acquainted with" alongside with Wittgenstein's "to know". It will just suffice to remember that Wittgensteinian objects, as opposed to Russellian ones, are items our acquaintance with which is prior to sensory experience ("Logic and Solipsism", p. 192).

proper name *a* in order to entertain the proposition in the first place. Keeping these similarities in mind, we can now begin to examine the differences between Wittgenstein and Russell's conception of the limits of thought.

The key to understanding these differences really lies in Wittgenstein's notion of object, which is completely different from Russell's. To be sure, both maintain that an object is to be designated by a proper name; however, while for Russell the objects that proper names stand for are mainly sense-data, Wittgenstein's objects should not be identified with sense-data instead. It is true that many commentators in the past have done so (among others *Investigating Wittgenstein*). But the idea that Tractarian objects are sense-data is not as popular as once was ("Does the *Tractatus* contain a private language argument?", p. 148). I shall argue against it, and try to present my own view on Wittgenstein's notion of object, in order to understand his conception of the limits of thought.

In some of the first remarks of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein gives his account of objecthood. First of all, objects are not self-subsistent. The essence of a Wittgensteinian object, in fact, is being relational, being a constitutive part of a concatenation of objects, that Wittgenstein calls *state of affairs* (*T*, 2.01 - 2.011). In the state of affairs, i.e. in a determinate concatenation of objects, the object assumes its external (or material) properties; but these properties are contingent, as we can, with a mental exercise, deprive the object of them and, afterwards, continue to think of something. What we cannot think of, however, is an object in isolation, outside the *possibility* of its concatenation with other objects (*T*, 2.0121). Thus, there are properties that an object must have, and without which it cannot be thought of; Wittgenstein calls them internal or formal – as opposed to external or material – properties (*T*, 4.123). In short, formal properties can be seen as the *possibilities* of the combination of an object with other objects in states of affairs ("The supposed Realism of the *Tractatus*", p. 84), and they are necessary (non-contingent) features of objects themselves. Now, Wittgenstein writes:

[L]ogic deals with every possibility and all possibilities are its facts (*T*, 2.0121).

If I am to know an object, though I need not know its external properties, I must know all its internal properties (*T*, 2.01231).

And further,

The 'experience' that we need in order to understand logic is not that such and such is the case, but that something *is*: that, however, is not an experience. Logic is prior to every experience – that something *is so*. It is prior to the 'How', not prior to the 'What' (*T*, 5.552).

As logic deals with all possibilities, where "all possibilities" are all possibilities of occurrence of objects within states of affairs, it is clear that logic has to deal with objects as well. But the possibilities of occurrence of objects within states

of affairs are none other than their formal properties, which, by 2.01231, are the properties whose knowledge is required to know objects themselves, regardless of knowledge of material properties. Since this is the case, the objects that Wittgenstein has in mind – and with which logic has to deal – will be, so to speak, *formal objects*, not primarily material ones. And this is why we should not identify Wittgensteinian objects with sense-data.<sup>5</sup>

I introduce the term "formal objects" on the understanding that they must not be thought of as logical objects, the existence of which Wittgenstein denies, but rather, I believe, as objects in their pure form; which is to say: objects as bearers of formal properties, independently of the material ones (that objects nonetheless must possess).<sup>6</sup>

This characterization clarifies, I hope, Wittgenstein's statement that logic is prior to every experience that things are so and so, i.e. every experience of the material properties of objects. Indeed, logic is prior to the "How", i.e. the way objects are linked in the *determinate* state of affairs, and by which they acquire their material properties. This very way, in fact, is in itself contingent, and logic cannot be concerned with contingencies. However, logic is not prior to the "What", which I interpret as the *givenness* of objects within the *possibility* of their occurrence in states of affairs, or, in a word, as their givenness as formal objects.<sup>7</sup> For, otherwise, logic would be prior to the very objects (and combinatorial possibilities) with which it busies itself, and would therefore be completely empty. In other words, although formal objects can be given a priori, i.e. independently of the experience that things are so and so, they must nonetheless somehow be *given*, and logic cannot be prior to this givenness, or otherwise there could be a logic without a world (but then how could there *be* a logic at all?). For this reason, formal objects are to be regarded as the substance of the world (*T*, 2.021), if logic, and with it language as a picture of the world, are to be possible (see *T*, 5.5521).

<sup>5</sup>Part of the background of this interpretation goes back to Hide Ishiguro's paper "Use and Reference of Names" (1969). There, Ishiguro argues that in the *Tractatus* "to be an object [...] is a purely logical notion" (pp.26-27), and thus that Tractarian objects should be identified neither with spatio-temporal objects, nor with sense-data (p.47). It is also worth noticing that the *identity* of a Tractarian object is exhausted by formal, as opposed to material, criteria, namely 1) its combinatorial possibilities and 2) its being numerically distinct from other objects with the same combinatorial possibilities (see *T*, 2.0233).

<sup>6</sup>I believe that the "shifting use of the word *object*" (*T*, 4.123) which Wittgenstein refers to, may be linked to this issue. In fact, in one sense objects may be considered just as bearers of formal properties, in another one as bearers of both formal and material properties. Logic just deals with the first sense (or use) of the word "object", and thus it is not concerned in giving empirical examples of objects. On this point see *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup>I am well aware that Wittgenstein, during one of his conversations with Schlick, links the question of the "What" to the existence of facts (*Ludwig Wittgenstein e il Circolo di Vienna*, p. 64). However, the existence and the givenness of facts relies on the existence and givenness of objects, being facts existing complexes of objects.

Now, since objects are exclusively thinkable within the *possibility* of their occurrence in states of affairs, then no object could ever be thought of outside the possibility of such an occurrence, i.e. outside of its *givenness* as a formal object (see *T*, 2.0121). But it is clear that, if this is the case, as soon as formal objects are given, the limits of logic end up to be "the limits of the world" (*T*, 5.61). In fact, since I can "only" think of what is given, that is formal objects, logic – which deals with all the possibilities – can neither exceed nor fall short of what is given; thought and world must have the same limits. Put another way, if formal objects are given, then all objects I can think of are given, and they are simply all objects: *my* world becomes *the* world (see *T*, 5.62). As a consequence, for Wittgenstein, Russell cannot be right when he argues that the proposition "there is something I am not acquainted with" may be both understood and true; for this proposition states that there is an object I am not directly given, that is, in my interpretation of Wittgenstein, an object outside the possibility of logically thinking of it against the background of concatenation, which really seems the possibility *tout court* for an object to be part of the world, if we take seriously 5.61. Thus, Wittgenstein's account of the general propositions of the form  $(\exists x)Fx$  must be quite different from Russell's. As he writes in his *Notebooks*:

Do not forget that  $(\exists x)Fx$  does not mean: There is an  $x$  such that  $Fx$ , but:  
There is a true proposition " $Fx$ " (*N*, 9.7.16).

To avoid the threat of solipsism, Russell understood  $(\exists x)Fx$  as "There is an  $x$  such that  $Fx$ ", and not as "There is a true proposition  $Fx$ ". This way he could maintain that general propositions may be both understood and true, independently of acquaintance with the particulars contained (and named) in their singular instances. Thus, we may know that "There is the father of Jones" without knowing that "Robert is the father of Jones" (or Michael, or Lucas, exc.). Similarly, I may think truly that "There is something I am not acquainted with", without being able to entertain truly the proposition "I am not acquainted with  $a$ " (or  $b$ , or  $c$ , exc.). That is: I may think truly that "There is something I am not acquainted with" without being given the particular  $a$ , or  $b$ , or  $c$ , exc. However, this is quite problematic for Wittgenstein. For if I am not given something, how can I talk about *it* by means of general proposition? How can a quantifier range over objects that are not given? This is really the core of the problem of the "What". In fact, if I am not given the objects that are supposed to fall in the range of the quantifier, then it is hard to understand on *what* I am quantifying over in the first place. Indeed, the very idea that a quantifier can range over non-given objects appears incoherent to Wittgenstein, for it would mean that there is a logical relation between the general proposition on the one hand, and singular sentences I cannot possibly understand on the other, i.e. singular sentences about objects I am not given (see "Does Bismarck have a beetle in his box?", p. 273). But how



can there be a logical relation that goes outside the totality of objects I am given? This would require the limits of logic to exceed the limits of the world, but at that point logic would be *empty*. For this reason, Russell cannot be right; his conception of generality – in Wittgenstein's view – tries to set the limits of thought further than the limits of the world, i.e. further than *any-thing* we can think of.

Thus, for Wittgenstein  $(\exists x)Fx$  does not mean "There is an  $x$  such that  $Fx$ ", but rather "There is a true proposition  $Fx$ ". In other words, what  $(\exists x)Fx$  really means is " $Fa \vee Fb \vee Fc \vee \dots$ ". In Wittgenstein's conception of generality, a general quantified sentence like  $(\exists x)Fx$  is then a *construction* from singular sentences of the form  $Fx$ , like  $Fa$ ,  $Fb$ ,  $Fc$ , and so on.<sup>8</sup> In parallel fashion, applying the operator of negation " $\sim$ " to  $F$  in  $(\exists x)Fx$ , the resulting general proposition  $(\exists x) \sim Fx$  will mean " $\sim Fa \vee \sim Fb \vee \sim Fc \vee \dots$ ". If we now take the general proposition of the form  $(\exists x) \sim Fx$  which Russell is committed to, namely "There is something I am not acquainted with", we see that for Wittgenstein it really means " $\sim Aa \vee \sim Ab \vee \sim Ac \vee \dots$ ", where I use the letter  $A$  as a sign for the universal *acquaintance* or *being acquainted with*. It is clear, for what we have seen, that none of these singular propositions (i.e.  $\sim Aa$ ,  $\sim Ab$ , etc.) can ever be simultaneously understood and true for both Russell and Wittgenstein. However, in Wittgenstein's case, as opposed to Russell's, the general proposition  $(\exists x) \sim Ax$  cannot be both understood and true either, since it is just a construction from its singular instances (and hence a truth-function of them).

Nevertheless, that  $(\exists x) \sim Ax$  cannot be both understood and true does not mean we are authorized to *say* that it is false. For Wittgenstein, we cannot state with sense the solipsistic thesis that "there are *no* objects with which I am not acquainted", since, as he points out:

[W]e cannot say in logic 'The world has this in it, and this, but *not* that'. For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world (*T*, 5.61).

To put it in the twisting words of Adrian Moore, "if there is no such thing as either thinking or saying something, then there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that thing" (*The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*, p. 244). This is why, although "what solipsism means is quite correct", it is nonsensical [*unsinnig*] to put its thesis into words (*T*, 5.62). For a further discussion of this problem, however, I will have to wait for a future occasion.

<sup>8</sup>For a careful usage of the idiom "construction" in this context, see "Does the *Tractatus* contain a private language argument?", p. 147.

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