

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

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## *Abstract*

The paper investigates the history of the introduction of what was later called “analytic philosophy” in October 1911–May 1912. Despite the fact that Russell and Wittgenstein were in full agreement in their antipathy towards the old-style philosophy, for example, that of Bergson, each had his own conception of the New Philosophy. For Russell, it meant “examined philosophy”, or philosophy advanced through “scientific restraint and balance” of our theoretical conjectures, and resulted in a series of logically correctly constructed theories. For Wittgenstein, it resulted in syncopated, short logical-philosophical “discoveries”. In the years to come, the two conceptions of “rigorous philosophy” embraced by Russell and Wittgenstein often came in conflict.

## **1. Russell Meets Bergson**

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

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

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

Furthermore, the insufficiency of the Old Philosophy is connected with the fact that its results are not apodictic. You can agree with the philosopher—if you are sympathetic to his style of thinking—but you can easily see his theory in alight in which it instantly break to pieces.

## 2. Rigorous Philosophy

In contrast to Bergson's philosophy, the New Philosophy produces “solid results” (Russell 1913, p. 38)—results that do not disintegrate when subjected to the “test of reason”. In this connection it is interesting to notice that Wittgenstein himself criticized Russell's paper “Free Man's Worship” (1901) in that there is not “something solid” behind it. (# 387<sup>1</sup>) Apparently, this paper was still not a part of the New Philosophy—not for Wittgenstein, at least.

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

On the face of these facts, it appears that the most appropriate name for the New Philosophy would be “rigorous philosophy”. Ironically, this term was first used by

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

Husserl in the title of his book *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* (1910/11). It is ironic since “analytic philosophy” was for decades considered to be opposite to phenomenology.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The New Philosophy as Examined Philosophy

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

Russell believed that the New Philosophy achieves solid results by, above all, being an “examined philosophy”—philosophy examined by reason. Perhaps the best description of this discipline is delivered in his paper “Mysticism and Logic”: the New Philosophy is a philosophy which uses “the harmonizing mediation of reason, which tests our beliefs by their mutual compatibility, and examines, in doubtful cases, the possible sources of error on the one side and on the other.” (Russell 1918, p. 17) This is a philosophy of “scientific restraint and balance”. (ibid., p. 20) Conversely, the Old Philosophy produces theories and ideas that are not examined this way. (In this sense, Russell also complained of Bergson’s “dogmatic, pontifical style” [# 360]). As a result, they are consistent only to sympathetic minds. Seen from another, unsympathetic perspective, they quickly disintegrate.

Following this method, Russell adopted the practice of constructing philosophical theories (a practice also followed in Carnap’s *Aufbau*). This kind of New Philosophy suggests ever new hypotheses (or models), that aim at better presenting (or ordering) the facts available. It does not claim to discover truths. A

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<sup>2</sup> In Milkov 2004 we have already shown that this was not the case.

typical example of this approach is provided in Russell's *Theory of Knowledge* (1913), where he set up a new system of epistemology following the apparatus of the New Logic, and starting from a single epistemological premise—acquaintance.

After Wittgenstein's criticized this book project, persuading Russell that his theory of judgment is false, the latter continued to believe that "this is a good book, because it gives an example of scientific method where previous writing has been unscientific.... It is what Galileo did in physics—its value is independent of the truth or falsehood of the particular results one arrives at." (1.6.13<sup>3</sup>)

#### **4. The New Philosophy as Consisting of Discoveries**

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

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

Wittgenstein developed his version of New Philosophy without arguments following an approach that was rightly considered by some historians "Kantian". Its main characteristic is that it fuses philosophy with logic. Thus strengthened, it produces rigorous thoughts that do not disintegrate under critical analysis. This variant of New Philosophy treats the fundamentals even more consistently than Russell's does. In this sense Wittgenstein sought to give "another and more

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<sup>3</sup> Here and later in the text, such tripartite digit numbers indicate the date of a letter of Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell.

fundamental account of the fundamentals of *Principia* itself.” (McGuinness 1988, p. 104)

In this way, Wittgenstein produced above all some discoveries in the area of philosophical logic. A very good collection of such discoveries is presented in Wittgenstein’s “Notes on Logic”. Here is an example: “Frege said ‘propositions are names’; Russell said ‘propositions correspond to complexes’. Both are false; and especially false is the statements ‘propositions are names of complexes’.” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 97) Three years later, in 1916, Wittgenstein found that this method could help him to produce solid philosophical results in ethics as well: “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.” (p. 83) Apparently, Wittgenstein’s logical-philosophical method could be applied not only to logic and ethics but also to any other philosophical discipline.

Elsewhere, we have called this method of working of Wittgenstein’s the “sculpture method”. This was a method of systematic parting away all the raw material from the “ultimate”, eternal philosophical truths (cf. Milkov 1997, i, pp. 355 f.). Seen from a different, positive, perspective, this method was that of step-by-step monolithic building of all those “ultimate” philosophical truths which Wittgenstein himself believed he had access to. This approach accepts that every happy philosophical discovery is ultimate, so that it settles the problem under scrutiny once and for all; we do not need to return to it again. In other words, it produces “crystals”, the purest of which was the *Tractatus* itself.

Wittgenstein himself described his idiosyncratic method also using other metaphors. At times he felt that his task “was something to be discharged, not by patient and cumulative removal of partial problems but by some great insight achieved as a result of effort.” (McGuinness 1988, p. 172) Intriguingly enough, this method of working was not completely foreign to Russell, that adept in arguments and systems, either. On March 22, 1912, he wrote to Lady Morrell: “[Wittgenstein’s] attitude justifies all I have hoped about my work ... he has even the same similes as I have—a wall, parting him from the truth, which he must pull

down somehow. After our last discussion, he said: ‘Well, there’s a bit of wall pulled down’.” (Clark 1975, p. 172)

In general, however, it should be said that Wittgenstein’s talent for philosophy, when compared with that of Russell, was of a rather different kind. In short, Wittgenstein was simply not good at systematic reasoning. In this sense Russell reported that “when there are no clear arguments but only inconclusive considerations to be balanced, or unsatisfactory points of view to be set against each other, he [Wittgenstein] is not good.” (23.4.13) This means that Wittgenstein was no good at constructing series of logically impeccable philosophical theories, which was, however, Russell’s forte. On the other hand, when Russell was confronted with “philosophical walls” which were to be destroyed, he felt that even when he “put out *all* [his] force” he was “only just equal” to Wittgenstein (17.3.12).

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

## 5. Wittgenstein’s Theoretical Aestheticism

The practice of discovering philosophical truths, of removing “philosophical walls” that shadow the truth in a fit of deep concentration, led Wittgenstein to aspire “to be creative”, an attitude well documented in Carnap’s “Autobiography”: When [Wittgenstein] started to formulate his view on some specific philosophical problem, we often felt the internal struggle that occurred in him at that very moment, a struggle by which he tried to penetrate from darkness to light under an intense and painful strain, which was even visible on his most expressive face. When finally, sometimes after prolonged arduous effort, his answer came forth, his

statement stood before us like a newly created piece of art or a divine revelation. (Carnap 1963, pp. 25–6)

Carnap, of course, was unfair to Wittgenstein when he compared him to “a religious prophet or seer”. Wittgenstein’s objective was not to invent religious truths but philosophical ones. His truths were rigorous and threw light on the fundamentals. In this sense he was a New Philosopher. Wittgenstein’s singularity consisted in the fact that he was “the [passionate] artist in intellect”, a characteristic which, as Russell emphasized, “is so very rare.” (27.5.12)

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

This practice of philosophy made Wittgenstein to believe that only honest philosophy reaches the fundamentals, while the Old Philosophy is phony, or “bourgeois”,<sup>4</sup> was of central importance for both philosophers. This was indeed what connected Wittgenstein’s logic with ethics, a tendency that led him to Tolstoy in the first days of the First World War.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein meant this designation literally. To be sure, it was planned that he should lecture at the Working Men’s College, London. (McGuinness 1988, p. 170)

<sup>5</sup> See on these developments Milkov 2003.

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