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James R. Connelly. *Wittgenstein's Critique of Russell's Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement.*

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Reviewed by Samuel Lebens

**Review: Wittgenstein's Critique of Russell's
Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement, by
James R. Connelly**

Samuel Lebens

The spring of 1913 gives rise to a puzzle for historians of analytic philosophy. On May the 7th, Russell started work, at an astounding speed, on his *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript. By the 6th of June he had written 16 chapters; two parts of what he hoped would be a three-part work. And yet, the project was abandoned later on in June, after less than two months of labour.

During this period, Russell saw Wittgenstein on a number of occasions. It's uncontroversial that it was these meetings which eventually led Russell's work to falter. Much of what we know about this series of events comes from letters that Wittgenstein wrote to Russell, and letters that Russell wrote to his lover, Ottoline Morrell.

Piecing together the scraps of evidence, we know that Russell told Wittgenstein, on the 14th of May, that he was working on a major book project. He wrote to Morrell, telling her that Wittgenstein had been "shocked to hear I am writing on theory of knowledge—he thinks it will be like the shilling book, which he hates" (75–76). Wittgenstein had thoroughly disapproved of Russell's popular *The Problems of Philosophy*. He had called it "a shilling shocker." And yet, despite Wittgenstein's misgivings, Russell doesn't seem to have been too perturbed, and continued to work at breakneck speed.

The second meeting between the two philosophers occurred on the 20th of May. As reported to Morrell, Wittgenstein assayed Russell with a "refutation of the theory of judgement which I used to hold" (30). But Russell didn't seem worried. He tells Morrell that Wittgenstein's criticism was "right," but that it only

attacks a theory that he *used* to hold, and that "the correction required is not very serious" (30). Russell's furious work-rate continued unabated.

After what appears to be a relatively uneventful meeting with Wittgenstein on the 23rd of May, the two men met again, in the midst of unseasonably sweltering weather, on the 26th. He reports this scene to Morell:

... we were both cross from the heat. I showed him a crucial part of what I had been writing. He said it was all wrong, not realizing the difficulties—that he had tried my view and knew it wouldn't work. I couldn't understand his objection—in fact he was very inarticulate—but I feel in my bones that he must be right, and that he has seen something that I have missed. (31)

Sadly, we're not told anything of the detail of this inarticulate criticism, but Russell received a letter from Wittgenstein in early June, which was almost certainly referring back to the 26th of May. He writes:

I can now express my objection to your theory of judgment exactly: I believe it is obvious that, from the prop[osition] 'A judges that (say) a is in Rel[ation] R to b', if correctly analysed, the prop[osition] 'aRb.v.~aRb' must follow without the use of any other premiss. This condition is not fulfilled by your theory. (31–32)

We have three significant meetings between Russell and Wittgenstein, on the 14th, the 20th, and the 26th of May. Each time Wittgenstein expressed reservations that he harboured with Russell's project. The first meeting didn't seem to bother Russell at all. The second meeting caused Russell to understand that Wittgenstein had a good criticism, but only of an old theory. And yet, on the third occasion, Russell was sent into a nose-dive, which ultimately caused him to abandon his book project altogether, and left him contemplating suicide—as he reported to Morrell (39).

These are the ingredients of a puzzle that have generated a considerable amount of scholarly debate. What was so devastating about the contents of Wittgenstein's still somewhat cryptic

letter, and how might it have related to the criticisms he had held against Russell's older theory of judgement? How can we reconstruct the philosophical dialectic that unfolded between these two titans of analytic philosophy over the course of that spring? It is this puzzle that James Connelly seeks to resolve in his thoroughly engaging book.

What's clear from Wittgenstein's letter is that the focus of his criticism was Russell's theory of judgement. We also know that Russell's theory of judgement was subject to various stages of development.

The common thread through the various iterations of Russell's theory of judgement, as it evolved from 1910 to 1913 (and onwards, until its eventual rejection in 1919), was the following feature. Instead of thinking of judgement, or assertion, or any other propositional attitude, for that matter, as a *binary* relation between a mind and a proposition, Russell thought that we should do away with commitment to the existence of propositions altogether. Instead, we should say that propositional attitudes are a relation between a mind, on the one hand, and the multiple entities that we might otherwise have thought of as the constituents of the proposition. And thus, when Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, he doesn't stand related to some entity called a proposition—the proposition *that Desdemona loves Cassio*—but, instead, he stands *multiply* related to Desdemona, and to Cassio, and to *love*. This theory of judgement is known as the Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement (or the MRTJ).

What changes between the different iterations of the MRTJ, as it evolved in Russell's work, was how exactly the relation of judgement was thought to relate the mind to these multiple entities, and whether extra *relata* were needed, in addition to Desdemona, *love*, and Cassio, before Othello could be said to properly judge the matter at hand.

For example, in the 1910 iteration of the theory, *love* was supposed to enter into the judgement alongside something called a *sense*. This detail was dropped in the 1912 iteration. In the 1913

version of the theory, the logical form of dyadic facts was supposed to appear in an analysis of Othello's judgement, such that, when he judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, Othello would stand related to *love*, to Desdemona, to Cassio, *and* to the logical form that would be exhibited by the fact that Desdemona loves Cassio, were the judgement to be true.

With this background in place, we can safely say that on the 20th of May, when Wittgenstein attacked a theory that Russell used to hold, he was attacking the MRTJ as it appeared in 1912. Evidently, Russell thought that the addition of logical forms, which was the new detail of the theory, as it would appear in 1913, would block whatever concern Wittgenstein had had. On the 26th of May, by contrast, when Russell finally showed Wittgenstein the "crucial part" of the new manuscript—*viz.*, the part that contained the new version of the MRTJ—Wittgenstein insisted that adding the logical form of a dyadic fact into our analysis of Othello's judgement wouldn't help. Wittgenstein had already tried such a fix. He had found that it wouldn't work.

So much is clear. But what has fascinated scholars is what, exactly, those underlying concerns were, and why the objection, stated inchoately on the 26th of May, and more exactly in his letter of early June, was so paralyzing for Russell.

Wittgenstein's letter makes it clear, and his later writings make it even clearer, that part of Wittgenstein's concern with Russell's theory of judgement is that it doesn't rule out the possibility of making nonsensical assertions. If judgement is a relation that relates minds to propositions, then what a mind can assert is constrained by which propositions exist, out there, beyond the mind, for it to assert. But, if propositions don't exist, and minds *create* propositional content, by standing multiply related to an array of discrete entities, then what's to stop a mind from asserting, not that *Desdemona loves Cassio*, but that *Desdemona Cassios love*? What's to stop a mind from asserting, not that *the book is on the table*, but that *the table penholders the book*—to use an example that Wittgenstein would later coin (36)?

If this was Wittgenstein's underlying worry, then why does he express it with the claim that, if Othello judges that aRb , then "'aRb.v.~aRb'" must follow without the use of any other premiss"? Which other premises did he have in mind? What's so bad about appealing to other premises? Moreover, how exactly were the concerns that Wittgenstein raised on the 14th, the 20th, and the 26th, related one to the other?

There is a "Standard Reading" (SR) of this history, first advanced by Nicholas Griffin and Steven Sommerville—*standard* because it went unchallenged in the literature for nearly twenty years. According to SR, Wittgenstein's talk of a "premiss", in his letter of June 1913, is an oblique reference to *13.3 of *Principia Mathematica*, and Wittgenstein's real concern is that Russell can't block the emergence of nonsense, without undermining the ramified theory of types (§2.2). The MRTJ and the ramified theory of types—both crucial elements of *Principia Mathematica* were, according to Wittgenstein's complaint, incompatible. Wittgenstein had brought down the entire edifice of *Principia*. No wonder he had shaken Russell to the core.

Connelly well describes how SR has been rejected by a new generation of scholars, for misunderstanding the theory of types, and misunderstanding the relationship between that theory and the MRTJ. Accordingly, a slew of competing alternatives to SR have emerged. There's Graham Steven's "Ontological Interpretation" (§2.5), Peter Hank's "Unity Interpretation" (§2.7), Christopher Pincock's "Correspondence Interpretation" (§2.10), Gregory Landini's "Showing Interpretation" (§2.12), and an interpretation which I have defended, greatly influenced by Fraser MacBride, which Connelly calls the "Irrelevance Interpretation" (§2.14). I won't go into the details of these various interpretations, but I will say that Connelly's treatment of them strikes me as fair-handed and illuminating.

Having laid out the philosophical background that gave rise to the MRTJ in chapter 1, and having surveyed the main competing interpretations of Wittgenstein's critique in chapter 2, Connelly

steps into the breach, in chapter 3, to offer his own interpretation of Wittgenstein's critique. He expertly demonstrates the various advantages of his interpretation by comparing it, each time favourably, with those he surveyed in chapter 2. Connelly's interpretation is called the "Logical Interpretation" (LI).

According to LI, Wittgenstein's critique was delivered in three waves. The first wave, expressed on the 14th of May, concerns the foundations of logic. Wittgenstein is dubious of building the foundations of logic upon epistemology. Analysing propositional content in terms of cognitive relations, which is what Russell had done in his shilling shocker, and what he was proposing to do in his new book, is to build propositional logic upon epistemological foundations (75–77). But, to use the rhetoric that Wittgenstein would use in his *Notebooks*, logic should take care of itself (164).

In the second wave, Wittgenstein raises a concern with the MRTJ as it appeared in 1912. That version of the theory seemed to have no resources to block the emergence of nonsense. If Othello's judgement was a relation between (1) Othello, (2) Desdemona, (3) *love*, and (4) Cassio, what is there to ensure that only a dyadic relation could appear in slot number-(2)? In other words, what is there to stop Othello from judging that *Desdemona Cassios love*?

Russell wasn't bothered too much by this second wave because he had already come up with a new version of the MRTJ. On the new version, when Othello judges that *Desdemona loves Cassio*, he stands related to Desdemona, *love*, and Cassio, but he also stands related to the general logical form of a dyadic fact. The form is supposed to function as something like a template for Othello's judgement. By placing Desdemona, Cassio, and *love* into the right slots of the logical form, Othello arrives at a truth-apt content to assert. He can't judge that *Desdemona Cassios love* because the various slots of the logical form are restricted, so as to rule out the wrong sort of insertions. Cassio can't be put into the slot where *love* should go because Cassio isn't a relation. The template won't allow for the emergence of nonsense.

On Connelly's reading, Wittgenstein's new worry, which became the third wave, is related to what later comes to be known as the "sense-truth regress" (146). That an atomic proposition p makes *sense* cannot, for fear of vicious regress, rely upon the *truth* of some other atomic proposition, q . If p is an atomic proposition, then it should follow, "without the use of any other premiss," that p makes sense. But, on the 1913 version of the MRTJ, we can only ensure that p makes sense by relying on the truth of various prior-judgements; judgements that govern how we plug the constituents of p into the correct slots of the relevant form. As Connelly would have it, Wittgenstein's letter of June 1913 is placing down what I have elsewhere dubbed a "no-constraints constraint".

As Connelly puts it, Russell's theory of judgement:

runs afoul of certain basic intuitions concerning logical inference. Namely, if aRb is a significant and intelligible propositional content and thus not nonsense, then $aRb \vee \sim aRb$ (or, indeed, any tautology) must follow from it automatically as it were (i.e. directly), without depending upon any supplemental premises for support. (82)

Tautologies should follow automatically, from an analysis of any given judgement, and not in deference to some external premise or constraint upon judgement.

Personally, I'm happy to accept the bulk of Connelly's LI. And yet, I don't think that the historical accuracy of LI really undermines the so-called Irrelevance Interpretation. The main insight of the Irrelevance Interpretation is that Wittgenstein's critique (a) didn't truly bother Russell as much as he made out and/or (b) it shouldn't have bothered Russell all that much, even if it did.

The grounds for thinking (a) to be true are biographical and psychological. They are surveyed quite fairly by Connelly in his presentation of the Irrelevance Interpretation (§2.14). But even if Russell's somewhat desperate letters to a uninterested lover really are a reliable indicator of his assessment of Wittgenstein's

critique, and even if Wittgenstein's hold over Russell was such as to paralyze him with the fear that Wittgenstein must be right; Connelly still hasn't, I think, done enough to establish that the no-constraints constraint *should* have bothered Russell.

Why can't a theory of judgement tell us that judgement simply *does* slot its arguments only into argument positions reserved for relata of the appropriate metaphysical category or kind? Othello doesn't have to *judge* that *love* is a relation. He doesn't have to *judge* that *love*, alone among the other relata of his judgement, can fit into the appropriate place, within a logical form, so as to give rise to the content that *Desdemona loves Cassio*. The relation of judgement itself can do that work alone.

We don't ask why the relation of " x is taller than y " can only relate things with *height*. We accept that its argument positions are reserved only for relata of a certain metaphysical type; such that the relation simply cannot relate the number 2 to *wisdom*. So why can't the relation of judgement be bound by similar restrictions? Nobody has to judge that these restrictions are in force, in order for them to be automatically enforced by the metaphysical structure of the relation itself.

Despite this difference in kind between the different object terms of Othello's judgement, they all enter into the judgement as terms, on an ontological par with one another. But because they all enter into the judgement on the same level, so to speak, Connelly is concerned that there are no "brute, or basic logical, metaphysical or structural distinctions" between *love*, as it appears in Othello's judgement, and the other object terms. There are therefore no distinctions "which can be relied upon to block" the emergence of nonsense, "independently of the stipulations involved" in Othello's "analytical procedure" of assigning *love* to the right slot in the logical form (122).

But why does Othello have to make any *stipulations*? Why can't the relevant argument places of the judgement relation, or of the logical form, be such as only to allow *some* metaphysical kinds, and not others, just as the x is taller than y relation won't allow for

non-spatial entities to occupy its argument positions? The fact that *love* is appearing as a term, rather than as a relating relation, doesn't mean that it isn't a relation. Why can't there be argument positions in judgements or logical forms that are reserved for relations-as-terms? This shouldn't have paralyzed Russell, and to the extent that it did, I would still insist that the issue was biographical and psychological, rather than philosophical or logical.

One more complaint. Connelly has a tendency to read the no-constraints constraint into sources where it likely has no place. For example, Russell laments, in his 1918 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, that the difficulties in drawing a diagram, to represent the logical form of a judgement, render it impossible to draw a "map-in-space" of belief (107). Connelly seizes on this comment (107–109). He interprets it to mean the following: drawing a map-in-space of belief would require us to make stipulations as to where the various relata should go, and being forced to make such stipulations, in order to give rise to propositional content, is to violate the no-constraints constraint (or, you could call it the no-stipulations stipulation, if you prefer). But this seems like an over-reading.

Russell, in 1918, is aware of the fact that the different object terms of Othello's judgment must be entering into the judgement on a par with one another, and that all of them should be equally subordinate to the relation of judgement. And yet Russell is aware that, at the very same time, the relation of *love*, which is one of those object terms, must be set aside and privileged, in relation to the other object terms. It's as if, from the perspective of the judgement relation, the subordinate relation is just a regular term, but that, from the point of view of the other object terms, the subordinate relation is a relation. It is these conflicting demands upon the so-called subordinate relation, and the fact that viewed from one perspective it's a regular term, and that viewed from another, it isn't, that makes it impossible to provide a single map that captures what Russell wants to say.

Having defended his reading of Wittgenstein's criticism, Connelly moves onto chapter 4—his final chapter—in which he sketches the lasting influence of that criticism in Wittgenstein's own philosophical development. On Connelly's reading, Wittgenstein's early period is characterized by a complex web of doctrines, theories, research programs, and sensibilities, and in very interesting ways, many of these strands of Wittgenstein's thought can only be appreciated in light of his critique of Russell's MRTJ. Moreover, the continuities between his earlier and later work, to the extent that such continuities exist, can best be understood—Connelly avers—in light of Wittgenstein's rejection of the MRTJ, and his contention that logic can take care of itself. Connelly's exploration of Wittgensteinian philosophy through the prism of his rejection of Russell's MRTJ is a *tour de force*.

Connelly claims to have had four main objectives in the writing of his book (2, 191–93):

1. To develop his reading of Wittgenstein's 1913 critique of the MRTJ, which he calls LI.
2. To defend LI against some of the most prominent competing interpretations in the literature.
3. To situate "Wittgenstein's critique of Russell's MRTJ within the broader context of each of Wittgenstein and Russell's philosophical development."
4. To introduce "students and scholars of early analytic philosophy to, and familiarize them with, the relevant historical events, textual evidence, scholarly controversies, letters, notes and diagrams associated with Wittgenstein's critique of Russell's MRTJ."

Connelly's first and second objectives are expertly achieved. Admittedly, I don't think that LI is in particularly deep conflict with the Irrelevance Interpretation, and I don't think that Connelly

has done enough to explain why Russell *should* have been paralyzed by Wittgenstein's concern. Having said that, I *do* think that LI appropriates all that is best, whilst avoiding the pitfalls, in all of those interpretations that directly compete with it.

Turning to Connelly's third objective, I would say that his success in shinning new light on Wittgenstein's philosophy, through the prism of his rejection of the MRTJ, is one of the best features of an already excellent book. And yet, I don't think that Connelly did half as well in using his reading of the relevant history to shine new light on the philosophical development of Russell. Connelly's engagement with Russell's work, in the aftermath of 1913, is cursory compared to his engagement with Wittgenstein. Moreover, his scene setting, in explaining the complex philosophical dynamics that gave rise to the MRTJ in the first place, though accurate and adequate for the task at hand, was far less illuminating than his exploration of the Wittgensteinian themes post-1913.

That leaves us to assess his fourth objective. The relevant scholarly controversies are complex and many. Moreover, the events of that fateful Spring are vitally important for the history of analytic philosophy. Accordingly, Connelly's expert and clear presentation, all in one book, of all of the key interpretations in the literature, and all of the relevant scraps of evidence, constitutes a significant contribution to scholars and students alike.

All in all, Connelly has written an admirably clear book. It eschews the unnecessary and cumbersome formalism which sometimes characterises histories of this period. Moreover, he does tremendous justice to the philosophical vision and penetrating insight of his two protagonists. We'll never know for sure what was said in those sometimes angry interactions in the spring of 1913, but Connelly has done as good a job as anyone can to reconstruct their most likely contours.

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