

Russell's *Inquiry into Meaning and truth*

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In comparison with his early essays in analytic philosophy and with the writings of his logical atomist period, Russell's *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* has received less attention and is often neglected by contemporary readers. There are, I think, two main reasons for this. The first is probably stylistic: in contrast to the sharpness of his earlier works such as "On denoting" and *Problems of Philosophy*, the style of the *Inquiry*, which comes from Russell's William James Lectures at Harvard in 1940, is less polished and the views expressed less clear cut than – for instance - those *Our knowledge of the External World* (1914) or *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918). The second reason owes more to the content and the atmosphere of the book: whereas Russell's first philosophy is based on the logical analysis of language as a guide to the structure of the world and displays a sort of analytic purity, his second philosophy, especially in the *Inquiry*, is more epistemological and provides a mixture of considerations on knowledge, meaning and ontology which is sometimes disconcerting, in particular when it introduces psychological considerations in matters of logic. For those readers who have been accustomed to think of Russell, along with Frege and Moore, as the founder of analytic philosophy, and who consider that the distinctive mark of this kind of philosophy is a logical analysis of language free of all psychological considerations, it comes as a surprise to see Russell analysing meaning in terms of psychological concepts. When he says, for instance, in chapter 5 of the *Inquiry*, that "psychologically, the logical connective "or" corresponds to "a state of hesitation", the readers of early Russell raise their eyebrows. Moreover the psychology of the *Inquiry* is mostly behaviouristic and outdated. If you add to that the fact that a large part of the book is a discussion of the doctrines of logical positivism, with whom Russell declares himself in the preface to be "more in sympathy than with any other existing school", it is not completely surprising that today's readers, who in their majority are less in sympathy with logical positivism than with any other existing school, should be put off.

Although these reactions are understandable, they rest upon a misapprehension of Russell's real concerns and of the history of his views. During his Platonist period, in *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), he believed that logic is the royal road to metaphysical truth about the world, and he eschewed considerations about the nature of knowledge, largely in reaction to his own early idealist apprenticeship. He was concerned with stating what is real, not with stating how we know what is real, and he believed that considerations about our knowledge of reality always lead to idealism. Epistemological questions, however, came quickly back into the picture. Even when he wrote "On denoting" (1905) his interest in logical analysis of descriptions such as "The present King of France" was related to the distinction between two kinds of knowledge: knowledge by "acquaintance" and "knowledge by description". The *Problems of philosophy*, published in 1912, just after the publication of the first volume of *Principia Mathematica*, as well as his unpublished *Theory of Knowledge* (1913), show clearly that his philosophy had taken an epistemological turn. A few years later, in *The Analysis of Mind* (1921) as well as in *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927) Russell had taken a psychological turn as well, and shown a strong interest in behaviourism and in scientific psychology in general. Two elements in his investigations led to these developments. The first one was his rejection, under the influence of Wittgenstein's criticisms, of his theory of judgement. In *the Problems of Philosophy* Russell considered a judgement such as the one expressed by the sentence "Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio" as a "multiple relation" between Othello on the one hand, and the complex formed by the relation of belief and love between Desdemona and Cassio. But this analysis stumbles on the fact that the relation does not exist when the judgement is false (as in the present case) and that the relation between Othello and the complex in question is not of the same kind as that between the terms of the complex and the relation (love). This led Russell to reject the idea that judging is a relation between a subject and the elements of a judgement. In the meantime, Russell had adopted the view that we do not perceive objects directly, but are acquainted with *sense data*, which are the immediate objects of sensation. These doctrines led him progressively to be more favourable to a view about the relation of the mental and the physical world that he had earlier criticized when he discussed William James' philosophy, namely neutral monism, according to which mind and matter do not form

opposing realms but are a single “stuff” which is neither mental nor physical. On this view the distinction between the subject and the objects of judgment disappears. Even though he rejected the Cartesian idea of a pure Ego or Subject, standing in front of his objects, Russell has always been a Cartesian in the theory of knowledge. His problem has always been : how can we be justified in what we know, and how can we base our knowledge on a firm foundation? After the first-world war, his version of this problem was: how can we reconcile of knowledge of the physical world with our immediate sensory knowledge? The *Inquiry* is the result of his re-evaluation of his answers to this questions for over thirty years.

The *Inquiry* is complex not only because it incorporates several layers of Russell’s views, but also because it combines four strands : epistemological, semantical, psychological and metaphysical. The starting point is epistemological: what is the nature of our empirical knowledge and what justifies our empirical beliefs? From *Problems of philosophy* to the end of his philosophical career, Russell has never ceased to ask this traditional question, which he formulates in *Human knowledge* (1948) thus : “How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know?” In 1940, however, his method for answering this question is explicitly linguistic. He his concerned with the way in which our empirical beliefs are expressed in sentences and his question is : “What justifies our empirical sentences?” Sentences, like beliefs, have a certain content or meaning. Russell distinguishes two components of meaning in the *Inquiry*: a psychological component and what we shall call a truth-conditional component. The psychological component is, in Russell’s terminology, what a sentence *expresses*. The truth-conditional component is what the sentence *indicates*, which is in general a fact or a state of affairs in the world. For instance the sentence “ There is food on the table”, uttered by me at a certain time and place, expresses my belief that there is food on the table, and indicates the fact that there is food on the table. The truth-conditional component, in turn, is made of various entities in the world – things, their properties or relations and facts - which, combined in a certain way, make our sentences true. These

entities. But how are these various dimensions – meaning, truth, and knowledge – combined?

In order to understand Russell's conception of meaning and truth in the *Inquiry* it is useful to sort out the various kinds of possible relations between the two notions. It will enable us to locate Russell's view among those which have been prominent in the twentieth century.

Let us call, following a recent tradition¹, a *theory of meaning* a philosophical account of meaning which would give us a specification – or explanation, or characterisation – of meaning in terms of a certain property of sentences of a given language of the form

[M] S means that p iff and only

where “S” is a sentence of a given language and “ p ” the appropriate meaning-giving condition. The point of a theory of meaning is to find an appropriate concept, or set of concepts, susceptible to define or at least to give a *substantial* characterisation of meaning.

Frege, the early Russell and the first Wittgenstein subscribed to a version of the view that “means that” in [M] can be explained in terms of the *truth-conditions* of the sentence p : what a sentence means consists in its truth-conditions.² On such a *truth-conditional conception of meaning*, the meaning of a given sentence S is spelled out with an appropriate specification of the schema

[T] S is true iff p

(where “S” denotes a given sentence and “ p ” is a sentence describing the truth-conditions of S). An essential ingredient of truth-conditional theories is that the meaning of a sentence S should be determined by the meaning of its component parts, hence that the truth-conditions of the whole sentence be determined by the contribution of its

¹ Actually the phrase “theory of meaning” often has the technical sense of a set of axioms from which one could derive knowledge of meaning. I leave this sense aside here. For a recent account of this tradition, see, for instance Hale and Wright, eds 1997. My presentation is much inspired by Skorupski 1997 in this volume.

² Frege: “It is determined through and through under what conditions any sentence stands for the True. The sense of this name (of a truth value) that is the thought, is the sense or thought that these conditions are fulfilled (Frege 1893, I, 32). Wittgenstein: *Tractatus*, 4.024. To understand a sentence in use means to know what is the case if it is true

parts to these truth conditions. Russell's theory of descriptions (Russell 1905) was, with Frege's earlier analysis of quantified sentences (i.e. those sentences containing phrases such as "all", "some" and similar expressions) a major step in the analysis of the truth-conditional element in meaning.³

Now, will the replacement of "means that" by "is true" in [M] do? According to a familiar objection (Dummett 1975), the problem is that a speaker who would know a sentence of the form [T], for instance

[1] "Lilac smells" is true iff Lilac smells

might well know that [1] is true without knowing what [1] means, that is without understanding this sentence. There is all the difference in the world between knowing what the sentence "Lilac smells" means or the proposition it expresses, and knowing that the *metalinguistic* sentence [1] is true. When we accept that sentences of the form [T] "give the meaning" of sentences of the object-language on their left-hand side, we tend to forget that this is so because we already know what these sentences mean. This remark often leads to the conclusion that the bare truth-conditional conception of meaning is insufficient, and that there must be something more to the meaning of a sentence than its truth-conditions. But what is this something more? The obvious candidate is: knowledge of truth-conditions, or some epistemic state which constitutes the understanding that a speaker has of the sentence. According to an *epistemic conception of meaning*, the meaning of a given sentence consists in what the speaker knows, or is justified to believe, when he uses the sentence. An epistemic conception of meaning is often associated (but as we shall see it need not be) to the view according to which to know the meaning of a sentence is to know how to verify it. We can call this a *verificationist conception of meaning*. In rough form (for a declarative sentence), it can be formulated thus:

[EM] S means that p iff one is justified in asserting p

³ For a clear statement of this view see Kaplan 1966.

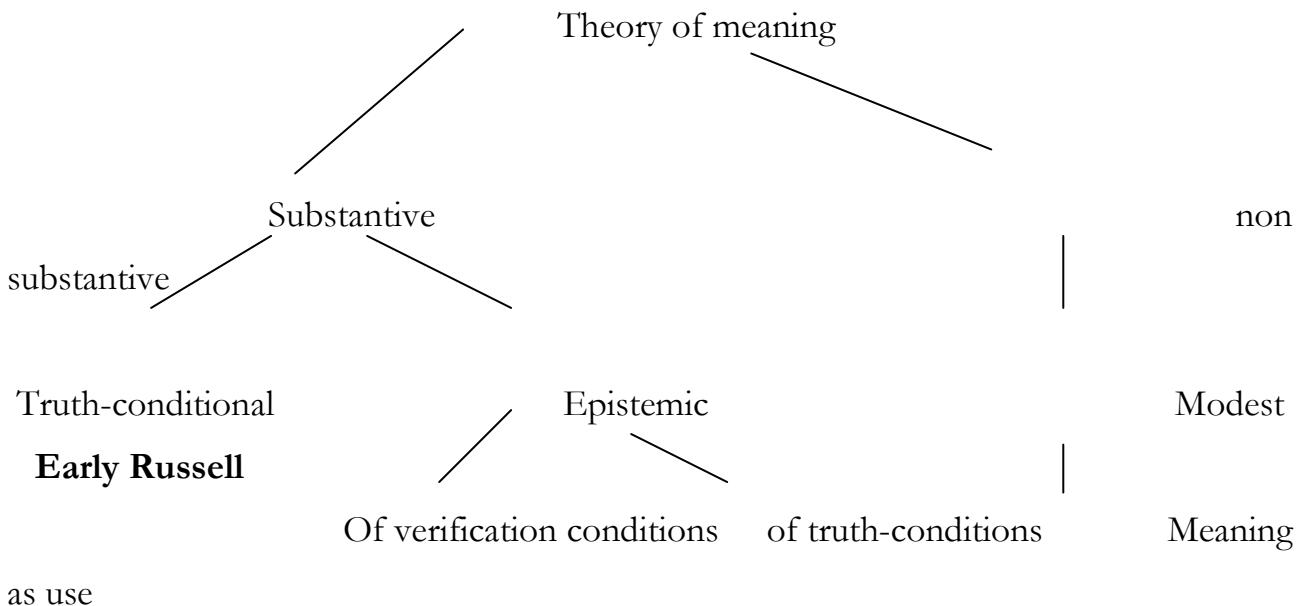
A verificationist theory of meaning says that understanding a sentence is to grasp the information which would verify this sentence. It does not tell us what this information consists in. There are, however, two distinct versions of the theory, depending on how we conceive the information in question. On one version, it can be said that what the speaker knows are the *truth-conditions* of the sentence. But this leads to an obvious difficulty: for a large number of sentences (about infinite quantities, about the past, or about remote regions of space and time) we do not know their truth-conditions, even though we do understand these sentences. A verificationist about truth will find much more plausible to say that what we know when we know the meaning of a sentence are its *verification* conditions. On this second reading, the epistemic conception of meaning is coupled to a verificationist conception of truth.

Both the truth-conditional and the verificationist conception of meaning share one presupposition: an account of what linguistic meaning is has to be formulated in terms of something which is necessarily extra-linguistic: namely states of affairs, objects, or facts, or whatever there is in the world that accounts for the truth-conditions and the reference conditions of our sentences, or states of a speaker (presumably states of mind) or capacities which account for what the speaker knows when he knows what the sentences mean. But the objection to the truth-conditional conception suggests that it is impossible to account for what the sentences mean without invoking our knowledge of what they mean, hence without relying on our mastery of linguistic expressions. The same objection can be pressed against the verificationist conception of meaning: how can we account for what a speaker knows without looking at how he *uses* the sentence, that is without taking this knowledge to be, in large part, a knowledge of the rules of language use? But then how can this knowledge of rules be spelled out without presupposing that the speaker masters them, hence already follows these rules? Such an objection is familiar from Wittgenstein's reflections of language use and rules. A famous remark by Wittgenstein just says that :

“In a certain sense, the use of language is something that cannot be taught, i.e I cannot use language to teach it in the way language could be used to teach someone to

play the piano. – And that of course is just another way of saying I cannot use language to get outside language.” (Wittgenstein 1975: 54)

On such a view, any specification of what meaning is has to be formulated in terms of language rules, and hence must presuppose the speaker’s mastery of these very rules. It follows that there is no language independent account of meaning, be it in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of mental states, or epistemic states which we could specify in language free terms.⁴ In other words we cannot explain understanding a linguistic expression as knowing what the expression means as if the meaning were an entity independent of language. We have to use our very knowledge of meaning rules in order to account for them. Let us call this, following John Skrorupski (1997), *the priority thesis*. According to many versions of this thesis, no genuine theory of meaning can be given, if a “theory” of meaning is supposed to explain, or account for, meaning in terms of an independent concept. This why a priority thesis is often called modest, or deflationary, or non substantive about the aim of giving a theory of meaning.⁵ We can recapitulate these distinctions thus :



⁴ This is notably, why there are no rules to interpret rules, one of the morals of Wittgenstein ‘s rule following considerations.

⁵ McDowell 1987, Horwich 1998, and a number of views inspired by the late Wittgenstein have been of this “deflationary” kind.

Wittgenstein

Now, where does Russell fit within this framework? The early Russell, as we have already remarked, defended a version of the truth-conditional view. But from 1919 onwards, he adopted a version of the epistemic conception of meaning, according to which the propositions expressed by sentences are psychological entities (mostly made up of images) which are grasped by speakers, and correlated to their behaviour in the use of sentences. During the nineteen thirties, Wittgenstein the logical positivists defended also an epistemic conception of meaning, but their version was clearly associated to a *verificationist conception of truth*. According to the celebrated criterion of empirical meaning proposed by the positivists, a sentence is meaningful only if it is either analytic and true in virtue of meaning, or synthetic, in which case its meaning consists in its method of verification. Various members of the Vienna Circle had divergent views on the nature of this method: some, like Schlick, held that the method of verification had to be based upon knowledge of basic sentences, themselves based on sensory experiences, others, like Neurath and Hempel, believed that the verification conditions had to be holistic, and based on the language of science as a whole. Other writers, like Carnap, influenced by the methods proposed by Tarski (1936) for defining truth in formal language, developed conceptions of meaning in terms of the precise statement of meaning-rules, understood as conventions tacitly accepted by speakers of a language. Wittgenstein himself became critical of these views.⁶

Russell's *Inquiry* is obviously inspired by these debates, and much of the book is devoted to a dialogue with these views. Russell's late approach however, is genuine, and owes as much to his previous evolution and premises as to the positivist atmosphere of the thirties. The originality of his views is that, whereas most positivists defend a version of the verificationist or epistemic conception of meaning and a verificationist conception of truth, Russell defends an epistemic conception of meaning (meaning is a function of

what a speaker knows) but a *non verificationist*, truth-conditional or realist conception of truth.

In order to understand in what sense it is an epistemic conception of meaning, we must first place into the context of Russell's general conception of knowledge. Russell presents his inquiry as an investigation into the sources and justifications of our knowledge of empirical propositions. He tells us that he is not concerned, in this work, with propositions of logic or mathematics, but only with the relation of basic propositions to experiences. This sets apart his approach from that of the logical empiricists, who distinguished two kinds of meaningful sentences: those which are synthetic or true in virtue of their relation to experience (such as "This is hot") and those which are analytic or true purely in virtue of meaning (such as "An oculist is an eye doctor")⁷. He also differs from the Viennese philosophers in his lack of interest for a general criterion of the meaningfulness of sentences, which would allow us to demarcate science from metaphysics. For him not only there is no such demarcation, but legitimate metaphysical issues arise in the theory of knowledge, which is not purely limited, as Carnap for instance had argued in his *Logical Syntax of Language*, to knowledge of words.

Russell's conception of knowledge is twofold. On the one hand he defends a version of what we call today a "naturalized epistemology": knowledge is a natural phenomenon, which can be studied, like anything within nature, in causal terms. The general outlook is broadly speaking behaviouristic and physicalistic: organisms enter into causal contact with a physical environment which provides stimuli to which they react by forming appropriate habits. In this respect, however complex human organisms can be, there is not much difference, except of degree, between animal cognition and human cognition. Russell's conception of belief is also causal. A belief is the mental state intermediary between environmental inputs and output actions of the organism. This can be understood in a purely behaviourist way, but Russell is not a straight behaviourist. He considers belief to be a genuine psychological state, which together with sensory inputs and with other mental states, such as desires, leads to actions. In this respect, this

⁷ Actually the early Russell took the sentences of logic and mathematics as describing the world in its most general features, hence as synthetic, unlike the positivists, who took them to express merely linguistic conventions. But the later Russell came close to the logical positivist view that they are tautologies (see Russell 1959, ch. XVII)

conception is very close to what today is called a functionalist conception of belief.⁸ On the other hand, Russell considers that it is impossible to reduce an account of knowledge to an account of the causal relations between an organism and a physical or biological environment. The physicalist point of view is also in need of justification, when it presupposes the naïve realism of common sense. But scientific realism cannot be simply presupposed. As Russell says in what may be one of the most well-known *modus ponens* of contemporary philosophy: “ Naïve realism leads to physics, and physics, if true, shows that naïve realism is false. Therefore naïve realism, if true, is false, hence it is false”. Epistemology is not merely concerned with the causal question of why and how our beliefs can become knowledge, but with the normative question of why we *should* believe this or that. The kind of answer that Russell gives to the latter question is a version of what is traditionally called a form of foundationalism – all our beliefs are ultimately based on some basic or foundational beliefs which are beyond doubt. And his version of foundationalism is empiricist: ultimately our beliefs are based on experiences. Or, to put into the linguistic terms adopted by Russell: our knowledge rests upon basic propositions which in turn owe their truth to basic experiences.

Much of the originality of Russell’s approach in the *Inquiry* lies in this twofold conception of knowledge, both causal and foundationalist, descriptive and normative. But there is also a potential tension between these two points of view, since there is no necessary coincidence between the propositions which come first in the causal order, and those which come first in the logical order. Another source of tension is due to the double character of experiences and of beliefs based upon them: on the one hand they are defined by their causal connexions and can be studied objectively, on the other hand they involve an irreducible subjective element.

Another doctrine which lies in the background of Russell’s *Inquiry* is logical atomism, . Logical atomism is the view, which Russell borrowed initially from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, that all complex propositions can be decomposed into simpler elements until we reach ultimate “simples”. Another part of the doctrine is that the structure of

⁸ Russell had already defended such a view in the *Analysis of Mind* (1921). The analogy with the functionalist conception has been observed by Baldwin (1992). It is also present in Ramsey’s (1926) elaboration upon Russell’s definition (see also Dokic and Engel 2002: 24-25)

propositions mirrors the structure of the world, and that all propositions correspond to facts, which can in turn be analysed into complex facts and atomic facts. In the version of the doctrine which he defended in *The philosophy of logical atomism* (1918), Russell admitted both positive facts corresponding to positive propositions such as “The chair is blue” and negative facts corresponding to negative propositions such as “The chair is not blue”. He also accepted that the ultimate simple entities which compose atomic facts are particulars which are denoted by demonstrative words such as “this” or “that” which he called “logically proper names”. He held that we are directly acquainted to these entities in sensation. Although Russell rejects in 1940 a number of these views, he keeps the basic structure of logical atomism. In the first place, as we have already noted, he continues to hold that propositions correspond to facts and he still accepts these as genuine entities in his ontology, over and above things and their properties or relations. In his 1940 terminology, facts are the “verifiers” of sentences. This terminology is potentially misleading, because it suggests that the semantic dimension of sentences is constituted by their verification-conditions, in the manner of the verificationist theory of meaning and of truth held by the positivists. But it would be wrong to take the verifiers as indicating epistemic conditions. On the contrary Russell’s verifiers are more properly conceived as those entities *in the world* which *make true* our sentences, or, to use a terminology made popular today by contemporary ontologists, such as David Armstrong, their “truthmakers”.⁹ In other words, they are the truth-conditions of our sentences in the substantive sense required by a correspondence theory of truth.

That our sentences are made true by facts is one thing. Our knowledge of these facts is another thing, which we have to account for. According to Russell’s empiricist outlook, all sentences are made true ultimately by entities which are known through basic experiences. Now sentences are made up of words, such as names, demonstratives, predicates and verbs, which themselves get their meaning and truth conditions through certain basic experiences. In order to achieve this foundationalist strategy, Russell supposes that there exists a basic level of language, “the object-language”, which contains only words – “object-words” – which get their meaning through our direct

⁹ See Mulligan, Smith and Simons 1984, Armstrong 2003. Armstrong (2003 :5) explicitly credits Russell for having anticipated the notion of a truthmaker in the *Inquiry*

contact with the world. For instance natural kind terms such as “dog”, or names of sensible qualities, such as “yellow”, names of actions, such as “walk”, or adverbs referring to events, such as “quick” and “slow”, belong to this object-language and are learnt by “ostension”. He has two distinct arguments for postulating such a “primary language”. The first is a classical foundationalist move: if we did not posit a basic level of learning of words, we would get into a regress and language could not be learnt. The second is modelled after Tarski’s theory of truth, which is based on the schema [T] above, which rests upon a distinction between an object-language and a metalanguage: semantic words like “true” or “refers”, but also logical words such as “or”, “and” or “some” presuppose the existence of the basic language but cannot belong to it. Hence Russell distinguishes the first-level object-language from a second-order language introducing logical words and semantic words. Russell’s recognition of the existence of a hierarchy of languages was, as he says at the beginning of chapter 4, implicit in his own theory of types, according to which we have to postulate a hierarchy expressions of different types in order to avoid the famous paradoxes of set theory. Here the hierarchy of languages is mostly devised for epistemological and ontological purposes, and both the ontology and epistemology of his classification of facts have undergone important changes since his logical atomist period.

In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Russell accepted that the kinds of facts which make true propositions more or less paralleled the structure of the kinds of propositions. Thus he accepted – somewhat reluctantly - the existence of negative facts, corresponding to negative sentences such as “The pen is not on the table” and of general facts corresponding to existential sentences such as “Some men are bald” or universal sentences such as “All emeralds are green”¹⁰. But he accepted neither the existence of conjunctive facts such as “Paul is bald and Mary is blonde”, because they can be reduced to singular atomic facts nor the existence of disjunctive facts such as “Paul or Mary came”. In the *Inquiry*, he rejects conjunctive, disjunctive, as well as negative facts, and he admits that the relation between general sentences (existential or universal) and the facts which make them true is less straightforward than it might seem

¹⁰ Wittgenstein did not accept such negative and general facts. See Wittgenstein 1922.

on a simple correspondence conception of truth.¹¹ Although he is sceptical about the panoply of facts that the first version of logical atomism implied, Russell accepts the epistemic counterpart of the various kinds of propositions. In his terminology, the fact that not all sentences *indicate* a certain kind of entity does not imply that sentences do not *express* a certain kind of belief. In this respect there are negative, conjunctive, disjunctive and general beliefs, which express certain kinds of psychological states. Thus a disjunctive belief such as “John is in town or abroad” expresses a state of hesitation. Russell also accepts that there are negative basic propositions which express experiences of absence, such as those which are expressed by our answering “No” to the question “do you hear something?” Most of the time, however, complex beliefs or the disjunctive or general form are inferred from basic beliefs, and for this reason Russell concentrates upon these.

The most basic propositions are those which are of “atomic form” Fa or aRb , where a and b are proper names, and where F and R denote properties or relations. During his logical atomist period, Russell held the view that to such atomic propositions corresponded atomic facts, made up of simple particulars and of properties and relations, conceived as genuine universal entities. He also held the famous view that the proper names of ordinary language (such as “George W. Bush” or “Texas”) are actually “truncated” or disguised descriptions such as “The 43 th President of the USA” which can in turn be analysed according to Russell’s theory of descriptions into sentences of the form “There is a unique x which is 43th President of the USA”. Ordinary proper names, on this view, do not directly denote their objects. According to the first Russell, only demonstratives such as “This”, personal pronouns such as “I”, or adverbs of time or place such as “now” or “here” denote directly particulars with which we are acquainted, and for this reason he called them “logically proper names”. The particulars denoted by these “genuine” names are individual substances, distinct from universals denoted by common nouns such as “man” or “horse”. In a famous paper (Russell 1912) Russell had argued for a strong dualism of particulars and universals and rejected the nominalistic view that universals are only resemblances between particulars. In the

¹¹ In Armstrong’s terminology, Russell tended to be, in his logical atomist period, a “truthmaker maximalist”, i.e he accepted (almost) the view that every truth has a truth maker, which Armstrong calls “truthmaker-maximalism”.

Inquiry, however, especially in chapters 6 and 7, Russell adopts a fairly different conception.

He first defines a name syntactically, as the kind of expression which can occur in an atomic sentence of the form $R(a)$, or $R(a,b, \dots)$ where “R” is a predicate or a relation, and “a”, “b”, etc. are names, and semantically as an entity which occupies a continuous portion of space time. Names in this sense can be of two sorts: either ordinary names, such as “Donald Rumsfeld” and “Iraq”, or demonstratives and expressions that he calls “egocentric particulars”, such as “this”, “I”, “here”, or “now”, including words such as “past”, “present”, “future” and tense in verbs. Russell’s account of egocentric particulars deserves to be considered, together with Hans Reichenbach’s¹², as one of the pioneering accounts of indexical and other context sensitive expressions, which has become one of the main issues in contemporary philosophy of language. Russell rightly points out that, semantically, demonstratives such as “This” and other expressions cannot be paraphrased in terms of general concepts and definite descriptions, unlike ordinary proper names according to his official strategy in his theory of descriptions. Whichever number of descriptions we can try to put in the place of “this” – such as “what I am now noticing” – the uniqueness of the demonstrative will not be accounted for.¹³ On the ontological side, however, Russell’s account of proper names and egocentric particulars is squarely eliminativist. He defends the view that particulars denoted by “this” or “I” are not needed in an objective physical description of the world. According to him, a statement reporting the content of a perception of the form

(1) This is red

is actually of the form

(2) Redness is here now

which in turn is considered as a bundle of coexisting qualities. More precisely, let a given red patch in the visual field be denoted “C”. Let the angular coordinates of this patch be (θ, φ) . Let the patch be also present at another place (θ', φ') . So the bundle (C, θ, φ) coexists with the distinct bundle (C, θ', φ') . There are no more particulars or

¹² Reichenbach 1947 is mentioned in a note at the end of chapter 7.

¹³ The point has been rediscovered and argued for by Perry 1982

substances, since they are replaced by “compresent” qualities such as redness, hardness, etc. instantiated at a particular place and time. Substances are eliminated in favour of bundles of qualities, and the dualism of universals and particulars is abolished. This is often known as a “bundle theory” of individuals. An ontology of substances has, according to Russell, two disadvantages. In the first place, a substance is an unknowable entity, considered as irreducible to the sum of its predicates. On the other hand the principle of the identity of indiscernibles is a synthetic proposition: two substances can share all their predicates without being identical, for the predicates do not exhaust the nature of the substance (spatial and temporal differences can account for this diversity). On the bundle theory, on the contrary, a particular, being replaced by a set of compresent qualities, becomes entirely knowable. The set of properties to which a thing identical is given in experience, and its experience can be described in purely causal terms. Moreover a thing being defined by the set of its qualities, and space and time being among these qualities, the principle of the identity of indiscernibles becomes analytic: by definition if two things are different they do not share their spatio-temporal properties.

This procedure of elimination of proper names and of egocentric particulars, and hence of the substances which they denote, is an echo of Russell’s famous motto in *Our Knowledge of the external world*: “Wherever possible replace inferred entities by logical constructions”. But it also involves a rejection of some of the main tenets of Russell’s logical atomism. One of Russell’s targets, in his rejection of Hegelian idealism, was a form of ontological monism which prevents the analysis of a thing into its simple elements, and which takes space and time as irreducible to properties of things. This was in large part the meaning of the principle of “external relations” which the early Russell defended against Bradley: spatial and temporal relations are not internal to things and they imply diversity (see Russell 1910). Atomism was the very foundation of analysis. To a large extent, as he explains in chapter 24, Russell rejects this atomism. Judgements of perception give us a global pattern, which we may call “this”, and that we can analyse into properties and relations, without this analysis coming down to ultimate elements. Names in the primary or object language are names of totalities or continuous spatiotemporal regions which belong to a given whole (here the influence of *Gestalt*

psychology is obvious). These perceive totalities are in turn internal to a physical object, *.i.e* the brain of the observer.

Russell's analysis encounters difficulties both at the ontological and at the epistemological level. The bundle theory of individuals tells us that an individual thing is a set of properties which are united by the relation of co-instantiation ("compresence" in Russell's terminology) which insure that the properties are all possessed by the same individual. But if we say that it is the same individual which possesses these properties aren't we reintroducing the idea of a substance lying behind the set of properties? And if a thing is a set of properties, how can anything ever change its properties? In order to answer this question it is crucial that the relation of co-instantiation be contingent: if two or more properties are co-instantiated it is not necessary that it is so. On this view redness is co-instantiated with roundness in a ripe tomato, but the two properties might not have been instantiated at all. It is not so clear that Russell escapes these difficulties. The fact that the principle of the identity of indiscernibles becomes analytic on his view means that if two things (sets of properties) are distinct, they are necessarily so. This seems, as we have noted, to reintroduce a principle similar to Leibniz's principle that an individual has all his properties essentially. Russell is aware of this difficulty, for he wants to say that if a given name, say "T", is the name of a bundle of qualities, we do not have to know, when we give the name, *what* qualities constitute the totality T. It is not clear, however, that this does not reintroduce the difficulties of the notion of substance: for if we know a bundle of properties without knowing which are its elements, doesn't a bundle look like a "I don't know what" ? On the epistemological side, Russell's analysis of singular judgements of the form "this is red" is meant to eliminate all elements of subjectivity that affects demonstrative and other indexical beliefs. The bundles of qualities are supposed to coexist without a perceiver. But is it certain that we can dispense with the subjective point of view of the perceiver? This question has figured prominently in all theories of perception and indexical beliefs.¹⁴

Atomic sentences of the form "Fa" where "a" is a proper name or a demonstrative form the basis of our experiential knowledge. Their verifiers (or truthmakers) are

¹⁴ R. Chisholm 1944 raises the objection about the elimination of egocentric particulars. On the bundle theory of universals, see Van Cleve 1985

ultimately, as we have seen, bundles of properties. What about general sentences? These are of two kinds: existential sentences such as “There is a fox” of the form “there is an x such that Fx ”, and universal sentences such as “All foxes run” of the form “For all x if Fx then Rx ”. The verifiers of existential sentences are individual facts of the form “ Fa ” (at least one such fact). But the correspondence between “There is an x such that Fx ” and its verifier Fa , or Fb , or ...cannot be the same as for atomic sentences. The correspondence, Russell tells us, is causal, and it is known through an inductive generalisation, which is an inference. Consider, next, universal sentences of the form ““For all x Fx ”. What are their verifiers? In his *Logical Atomism* lectures, Russell held that the existence of general facts should be granted as much as the existence of particular atomic facts. In other words, when we have listed all the particular facts, Fa , Fb , Fc , etc. there is a further fact in the world, the fact that all x are F . In the *Inquiry*, Russell rejects this view, and takes the verifier to be simply the collection of particular facts. He further tells us that what we know when we know the meaning of such sentences cannot be based on our experience, but on induction. Both the ontological view and the epistemological view, however, raise one of the most difficult problems for any empiricist epistemology.

The problem is this: if the collection of facts which are “indicated” by universal sentences is infinite, how can we know their meaning if all meanings have to be based on basic beliefs? How can their meaning consist in their truth-conditions if these conditions are unfathomable? The Viennese positivists, who subscribed both to the verificationist theory of truth and to the verificationist theory of knowledge, concluded that the meaning of these sentences could not consist in their truth conditions. They also held that truth could not be interpreted in the realist way, as a form of correspondence with facts. In chapter 21 of the *Inquiry*, Russell examines these views, and related ones, such as Dewey’s and Reichenbach’s, who attempted to reduce truth to warranted assertibility or to some epistemic notion, such as probability. He refuses to assimilate the meaning and truth conditions of general sentences and of sentences about unknowable facts to their assertion conditions. In this respect, he refuses to question classical logical principles such as the law of excluded middle (a proposition is either true or false), which is rejected by mathematical intuitionism and the strong versions of verificationism

or anti-realism. He sides, both in mathematics and in natural science, for an uncompromising realism. Truth, for him, transcends knowledge and cannot be reduced to an epistemic notion.¹⁵ But how can this be reconciled with an empiricist epistemology? At this point, Russell bites the bullet: he accepts that pure empiricism, the view that all true propositions are verifiable, is false, and that there are principles of inference and propositions which are neither demonstrative nor derivable from experience. He will return to these themes in his last great philosophical book, *Human Knowledge*, in 1948. There he admits that our knowledge of such principles as the principle of induction is distinct from our knowledge of particular facts: its known “solely in the sense that we generalize in accordance with them when we use experience to persuade us of the truth of a general proposition”.¹⁶

The originality of Russell’s views is obvious if one compares them to the other versions of empiricism that he discusses in the course of his *William James lectures*. He rejects the verificationist and the pragmatists theories of meaning and truth, and defends a realist conception of truth. Although he manifests a strong attraction for the linguistic turn in epistemology introduced by the logical positivists, he refuses to accept that the justification of empirical knowledge rests upon the choice of a language and his ontological and metaphysical perspectives are very far from Carnap’s neutralism or Hempel’s holism. But in spite of their originality, what is the legacy of Russell’s ideas?

Actually, if the *Inquiry* has had a legacy, it seems to have been, in the first two decades which followed its publication, mostly negative. At the time when Russell was delivering his William James lectures, Wittgenstein was writing the work which led to his *Philosophical Investigations*. One of his main targets is “the myth of pure ostensive definition”, the view that the very basis of meaning resides in primitive acts of “ostension”. Basically, the gist of Wittgenstein’s remarks is similar to his objection to the

¹⁵ Although it cannot be done here, it would be interesting to compare Russell’s view here with those of Frank Ramsey, who discussed Russell on logical, epistemological and ontological matters. Russell himself reviewed Ramsey’s posthumous book *The Foundations of mathematics* (1931) (Russell 1931). His rejection of the dualism of universals and particulars may well have its origins in Ramsey’s paper “Universals”. Ramsey had also an account of general propositions which has probably attracted Russell’s attention. He took them to be “variable hypotheticals”, expressing inferences that we are prepared to make. Thus to believe that “All men are mortal” is for Ramsey to be prepared, when one encounters a man, to infer that he is mortal. Hence general propositions are based on habits. (see Dokic and Engel 2002). Russell, however, in his review of Ramsey’s book, finds this circular, for the notion of habit already contains, according to him, the very notion of generality. Russell was also in strong disagreement with the anti-realist implications of Ramsey’s conception of truth (which has affinities with intuitionism at the end of his life).

¹⁶ Russell 148, last page.

idea that we could account for our mastery of language rules and linguistic meaning from outside language, which led to what we called above the priority thesis: there can be no such ostensive acts of definition without presupposing a great deal of mastery of language.¹⁷ The very idea of an object-language which could form the basis of knowledge is also one of the ideas which were fought by Wittgenstein. It threw doubt on empiricist theories of meaning for a least a generation of British philosophers.

Within the empiricist tradition, the main heritage of Russell's *Inquiry* is to be found in Quine's analysis of meaning in *Word and Object* (1960) and in the *Roots of Reference* (1973). Quine starts, like Russell, from the question: how is an empirical theory of meaning possible? and his account, like his, is strongly influenced by behaviourism. Like Russell, Quine takes a naturalistic starting point. Quine is also very interested in giving an ontogeny of reference, proceeding from the earlier stages of infant life, where quantification is not, according to him, yet in place, to its later stages, where individuation, reference and identity in objects come in. But apart from these similarities, Quine and Russell's perspectives are diametrically opposed. Quine starts from sentences, which he takes to be the immediate object of assent and the main unit of meaning, where Russell starts from words. His epistemology is explicitly holistic, and Duhemian, and explicitly anti-foundationalist: there is no privileged, ostensive basis, for meanings and sentences are "interanimated" and connected within a holistic whole. So Quine is actually quite close to the kind of coherence conception of truth and knowledge that Russell criticised in Hempel in chapter 10 on the *Inquiry*. Last but not least, Quine's analysis is a sort of *reduction* of the whole enterprise of giving an empiricist account of meaning, at least if a theory of meaning based on experience is supposed to give us a completely specified account of the meanings of the sentences of a given language in the sense of a theory answering the schema [M] above. For meaning, according to Quine's famous thesis, is indeterminate, in the sense that two translation manual which would fit equally the evidence could diverge in the meaning that they would attribute to the sentences of a given language. Indeed, given the thesis that Quine calls the "inscrutability of reference", the very idea that types of sentences could have their specific verifiers or truthmakers is a view that Quine strongly rejects: given that reference as well as meaning

¹⁷ Wittgenstein 1952, 5, 6, 27-36

is indeterminate, there is no such thing as an ontological counterpart of our sentences in reality.

Quine's and Wittgenstein's view of meaning come in, the end, quite close to the priority thesis, which, in the end, has very strong similarities with the thesis that no genuine theory of meaning can be given at all. A theory of meaning, on such a view, can only, at best, be an exercise in linguistic paraphrase of words the meaning of which we already know. They agree more or less on the idea that at best what a theory of meaning can do is to give us specifications of the form "P" is true iff p , where p is a translation of "P" or P itself, and where our knowledge of the meaning of this sentence is already secured. Although they reach this disenchanted conclusion about meaning (and often about truth) through distinct arguments, such views have been developed under the name of "scepticism about meaning", "deflationary", "modest" or "nihilistic" conceptions of meaning.¹⁸ In other words, we would be more or less bound to end up on the right hand side of the table above.

Disenchantment with the project of a substantive theory of meaning, however, may well be premature. Even if we subscribe to the priority thesis and accept the idea that there is always a kind of circle in an account of language learning, the circle has to be broken, for even the most convinced defendant of the innateness hypothesis has to recognise that language is learnt and that the child has to start from somewhere. Wittgenstein himself held that signs can convey meaning only if at some point there is a natural, non linguistic, uptake of how they are being used. He took this uptake to come through a drill (*ein Abrichten*, Wittgenstein 1958, §5). Russell took the uptake to reside in association, conditioning and habit. Quine took it to reside in a set of dispositions. Contemporary innatists take it to reside in some structures of the brain. So in a sense there are all sorts of plausible ways to break the circle and to reject the priority thesis in this sense. But its proponents do not deny that we learn a language, and that there can be empirically plausible theories about this. What they object to at a more fundamental level is the claim that one could give a *philosophical account* of content or meaning without

¹⁸ Although they are in many ways quite distinct, works like Kripke (1981), Davidson (1985), Mc Dowell (1981), Schiffer (1987) or Horwich (1998) can be said to belong to this family.

using, in one way or another, the very concepts that we intend to define. In other words, they are sceptical that a reductive account of meaning in terms of things which are not meanings (physical entities, platonic entities, or whatever) can ever be given. Now even if we grant them this, it does not follow that nothing can be said of meaning within a kind of inquiry inspired by Russell's own.

I have already mentioned the fact that Russell's account of egocentric particulars was in large part pioneering with respect to contemporary work on the semantics of demonstratives and other indexicals. Now in this respect, in order to find the true heritage of Russell's *Inquiry* within contemporary philosophy, we have to turn to the work on singular reference and demonstrative thoughts which has emerged during the last twenty years along the lines of writers like Gareth Evans and John Perry. One of Evans' main theses in his *Varieties of Reference* (1982) is that a number of linguistic expressions are "Russellian" in approximately the sense in which Russell talked of "logically proper names", that is expressions which are such that they make essentially a reference to their bearer. He argues that proper names, demonstratives and a number of pronouns are Russellian in this sense. He defends, with respect to singular thoughts the very principle which Russell defended in his *Problems of Philosophy*, the "principle of acquaintance": "Every proposition which we understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted" (Russell 1912, ch. 5), or, in other terms, a subject cannot make a judgement about something unless he knows which object the judgement is about. The specification of the kind of knowledge necessary for acquaintance with objects lead Evans to specify the kind of information possessed by a subject, especially in the case of demonstrative identification with words such as "this" and other indexicals. Evans 's account of singular thought is much more sophisticated than Russell's, and it does not rest upon any behaviouristic premises, but it is equally psychological in that it accepts the idea that there is a "fundamental level of thought" which is *prior* to language, and on the basis of which the relation of reference is built. Unlike Russell, however, Evans grounds demonstrative thought in basic thought structures of self identification. If Evans is right, there *is* , contrary to Quine's verdict, a fact of the matter as to what are thoughts about objects are *about*.

Another line of development of ideas which belong to Russell's ancestry has already been mentioned. A striking feature of the *Inquiry* is Russell's refusal to set apart epistemological, semantical and ontological matters. He does not intend simply to tell us what psychological states are responsible for our thinking about, but also what there is in the world for our thoughts to be about. This is why he cares so much for what sentences "indicate" and their "verifiers". As recent work on the relation of truthmaking and on the kind of entities which have to exist if our sentences are true shows that, even if it encounters difficulties of its own, this kind of project is not completely bound to failure.¹⁹ In other words, contrary to what the partisans of various deflationary, minimalist or modest theories of meaning have argued, there is room for a substantive epistemic, and truth-conditional conception of meaning. In many ways the construction of such a theory is still to come, but it owes much of its inspiration to Russell's *Inquiry*.

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¹⁹ Stephen Mumford's (2002) recent collection of texts by Russell is very much a reading of his work along these lines.

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