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THE UNITY OF THE TRIPOD OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S PHILOSOPHY OF LOGICAL ATOMISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

The paper establishes that Bertrand Russell's theory of logical atomism is an outcome of his advocacy of the ontology of realism premised upon a tripod of the strands of idealism, rationalism and empiricism. This is argued to be the basis of both Russell's analytic philosophy and method of logical analysis. It is against the position of a few scholars who hold that an empiricist philosophy should be devoid of element of rationalism; and vice versa. This problem, evident in Russell's philosophy, has made his critiques to charge his philosophy of inconsistency. Adopting a methodology that is comparative and analytical, the paper sets out to address this.

The unity and the direction that the development of Russell's philosophy took can consequently be justified by this fact. This position debunks the generally held, but wrong, view that Russell's philosophy was undiluted empiricism or inconsistent philosophical thinker who changes his views at every turn of criticism. The paper attempts to answer the questions: What is the foundation of Russell's logical atomism? How does this contribute to the unity and understanding of the philosophy of logical atomism? Was Russell an empiricist or inconsistent thinker? The fact is established that his philosophy is built upon a tripod of varied philosophical traditions that did not paradoxically affect the outcome of the philosophy of logical atomism negatively. Leibniz, Hume and a form of idealism were position at every turn manifest in this philosophy. The social and philosophical consequences of atomism and analytical approach were outlined by the paper.

Keywords: logical atomism, Idealism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Realism.



1. INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell's philosophy of logical atomism can be paralleled with the thought of many other philosophers from whom it was derived. It is therefore difficult to categorise him as a rationalist, empiricist or idealist philosopher. He is all at the same time without being inconsistent. There are elements of Platonic idealism in his thought. He was a realist who shared philosophical doctrines with G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein within the analytic tradition. He also disagrees with them on many scores too. However, beyond the analytical trend, Bertrand Russell is a revisionary Leibnizian. He tried to fill Humean philosophical lapses. These are visible elements in the final output of his thought. Fundamentally, the programme of Russell is a continuation of the philosophy of Leibniz in a new spirit. It is therefore surprising that Russell did not acknowledge, the way he ought to, the Leibnizian basis of his atomism. Arguably, it is misleading for Russell to have entirely direct such credit to Ludwig Wittgenstein as he did when he wrote "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" even though it is obvious that no havoc would be done even if his 'logical atomism' was called 'logical monadism'.

2. THE IDEALIST STRANDS OF LOGICAL ATOMISM

At the outset, Bertrand Russell was an idealist. He was a student of F. H. Bradley (1846 – 1924), who was the major exponent of idealist philosophy in Britain. The later position he adopted in philosophy was due to what he calls his revolt and reaction against idealism. As Russell himself notes, his philosophical development had been most influenced by the problems he had to contend with, and by the philosophers who influenced his thought, hence his statement that: "my philosophical development may be divided into various stages according to the problems with which I have been concerned and the men whose work has influenced me."¹ Russell, along with G. E. Moore, constantly maintained a basic position that was antithetical to idealism. He regards the monist view to be the basic general doctrine that informed the differences between idealism and his philosophy. Indeed, Russell argued that the difference in metaphysical positions is demarcated by the line drawn by monists on the one hand and pluralists on the other hand. He therefore consistently stated that: "the most important ['logical matter'] ... which dominated all my subsequent philosophy was what I called 'the doctrine of external relations.'² He argued further that "monists had maintained that a relation between two terms is always, in reality, composed of properties of the two separate terms and of the whole which they compose, or, in ultimate strictness, only of this last."³

Once Russell had taken the difference of "internal" relation versus "external" relation to be the determining factor between holding on to idealism or materialism, he came to the following conclusions that: (i) The differences among philosophers metaphysically is one expressed by their doctrine of "relations"; (ii) depending on the position of each philosopher, one is either a *monist* or a *pluralist*; and (iii) the differences in philosophy is therefore a function of *logic* and not metaphysics. With this, it is obvious that Russell was not against idealism in itself, but monism. He therefore accommodated some elements of idealism in his philosophy. What are these elements?

In the philosophy of logical atomism, Bertrand Russell maintained a dichotomy between (i) objects *as the cause of perception* and the percepts *as different from physical objects*. This position was held when he believed in the *sense-data* conception of our experience (i. e. perception) of things, and also when he held the neutral monist view. In *The Analysis of Matter* for example, he pointed out that the *structure* of object is what can be known. He associated this with perception. However, the *content, intrinsic character* or *actual qualities* of objects cannot be known with epistemic certitude. Russell associated content with *sensation*. This idealist disposition

¹ Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959),9

² *ibid*

³ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, vol 3* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969),10-11



was quite evident in his epistemology of logical atomism, especially in his conception of the proposition. In the words of Ronald Jager,

It is primarily because of a certain frame of mind, inspired by his idealistic forebears of this sort. We may think we can get to things or to facts pure, but any fact we get will immediately present itself in propositional dress; in knowledge claims we cannot get past making propositions.⁴

In knowledge therefore, objects are not known in their 'actual' states or as they are in themselves. They are known only in their knowing-situations. This fact is never lost on scholars who understand Russell properly. Russell was "struggling within a mirror image of that idealist net".

Consider how much idealist philosophy revolves around this hoary banality; to know object; you cannot, as it were, get to the object and know it in its pure state, as it is in itself, apart from the knowing situation. Russell never looked twice at this argument, so convinced was he that an apparently opposite banality was the simple and entire truth: knowing never makes any difference to the object known. If he had looked twice, he might have seen that he was himself struggling within a mirror image of that idealist net: you can never in knowledge, or belief, or supposition get past the proposition.

According to Russell therefore, the proposition represents our knowledge of things. This it does through its components which include "the *subject*, predicate, relation or some terms in a proposition". Comparing Russell's logical atomism to idealism, Jager points out that:

The idealist talked of judgement - acts of mind; Russell talked of propositions in objects of mind. This gave him objects independent of the knower - what he demanded above all. Russell made use of the concept 'judgement' but always a generic term for the different possible attitudes of mind towards propositions.⁵

For Russell therefore, the known are subjects (constituents) of propositions. Essentially, Russell was not able to 'argue' himself out of this idealism. He only, as a matter of conviction and not argumentation, lent support to realism. This position is buttressed by the view that

It was by the means of his realism, its preoccupation rather than its doctrines, that Russell, with powerful support from Moore and later Wittgenstein, accomplished a vast and historic shift in the inclinations of Anglo-Saxon philosophers: "Though he demonstrated by inadvertence how hard it is to argue one's way out of certain idealist traps, he broke successfully with that framework of subjective judgement and the 'block universe.'⁶

It follows therefore that apart from its protest of subjectivism and monism, logical atomism largely had characteristics of idealism. Of note is the fact that as earlier as 1900 when he wrote his first book in philosophy, his entrenched belief in the epistemological role of the *proposition* was quite evident. This was during his idealist era. Hence in his *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* he wrote:

The principal premisses of Leibniz's philosophy appear to me to be five. Of these some were by him definitely laid down, while others were so fundamental that he was scarcely conscious of them. I shall now enumerate these premisses, and shall endeavour, in subsequent chapters, how the rest of Leibniz follows from them. The premisses in question are as follow:

⁴ Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1972), 91

⁵ R. Jager, *ibid.* 92

⁶ R. Jager, *ibid.* 92



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- I Every propositions has a subject and predicate
II A subject may have predicates which are qualities existing at various times. Such a subject is called a *substance*.)
III True propositions not asserting existence at particular times are necessary and analytic, but such as assert existence at particular times are contingent and synthetic. The latter depend upon final causes.
IV The Ego is a substance.
V Perception yields knowledge of an external world, i.e. of existents other than myself and my states.⁷

Apart from premiss IV above, all the others rested the philosophy of Leibniz on the notion of the proposition; a discovery made by Bertrand Russell himself. His subsequent philosophy of logical atomism also rested on the proposition. Invariably, Russell did not develop his ontology and epistemology of proposition because of his subscribing to analytic philosophy. The reverse was actually the case.

B. The Rationalist Strands of Logical Atomism

The influence of rationalism in Russell's philosophy is most evident in the link between his thought and that of Gottfried Leibniz (1646 - 1652), the rationalist of the modern era. Russell shared a lot with Leibniz in intellectual temperament. Both had pluralist metaphysics, and their philosophical methods were quite similar. They placed great emphasis on the metaphysical and epistemological role of the proposition.

The rationalist basis of Russell's philosophy may be traced to first, his early interest in mathematics, and second, the philosophy of Leibniz. His first two books of philosophical input were respectively on mathematics and the philosophy of Leibniz. In 1897 he wrote *An Essay on the Foundation of Geometry* and in 1900 on *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. Russell's respect for Leibniz as a philosopher was so profound that many years later in 1945 in his *History of Western Philosophy*, he describes Leibniz as "one of the supreme intellect of all time."⁸ J. O. Urmson captures the similarity which Russell's metaphysics shares with Leibniz' thus: "Most similar to it of all the great metaphysical systems of the past is that of Leibniz, for whom Russell had a significant admiration. Russell's atoms are nothing but Leibniz' monads."⁹ According to C. A. van Peursen, "Russell's logical atomism ... provides a model of the world as built up of 'events', that is, of everything that can become the content or purport of observation or can be deduced from it (for instance, via causal rules, as in physics)."¹⁰ It can therefore be argued that Russell's conception of a "term" was Leibnizian; in that it shared the same metaphysical features with the 'substance' of Leibniz.

Language constitutes an essential aspect of the philosophy of Russell. This was an insight he got in the course of his study of the philosophy of Leibniz; that convinced him the doctrine of proposition. "This was not only a novel achievement on Leibniz's part; it was a novel insight on Russell's part as well. It was a fact too which was profoundly influential."¹¹

The notion of perspectival privacy as developed out of his neutral monism, and on which Russell elaborated in *Human Knowledge* can be linked to the influence of Leibniz on him. Russell states in *Human Knowledge* that: "What I call 'here' is of necessity different from what anybody else calls 'here', and what I call 'now' is of necessity different from what I 'now' call at another time, since anything whatever, including moments of time, is different from another thing which I might call by the same name."¹² The similarity Russell shares with

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd), 4.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from its Earliest Times to Present Day* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945),563

⁹ J. O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959),45

¹⁰ C. A. van Peursen, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: An Introduction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

¹¹ Ronald Jager, op cit. 88

¹² Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limit* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1948)



Leibniz here has to do with the fact that the *monads* of Leibniz are individuated. They mirror their own world. And in mirroring their subjective world, their “windowless” nature does not open to other *monads*. The ‘harmony’ of all *monads* in Leibniz’s philosophy; and how the *monads* relate with each other depend on the benevolence of God who has put *pre-established harmony* in things. How does Russell’s *monad* – now atoms – get unified? This question leads us to further similarities Russell’s philosophy shares with Leibniz’ in terms of methodology.

The philosophy of Leibniz rests heavily on the pillar of various *principles* and *methods* he (Leibniz) designed independently of his metaphysics. Indeed, his metaphysics is only acceptable to one insofar as one accepts the logic of the principles. Leibniz attempts to convince his audience on the fact that God has *sufficient reason* for whatever there is in the universe. Also, he used the principle of *pre-established harmony* to explain the reason why each of the otherwise unrelated ‘monads’ interact with each other. Other logical principles of Leibniz include the *principle of perfection*, the *identity of indiscernibles*, the *law of continuity* and his *panlogism*. The importance of these in Leibniz’s thought is obvious. He invokes these principles to both defend and construct his metaphysics and epistemology. They provide the logical canons of his thought. The same is also evident in the philosophy of Bertrand Russell.

First, Russell used his *doctrine of external relations* to knot his atoms together. The entire structure of Russell’s analytic philosophy, i.e. his *method of analysis* which included various principles such as his *theory of description*; his *method of constructions*; his *theory of types* (class), his *method of reductive analysis*, etc. and indeed his Ockham Razor were modelled on Leibniz’s system. The logical atomism of Russell is modelled on Leibniz’s monadology; hence it is reported by Van Peursen thus:

Russell’s logical atomism... provides a model of the world as built up of ‘events’, that is of everything that can become the content or purport of observation or can be deduced from it ... such ‘events’ are not definable in *straight physical terms*, nor yet simply in psychic ones. They are the objectivizing of a picture of reality... as objective space, which itself originates when the ‘private’ spaces of all observers, who experience the world within their own several perspectives are posted in reciprocal relations. There is a considerable degree of resemblance here to Leibniz’s theory of monad - *all the more so when we consider the other, non-empiricist aspect of Russell’s system*: the framing of a logical system of symbols, compared by Russell with Leibniz’s programme for a ‘*characteristica universalis*’ capable of providing a reflection of atomic facts as a whole.¹³

Where Leibniz relied on God’s pre-established harmony, Russell gave *relation* the type of existence the former accorded theistic harmonization. “There is however a clear difference between Leibniz’ and Russell’s metaphysics. Just as interpreters of Leibniz, even, Russell resists the theistic conclusions of Leibniz monadology; but in his systematic work Russell also makes a point of other divergences from Leibniz’ philosophy ... for Russell causal relations between atomic facts are real and that for him, therefore there is more than for Leibniz a line of continuity between physics and metaphysics.”¹⁴

Beyond metaphysics, Russell followed Leibniz in the sphere of the theory of knowledge; Leibniz makes a distinction between two types of truths: the truths of *reason* and the truths of *facts*. The truths of reason are of the type which belongs to necessary propositions. Leibniz says in the first place of the truths of reason that they are subject to the principle of contradiction or, what comes to the same thing, that of identity. It follows therefore that the truths of reason are analytic. They cannot be denied without resulting into self-contradiction. They are *self-evident* and known by *intuition*. He calls them *primitive truth* and *identicals* because they are tautological statements. However, on the other hand, the truths of fact belong to contingent and existential statements. To this extent, Leibniz says they are *a posteriori*. Truths of reason are necessary and their opposite is impossible: truths of facts are contingent and their opposite is possible. Explaining this aspect of Leibniz

¹³Van Peursen, op cit. 101

¹⁴Van Peursen, ibid



epistemology, Copleston states that: "Truths of fact: then, rest on the principle of sufficient reason. But they do not rest on the principle of contradiction, since their truth is not necessary and their opposites are conceivable."¹⁵ However, if Leibniz is well understood, it can be seen that the difference between the two truths is not a totally an exclusive position.

We cannot simply equate truths of reason with analytic propositions, and truths of fact with synthetic propositions. Since what he calls 'truths of reason' can be shown by us to be analytic, that is, since in the case of reason we can show that the predicate is contained in the subject while in the case of truths of facts we are unable to demonstrate that the predicate is contained in the subject; we can, to that extent, say that Leibniz's 'truths of reason' are synthetic proposition.¹⁶

A similar trend is evident in the epistemology of Russell. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell brings this out clearly by stating that:

The word 'know' is here used in two different senses. (1) In its first use it is applicable to the sort of knowledge which is opposed to error, the sense in which what we know is *true*, the sense which applies to our beliefs and convictions, i.e. to what are called *judgements*. In this sense of the word we know *that* something is the case. This sort of knowledge may be described as knowledge of *truths*. (2) In the second use of the word 'know' above the word applies to our knowledge of *things*, which we may call *acquaintance*.¹⁷

Russell's *knowledge of truths* has close epistemological affinity with Leibniz's *truths of reason*. Russell says: "There is no state of mind in which we are directly aware of the table; all our knowledge of the table is really knowledge of *truths*."¹⁸ Nevertheless all knowledge, (like Kant and Leibniz [of things] believe) has experience (i.e. Russell's acquaintance) as their foundation.

Our knowledge of truth, unlike our knowledge of things, has an opposite, namely *error*. So far as things are concerned, we may know them or not know them, but there is no positive state of mind which can be described as erroneous knowledge of things, so long, at any rate, as we confine ourselves to knowledge by acquaintance. Whatever we are acquainted with must be something; we may draw wrong inferences from our acquaintance, but the acquaintance itself cannot be deceptive. Thus, there is no dualism as regards acquaintance. But as regards knowledge of truths, there is a dualism. We may believe what is false as well as what is true.¹⁹

The rationalist aspect of Russell's philosophy is pointed out by David Pears, thus:

In fact, Russell's work was very much influenced by the system of Leibniz. His philosophical temperament combines in an unusual way, the caution which is characteristic of British philosophers, with the kind of speculation which, rather absurdly, we call 'continental'. It is of course, questionable whether the doctrines to which these two tendencies naturally lead can be combined.... can an impersonal system be built on a foundation of essentially private sense-data? Can such a foundation really support reconstruction of empirical knowledge which is not egocentric?²⁰

¹⁵ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Bentham to Russell, vol viii* (London: Image Book, 1966),280

¹⁶ Frederick Copleston, *ibid.*280-1

¹⁷ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 23

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ Bertrand Russell, *ibid.*, 69

²⁰ David F. Pears, *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition of Philosophy* (London: Fontana), 269



3. THE EMPIRICIST STRANDS OF LOGICAL ATOMISM

Most of what have been pointed out about Leibniz' rationalist flavour on Russell's thought can equally be said of the empiricist philosopher, David Hume's influence, on Russell in another perspective. David Pears in his *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy* interpreted Russell's entire philosophy as an attempt, by Russell, to continue and perhaps complete the programme of David Hume. For David Pears, Russell's philosophy is an attempt to rectify some shortcomings of Hume's philosophy. Pears more or less discussed Russell's thought in the light of Humean problems. He puts it succinctly in the "Introduction" of the text thus: "Russell's reconstruction of empirical knowledge" can be "best seen in a fairly long historical perspective; ... Russell 'took over' and 'strengthened' "the type of empiricism whose most distinguished example had been David Hume." "The framework of Hume's system was psychological: the framework which Russell substituted for it was logical."²¹ David Pears therefore points out that his task in the text under reference is to devote considerable space "describing Hume's system in order to show how Russell's developed out of it, and more generally, how the new logical approach to the problem of philosophy differs from the old psychological approach."²²

In fact, if Pears is followed all the way, Russell is nothing but a revisionary Humean. No doubt it explains why many scholars usually rest the fundamental position of the entire analytic philosophy on Hume's empiricism. Pears held that Russell was pulled from two directions. First, to save whatever he could from empiricism; and second, to plant his reconstructed empiricism on 'sound foundation'.²³ He says further of Russell:

Now his predecessor, John Stuart Mill, who was, as a matter of fact, his godfather, seemed to him to accept received scientific doctrines in too facile a way. But he followed the line of British empiricists further back to Hume, he found the opposite situation. Hume's strong and subtle sceptical arguments carried away too much...²⁴

The influence which David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* had on Russell, according Pears, was 'powerful and persistent'. Russell, Pears pointed out, "was apt to forget that he had done so, and would sometimes find it difficult to emancipate himself from Hume's way of looking at things and could relapse into it. Consequently, one good way of achieving an understanding of Russell's philosophy is to approach it through Hume's. What is the Humean basis of Russell's philosophy of logical atomism?"

Russell's theory of language, his two-level conception of the perception of things as sense-data and physical objects, and his theory of judgement are all Humean in character. But Russell was not ready to follow David Hume all the way. Hume held that there were two kinds of ideas called *simple ideas* and *complex ideas*. On another level we have what Hume calls *singular ideas* and *general ideas*. Before showing what these forms of idea stand for, let us see what Hume means by an idea. In his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume holds that ideas are images in the mind. Ideas are derived from either sense impressions or from already held (i.e. replica) impressions. In other words, all *ideas, images of things* (in the mind) must be derived from their relevant or appropriate *impressions*. Hence Hume always asks of our 'knowledge' of anything thus: "from what impression does so-and-so idea derives?" Significant ideas must have their basis on, i.e. produced by, *sense impression*.

In his analysis of various types of ideas, Hume says simple ideas represent ideas whose impressions are *directly acquired from things that cannot be analysed into different features*. For example the idea of the colour red is simple because no other feature can be analysed from it. If looked at, it (e.g. red) is not possible to develop added ideas from simple ideas. However, it is possible *to combine* (and Russell says 'relate') two or more simple

²¹ David Pears, *ibid*: 11

²² David Pears, *ibid*

²³ David Pears, *ibid*: 23

²⁴ David Pears, *ibid*



ideas to constitute *complex idea*. For example, the idea of a university is complex. This is because other properties or features can be analysed from it. Such properties include, the idea of the faculties, departments, students, lecturers, library, etc. which all combine to constitute the idea of the 'university'. Hume says complex ideas are derived either from the direct ideas we already hold from simple ideas or from compounded simple ideas. Nevertheless, some complex ideas, e.g. the university, are singular.

Hume lists three kinds of ideas: an idea may be general and complex, like the idea of a dragon, or the idea of a horse: or it may be general and simple like the idea of the city of Paris. Russell classifies the three phrases which are annexed to these three kinds of idea in an exactly parallel way. The first is a complex general symbol, the second is a simple general symbol and the third is a complex singular symbol.²⁵

Hume's philosophy can therefore be shown to have its parallel in Russell's philosophy in the following ways.

(i) Both philosophers align meaning with our experience of things. For Hume, ideas are caused by sense-impression. Any statement that falls short of this is not significant. It is meaningless. Russell on his part says the proposition and words which constitute it are symbols. Or they can ultimately be interpreted to be symbols (for Ludwig Wittgenstein, "facts.") which represent objects of experience.

(ii) Hume believes that in perception we get *impression* which leads to *ideas*. Beyond this, we cannot get to the things themselves. Hume thereby employs this criterion to reject the existence of any "substance" in things beyond what is given through sense-impression. Russell on his part posits that in perception, what we experience are the sense-data. The physical object is itself quite remote. We may reach physical objects through the 'method of construction', 'inference', etc.

(iii) Although David Hume used *psychological* approach in equating simple ideas to be product of their corresponding simple impressions, Russell calls his own *logical*. This switch, between Russell and Hume, is no doubt suggested by the fact that whereas Russell's analysis was conducted on symbols (language, hence logical), Hume's was conducted on ideas (mental, hence psychological). Russell held that all definable symbols are complex. Simple symbols cannot be defined. Of course "definition" belongs to logic. Hume's restriction to psychology as the basis of analysis, made his logic parochial and restricted. In his reliance on language, Russell's analysis became comprehensive, so the logical basis of his analysis was broad and diverse.

In Russell, we thereby have beyond the *psychological, language, scientific and logical* analyses. These added analyses are suggested by *reason* which would be impossible if Hume were rigidly followed.

Apart from these similarities between both philosophers, there still exist remarkable differences even in points where they agree. Russell did not bring psychology into his analysis. He confined himself to language. He believes that the definition of a word is quite a different thing from its analysis. For example, even though 'red' may be defined as 'the colour with the greatest wave-length', this definition is not an analysis of the word. Analysis provides the meaning of the word. So it is possible for one to know the meaning of the 'word' red without knowing the physicist's definition of it as the 'colour with the greatest wave-length.'²⁶ Therefore, Pears may have been right in pointing out that:

²⁵ David Pears, *ibid*: 43

²⁶ Marsh, 1956, 111



One thing which makes Russell's method a logical one is that he relies on definition which is a logical operation. He relies on the kind of definition which gives the meaning or at least the legitimate part of the meaning of the phrase in question, as it is actually used.²⁷

4. LOGICAL ATOMISM AND ANALYSIS: BEYOND THE TRIPOD

Why did Russell adopt the method of logical analysis? Pears states further that Russell "had high hopes of this method because he thought that it would provide firm and precise results instead of the customary vague intuitions and spongy opinions which are to be found in most philosophical books. He belongs to the long line of European philosophers who have tried to improve philosophical method by making it more like scientific method."²⁸

The implications of following David Hume were quite many for Russell. In the first place, his logical analysis was set out to cut whatever was repulsive to belief in science and common sense. Whereas David Hume would ask: "From what sense-impression is it derived?" Russell would want to know whether it conforms to our belief in science or common sense. He conceives these to be what 'realism' stands for. The result for Hume, on the negative side, was scepticism. For Russell, he would rely on reason and adopt agnosticism. This was a typical Russellian commitment to decade long adherence to his philosophical avowal flowing from his seminal 1905 "On Denoting" canon of realism.

The most Russell could get for his conception of the mind or self was Humean. This brought about the popular "bundle theory" of the mind as a series of experiences. To what extent was Russell able to rehabilitate David Hume (rightly, empiricism)? We can argue that he did this by bringing in elements of rationalism into his thought. Of course, Russell was aware that his system was not anything to be strictly called empiricism. He believes that knowledge, like Kant held, should start from "the experienced." He also believes, like Kant did, in the impelling role of "reason" in the process of knowledge. It is in fact a truism for Russell that man is naturally a realist. His task was directed at attempting to "justify" why we hold our beliefs the way we do. Two things needed to be infused into Hume's system. The *psychological* (Hume's ideas), which were bits of fragmentary information "pictured" as ideas, have to be objectified. Russell translated this, in his thought, as *proposition*. Once this is achieved, bringing in rationalism was no longer a difficult task. Grounds for positive knowledge rather than scepticism had to be put into Hume's thought. Hence Russell had to tackle Hume's attack of the principle of causality with his doctrine of non-demonstrative inferences as a viable option for scientific knowledge. As was noted in *The Times* of February 3, 1970, the day following Russell's death, "The incorporation of mathematics and the development of a powerful logical technique were, as he himself said, what distinguished his modern analytical empiricism from that of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume".

5. THE CONSEQUENCES OF LOGICAL ATOMISM

The philosophy of logical atomism is of tremendous significance and relevance. This is most evident within philosophical inquiries. An atomistic conception and temperament is capable of being employed as a useful social tool. No doubt, as in any philosophical system, it has its own shortcomings. First of all there is the problem involved in trying to conceive nature from the perspective of language. This position is there even if one does not strictly say that philosophy is all about the analysis of language. However, without contradiction, the analysis of language provides an insight into philosophy as a few scholars have successfully shown. Both atomistic philosophy as against holistic philosophy has been shown to be 'a limited' form of philosophical scholarship. In spite of this, both are useful as philosophical positions.

²⁷ David Pears, *ibid.*, 44

²⁸ David Pears, *ibid*



Reality is a process. It is not a fixed rigid 'event'. Even then, reality cannot be separated from the perceiver. The symbols (of language) that are engaged to capture reality are categories. But what type of categories are they? They are not (apparently as symbols) as dynamic as the reality (or even the subjective knower) they are meant to capture. The reason why we say so is that even though the symbols, i.e. the words, have retained their locution in terms of 'utterance' and literary representation, their meaning change constantly. In meaning, language reflects the dynamics of reality since it is indeed part of the real. Language belongs to the rational reality of man.

Recognition of "the same object" is only the function of the concept of that object. Concepts aids recognition though reality is a process... language is a sign, when we examine the "thing" for which it is a sign and the person for whom it is a sign of that "thing", we perceive the profound meaning of language, namely that reality is a process inseparable from the person who perceives or knows it.²⁹

Anyanwu argues that though language tells us something about reality this may not be adequately carried out. It however complements reality. It makes reality understandable to us. Hence

Constructs and concepts stem from perceptual world, and by definition we regard the perceptual world as the indication of the hypothetical, external world. Theoretical constructs like atoms, gene, mathematical space and time, etc. arise from the recognition that perception does not completely unfold everything we see in the world. So, those elements of the world that are concealed are to be represented in our theories through theoretical constructs.³⁰

In other words, reality, given its motions and dynamism, is not really the kind of object language can *adequately* pin down. Language merely brings us closer to objects. In spite of this critique, we cannot strictly hold the view that language does not provide philosophical insight. Really, since language is a symbol it is to that extent a part of reality. Reality also penetrates the perceiver's state of mind. Somehow, reality belongs to both divide. Both provide an insight into what reality is. So language facilitates our epistemology.

Now, what are the philosophical implications of logical atomism? On analysis, we can hold that language's capability to penetrate reality is of high esteem. Even though there are evident limitations in the capacity of language to achieve this. This brand of philosophy has ushered in great emphasis on the relationship that exists between language and what language ought to represent. This is not an entirely new position in philosophy. John Locke, for example, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* divided the sciences into three distinct fields of inquiry thus: (i) natural philosophy, (ii) moral philosophy and (iii) doctrine of signs. Farhang Zabeeh, *et al* underscored this point in John Locke when they noted that even though Locke's *Essay* is essentially 'an epistemological work', he devoted "a whole book (Book III, "of words") to semantics.

According to Locke, significant words denote not things, but ideas, which are mental entities. He realised that there are significant words such as *nihil* in Latin and 'ignorance' and 'barrenness', 'Spirit' and 'Angel' in English may refer to ideas obliquely.³¹

The important point here is that: underlying language is what language ought to be about.

In recent times, this point has been evident in inquiries on African philosophy. Scholars in this field have been able to successfully use the insight provided by African languages in forms of proverbs and wise-sayings, especially of sages, to show that Africans were in the past philosophical in their thought system.³² Oral tradition (through language analysis) constitutes one of the approaches to the study of African philosophy. Leo

²⁹ K. C. Anyanwu, "Humes's Problem of Induction," *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, vol 2, nos 1&2, 1982: 42.

³⁰ K. C. Anyanwu, *ibid*: 43.

³¹ F. Zabeeh, E. D. Klemke & A Jacobson, eds., *Readings in Semantics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 2

³² A. F. Uduigwomen, *Footmarks on African Philosophy* (Lagos: Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers Ltd, 1995), 36-43.



Apostel suggested the language analytical approach to inquiring for African philosophy. So if it is properly understood and used, the analytic approach will enhance inquiries on African thought system.³³

Another area of relevance is what can be termed the *atomistic approach*. In the first place, and as Russell also notes, there have to exist 'wholes' before 'atomisation' can occur. Yet the act of atomising provides deeper and better insight into the "inner structure", the "constitutive parts" and the "relating components" of the whole. So, as an epistemic apparatus, atomism gives a thorough and detailed knowledge of its object of study. This point has often been ignored by those who hold that atomists fragment reality and leaves it so. Irrespective of what the philosopher may say, things, reality, objects, etc., remain what they are unaffected, i.e., they are *wholes* if that is their being, and they are *atoms* if that is their being. Nevertheless, our knowledge is basically 'propositional-knowledge', i.e. statements bearing truth-value which we hope do conform to the things. Depending on our conception, we may call these *truth-statements* or simply *knowledge*. Justifying this is a fundamental task of both the epistemologist and the metaphysician. Atomism recommends itself as one of the approaches to understanding man and his universe

Invariably, even though Russell did not extend his logical atomism to social sphere, we could discern the possibility of such a programme. In the first place, it can be shown that all social problems are a complex capable of being analysed. Problems can be broken down or unbundled along the line of the 'steps' that constitute the problem; or 'steps' which may be adopted to understand or solve human problems. We can term such 'points' arrived at through analysis as *soluble simples*. And depending on the purpose they serve, they may be qualified, if we are to humanise our epistemology, "social epistemic simples". They constitute the kernel of the solution of given social problems.

It is a well-known fact, and Rene Descartes, emphasised this greatly, that solving problems from the simple to the complex is a better approach to achieving results. The advantages of this atomistic attitude over the holistic approach are quite evident and obvious. This is not to condemn the holistic approach. Rather, it is to state that once the whole is given and known peripherally, a further thorough knowledge of it calls for atomistic and analytical attitude. After all, in terms of creation, it is easier to produce the simple than the complex. It is easier to construct the part (i.e. unit) than the entire body. It is easier to comprehend the parts than the entire body. The atomistic attitude is therefore a call to consciously refocus on a familiar attitude of doing things. Since even in our educational programmes at school, the curriculum operates on the principles of atomism. We learn the letters of the alphabets "A, B, C...to Z"; then 'words' and what they stand for; then sentences and what they mean; etc. This progression is atomism at work.

Atomism is not a goal in itself. It is not an end. Atomism is a means to achieving a goal, i.e. a synthesis. It is therefore a movement from synthesis through analysis to synthesis. It is paradoxically part of, and derived from, that which is given as a 'whole - complex'. Without the latter there can be neither analysis nor atomism. It is a different thing entirely to say that everything, i.e. reality, is made up of atom. And those atoms constitute substance, the unit of first creation. Leibniz's 'monad', and to go backwards in the history of philosophy, Democritus 'atom' are a reflection of this position. Nevertheless this is a -type-of-metaphysics', i.e. ontology; which is outside the scope of this paper. However, it does not subscribe to it. We are only ready to admit that things are made up of parts and are capable of being analysed into parts.

In another dimension, there is good evidence that Russell thought informs a good deal of contemporary philosophy. His thought foreshadowed postmodernism. P. K. Sasidharan in his "Wittgenstein's Critique of Language Game: A Lyotardian. Dialectic" says "Wittgenstein's critique of language-games bespeaks of a motif which lies close to postmodernism as attributed to it by Lyotard."³⁴ The language game of Wittgenstein - which

³³ See Leo Apostel, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality?* (Belgium: Scientific Publishers, 1981)

³⁴ P. K. Sasidharan, "Wittgenstein Critique of Language Game: A Lyotardian Dialectic," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol xxv, no1, 1998:367.



can be pointed out to be one of Russell's 'unofficial theory' of meaning - envisages a 'pluralistic conception of reason' and knowledge, especially against the backdrop of what Lyotard qualifies as the 'modern'. That is:

when, on the one hand science is pursued on the basis of the rate of its own, and on the other hand, it appears to be a metadiscourse of politics or ethics as the rule for its legitimation. However, with the emergence of contemporary post-industrial society and post-modern culture, the question of the legitimation of knowledge has also undergone transformation in such a way, entailing the loss of its credibility of the unifying power of the grand narratives of progress and emancipation... Lyotard's attempt is to present language game investigation as a "general methodological approach" which is not far removed from the idea of post-modern perspective.³⁵

And in a clearer way, Sasidharan concludes that Wittgenstein's theory of games accepts:

Agnosticism as a founding principle [that can be adopted] to understand social relations from a pragmatic point of view. This way of attempting to locate the focal point of post-modern concern around the notion of "language-games" signified that the whole issue is a matter of viewing the nature and status of knowledge and reason in the reflective endeavour. *Thus as opposed to the absolutist and universalist conception of knowledge and reason, envisaged in the history of traditional philosophy throughout, the language game approach is said to have envisaged a "pluralistic conception of reason" and knowledge*³⁶.

No doubt the parallels between the above and atomism as a theory of knowledge is apparent. Russell remains a rigid advocate of interdisciplinary approach of inquiry. He always advocated the scientific attitude for philosophical inquiries.

6. DISCUSSION

The basic position of this paper is that Bertrand Russell's philosophy of logical atomism stands on a tripod that unifies it and provides the plank of his subsequent analytic philosophy thus a synthesis of the two broad forms of epistemology - i.e. rationalism and empiricism. To come to this point, our paper has dug into various intellectual components of Russell's theory of logical atomism. Russell held that philosophy should be conducted with a scientific attitude. He also subscribed to a "wide-view" of what philosophy is. This is a departure from what most of his followers in the analytic tradition subscribed to. Essential to Russell's conception of philosophy is the fact that philosophy should be "logical". But the point is underscored that Russell never held logical analysis to be all there is to the philosophical enterprise. In his own words,

On the accusation that I regard logic as all philosophy - that is by no means the case. I don't by any means regard logic as all philosophy. I think logic is an essential part of philosophy and logic has to be used in philosophy.³⁷

In his epistemology, Russell believes that the proposition constitutes a good portion of what we claim to know. So, a theory of symbol, spelling out the meaning of words and statements should be added to the type of scepticism which provides the basis for all forms of positive epistemology. We also noted that Russell's philosophy of logical atomism can be located on the basic position of Russell's 1905 paper entitled "On Denoting". The substance of the principles which guided Russell's subsequent philosophy has been shown to have its root in this paper. Of note of course are his theories of definite description and types. Couple with his fidelity to Ockham's razor, a principle which holds that the simple and less speculative explanations are to be preferred the more complex and speculative; entities should therefore not be unduly multiplied. Russell frowns against unguarded "postulations." His ground for this is not just for the aim of economy, i.e. parsimony, but for

³⁵ P. K. Sasidharan, *ibid.*

³⁶ P. K. Sasidharan, *ibid.*, 370.

³⁷ Edward Paul & Arthur Pap, ed., *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1973):490



ontological reasons. He believes that the more entities one postulates, the greater is the risk of one believing in something that lacks existence. Postulating, Russell held, is a form of philosophical laziness. In the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Russell says postulation has “the advantage of theft over honest toil.”³⁸ Postulation may give undue hostages to fortune. All these constituted the elements that guided the typical Russellian philosophical temperament. Where does analysis come in, for Russell, in all these?

Ayer states that Russell is not interested in analysis for its own sake.³⁹ Nevertheless he is usually classified as a major proponent of analytic philosophy because of his method of constructions. This method gave preference to what Russell called “logical constructions” over ‘inferences’. Logical constructions provide us the rational place for a horizontal analysis; on the basis of which we can make judgement. Whenever possible, this approach should be adopted, over, and before the vertical analysis given by inference may be adopted.

An object A is shown to be a logical construction out of a set of objects B, C, D., when some rules can be given for translating any statement about A into C set of statement about B, C, D, which have at least the same factual content. Since the entities which Russell wishes to exhibit as logical construction already play an important role in our system of beliefs, the process of constructing them assumes the form of a process of analysis: and for this reason Russell is often represented as being primarily an analytical philosopher.⁴⁰

It is this approach he engages to investigate traditional problems of knowledge such as belief, truth, perception self-consciousness, and memory; all of which influenced his conception of reality. The view that Russell’s logical atomism rests on this tripod, as the architectonic of the analytic method, do not constitute destructive inconsistency in Russell’s philosophy. The philosophy of logical atomism of Bertrand Russell is in the main a unity of this tripod. Bertrand Russell regards philosophy to be a rational enterprise. Apart from this, he believes that a good philosopher should not be dogmatic. The philosopher should be ready to accommodate other positions in so far as they are grounded on good reasoning.

As A. C. Grayling stated, ‘two principal schools of thought on how to achieve knowledge exist. These are: “the ‘rationalists’ school, which hold that the chief route to knowledge is the exercise of reason; and the ‘empiricist’ school, which holds that the chief route to knowledge is perception (the use of the five senses of sight, hearing, smelling, taste, and touch, and their extension by means of such instruments as telescope, microscopes and the like)”⁴¹. If one considers these two epistemological approaches in the light of the thought of Russell, it will be obvious that both are evidently represented. Russell, unlike (for example John Locke) most philosopher did not classify himself an empiricist. He did not set out in his philosophy to deliberately elevate empiricism over rationalism.

The essential characteristics A. C. Grayling identified with each of the two approaches in fact made Russell to conveniently belong to the two approaches. Grayling notes that: “The model of the rationalists is *mathematics* and *logic*, where necessary truths are arrived at by *rational inference*. The model for empiricists is any of the *natural sciences* where *observation* and *experiment* are the chief motor of inquiry”.⁴² These (mathematics, logic and natural science) are obvious elements in Russell’s philosophy.

John Tucker for example called Russell a Cartesian. To be a Cartesian is to be a rationalist. Tucker writes that:

³⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), 71.

³⁹ A. J. Ayer, *Russell* (London: Fofana, 1972), 40

⁴⁰ A. J. Ayer, *ibid.*, 40.

⁴¹ A. C. Grayling, *Philosophy* 1(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9

⁴² A. C. Grayling, *ibid.*



Russell in characteristically Cartesian fashion, looked for some distinctive introspect feature of memory, image, and thought that he had found it in 'feeling of familiarity' carried by those images and not by other sorts of image.⁴³

Now, our task cannot be taken to be a new discovery concerning the philosophy of Russell. Many other critics of Russell and scholars have noticed the elements of rationalism in his thought. However they usually go on to conclude that such elements being inconsistent with empiricism renders his philosophy incoherent. What has set this paper apart is precisely the fact that it holds the thesis that both empiricism and rationalism are synthesised and compatible with the logical atomism of Russell. If "inconsistency" is found in Russell's philosophy it should not be rested on the position that it is due to his blend of rationalism and empiricism. For anything, Russell has shown how we ought not to make hostages of ourselves by such labels as being "empiricists" on the one hand and "rationalists" on the other hand. Having recognised the limits of empiricism as an epistemological approach, he brought in reason. Between experiencing facts and the making of judgement on that which is experienced, the mind (reason), as Kant has also argued, plays a prominent role. So it really makes no sense for one to start separating rationalism and empiricism as two incongruent approaches to knowledge, especially as was the case in the modern period. Given the apparent and well-known limitations and problems involved in both approaches, Russell, (Kant also), was justified in his approach. What one achieves in this method is a form of rationalistic-empiricism. This unified form of philosophy, dating back to the early era of Russell's odyssey in philosophy, was as early as he wrote his *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903); *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900) and his 1912 *The Problems of Philosophy* where he proclaimed:

The word of *being* is unchangeable, rigid, exact, delightful to the mathematician, logician, the builder of metaphysical systems, and all who love perfection more than life. The world of *existence* is fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries, without any clear plan or arrangement, but it contains all thoughts and feelings, all the data of sense, all physical objects, everything that can do either good or harm, everything that makes any difference to the value of life and the world. According to our temperaments, we shall prefer the contemplation of the one or of the other. The one we do not prefer, will probably seem to us a pale shadow of the one we prefer, and hardly worthy to be regarded as in any sense real. But the truth is that both have the same claim on our impartial attention, both are real, and both are important to the metaphysician.⁴⁴

7. CONCLUSION

Thus far, we have pointed elements that may seem contradictory but encompassed in Russell's philosophy of logical atomism. This, we have argued, are mainly three - idealist, rationalist and empiricist. In "*On Denoting: Within and Beyond the Bounds of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*", we pointed out that the philosophy of Bertrand Russell relied on three of his theories: the theory of description, method of construction and theory of types.⁴⁵ Here it was established that the theories put by Russell in 'On Denoting' have implications for the question of being (existence and subsistence), the problem of meaning and truth, and the way language ought to be legitimately employed and interpreted. In this paper of 1905, Russell foreshadowed a new transition in epistemology; from the traditional approach (i.e. from scepticism to claims of knowledge) to a theory of meaning (language, proposition) for proffering theories of truth.⁴⁶ That these elements unify rather contradict or make inconsistent the philosophy of Russell called Logical Atomism can only be explained by the fact that

⁴³ John Turker, "Language, Meaning and Our Actual Procedures," *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, vol x, nos 1&2 (1981): 17

⁴⁴ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912): 57.

⁴⁵ Karo Ogbinaka, "On Denoting: Within and Beyond the Bounds of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy," *Journal of Contemporary Issues*, vol 4, no 1, 2014:144

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 155



they served as the tripod upon which his thought is erected; and the fact that Bertrand Russell was one of the early precursors of post modernism.

Postmodern theory is a consequence of this century's obsession with language. The most important 20th century thinkers – Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and others – shifted their focus of analysis away from *ideas* in mind to the *language* in which thinking is expressed. Philosophers or logicians, linguists or semiologists, they are all language detectives who seem to agree about one thing. To the question, "What permits meaningful thinking?", they reply in different ways, "The structure of language." Postmodern theory has its roots in one school of formal linguistics, *structuralism*, chiefly founded by a Swiss professor of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).⁴⁷

Along with our postulations, it is only broadly within the above context, of postmodernism, that Bertrand Russell's philosophy of logical atomism can be freed of charges of being inconsistent thought system.

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⁴⁷ Richard Appignanesi & Chris Garratt, *Introducing Postmodernism*, New York: Totem Books, 1995:56