

Neutral Monism

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Abstract: Neutral monism is the view that each particular is intrinsically neither mental nor physical, but is instead a member of some neutral metaphysical category. In this paper I will reconstruct Russell’s changing views on neutral monism. Initially Russell accepted the existence of the self, and took it to be distinctively mental. However, by *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) Russell admitted that we seem to lack direct acquaintance with the self. Nevertheless, the self continues to play a central theoretical role in Russell’s account of knowledge and judgment. This led Russell to an extended reflection on neutral monism in places like *The Theory of Knowledge* (1913) and the “Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918). In 1918 Russell endorses neutral monism as a goal to be achieved, but remains puzzled about belief. While the 1921 book *The Analysis of Mind* comes close to accepting neutral monism, there is still a residual resistance to it when Russell posits images that appear to be distinctively mental. By 1925, though, Russell had seen how to eliminate even these particulars, and as a result became a committed neutral monist.¹

¹ I am grateful to the editor and Thomas Pashby for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. There is no consensus on when and why Russell adopted neutral monism. For alternative accounts and additional references, I would recommend Tully 2003, Landini 2011, ch. 6, Bostock 2012, ch. 10-11 and Wishon 2015.

I. Introduction

Russell's 1914 article "Neutral Monism" begins with a clear statement of this position:

"Neutral monism" – as opposed to idealistic monism and materialistic monism – is the theory that the things commonly regarded as mental and the things commonly regarded as physical do not differ in respect of any intrinsic property possessed by the one set and not by the other, but differ only in respect of arrangement and context (Russell 1984, 15).²

The things Russell has in mind are what he elsewhere calls particulars. For the neutral monist, particulars are neither intrinsically physical nor intrinsically mental. What makes a particular either physical or mental (or both) is the relations that it stands in to other particulars. Russell began his philosophical career by more or less presupposing that neutral monism is false. However, after the completion of *Principia Mathematica*, and the more resolute turn to epistemology and metaphysics, Russell took neutral monism more seriously. In this 1914 article Russell argues quite carefully against neutral monism. By the 1918 logical atomism lectures, he admits to great difficulties in deciding whether or not neutral monism is correct. In the *Analysis of Mind*, published in 1921, Russell seemingly has become a whole-hearted advocate of neutral monism. This marks one of the more puzzling shifts in Russell's philosophical outlook.

² This article was an early chapter in Russell's abandoned *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript. I consider this manuscript in section II.

I will reconstruct this philosophical evolution by distinguishing three epistemic attitudes that one could take on a neutral monist metaphysics. The most qualified endorsement of neutral monism says that no intrinsic difference between particulars is known to us directly. A more confident attitude agrees that no intrinsic difference is given in experience, but goes further and affirms neutral monism on the basis of systematic considerations. In Russell's case, the shift from a qualified attitude to a more confident attitude towards neutral monism occurs after 1921, largely based on his interpretation of Occam's Razor. Finally, there is a more strident attitude towards neutral monism that maintains that every particular actually is known to be both mental and physical. In Russell's terms, this involves showing that every particular is part of a logical construction that leads to a mental object (such as a mind) and also part of a logical construction that leads to a physical object. As I see it, Russell never embraced this strident attitude to neutral monism, and remained with his confident attitude.

Russell's considerations for and against neutral monism focus largely on its ability or inability to make sense of what is distinctive of our mental experiences and activities. In 1898 Russell rejected neo-Hegelian idealism in favor of an extreme form of realism that Hylton has dubbed "platonic atomism" (Hylton 1990, 108). A central plank of platonic atomism is the existence of intrinsically mental particulars, although Russell does not often emphasize this aspect of his realism. In *Principles of Mathematics* Russell aims to "see clearly, and to make others see clearly, the entities concerned, in order that the mind may have that kind of acquaintance with them which it has with redness or the taste of a pineapple" (Russell 1903, xv). Minds are

just those things that can stand in relations of acquaintance to other things. These varying relations are central to our best account of what is responsible for our sensory and intellectual experiences.

Russell seems to have initially thought that each mind is acquainted with itself, although no mind is acquainted with any other mind. This is the best interpretation of Russell's somewhat condensed remarks in "On Denoting": "Now such things as matter (in the sense in which matter occurs in physics) and the minds of other people are known to us only by denoting phrases, i.e. we are not *acquainted* with them, but we know them as what has such and such properties" (Russell 1956/1992, 56). Here Russell clearly commits himself to the existence of a special sort of thing, minds, and distinguishes them from the matter found in physics. He does not come out and say that each of us is acquainted with our own mind. However, two considerations indicate that Russell thought this at this time. First, if Russell believed that we were not acquainted with our own minds, then he would have said so here. Instead, he carefully restricts his claim to other minds. Second, there are internal philosophical pressures that should strongly incline the defender of platonic atomism to the view that each mind is acquainted with itself.

In 1911 Russell argues that his theory of acquaintance requires acquaintance with the self. The argument does not proceed by any principle of transparency. Russell allows that I may be acquainted with X and yet be uncertain that I am acquainted with X. So, the fact that I can doubt that I am acquainted with my self does not settle whether or not I am acquainted with my self. Russell instead proceeds by considering propositions that can be known by introspection. In

“Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” (1911) acquaintance is presented as the basis of our entire mental life. It involves a “dualism of subject and object” that is a “fundamental fact concerning cognition” (Russell 1992, 148; 1911, 109). The only alternatives to this dualism that Russell allows in 1911 are “the view that there is no subject, whence we arrive at materialism” or “the view that what is presented is part of the subject, whence we arrive at idealism” (Russell 1992, 148; 1911, 109).³

While seeing the sun, I may know that I am seeing the sun. For Russell this requires that I be acquainted with whatever it is that I am seeing. Russell calls these objects sense-data. In some cases, through introspection, I know that I am acquainted with this sense-datum. When I know that I am acquainted with this sense-datum, Russell claims that “the complex has been analysed” (Russell 1992, 149; 1911, 110).⁴ The complex here is the whole composed of my self standing in

³ It is difficult to know why Russell thought the options were dualism, materialism and idealism. Cf. Ward’s *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, lecture 18: “Neutral or agnostic monism tends to degenerate into materialism; but it might logically advance to idealism” (Ward 1899, Vol. II, 205). Russell is thanked for comments on proofs in the preface to first edition. However, in *Analysis of Matter* Sheffer is credited with the phrase “neutral stuff” (Russell 1927/1954, 10).

⁴ Russell distinguishes between an acquaintance with the complex as a whole and the acquaintance with the complex’s parts. However, he struggles to decide if acquaintance with the whole involves acquaintance with the parts. See esp. “Analysis and Synthesis” (Russell 1984, 119-128).

the relation of acquaintance to this sense-datum. And, if this whole has been analyzed, then Russell concludes that I am also here acquainted with my self. He goes on to consider an alternative analysis in terms of a description. However, the only analysis that he mentions is that “I” be “the subject-term in awareness of which I am aware” (Russell 1992, 149; 1911, 110). As this circular proposal does not mark any progress, Russell concludes “It would seem necessary, therefore, to suppose that I am acquainted with myself, and that “I”, therefore, requires no definition, being merely the proper name of a certain object” (Russell 1992, 149; 1911, 110).⁵

A few months later when Russell was working on *Problems of Philosophy* he already noted the limitations of this argument. The same introspection argument now leads to a more tempered conclusion: “in some sense it would seem we must be acquainted with our Selves as opposed to our particular experiences. But the question is difficult, and complicated arguments can be adduced on either side. Hence, although acquaintance with ourselves seems probably to occur, it is not wise to assert that it undoubtedly does occur” (PP, 51). A more searching investigation of acquaintance and its features was needed to resolve this issue.

II. Three Arguments Against Neutral Monism

A likely proximate cause of Russell’s second thoughts about acquaintance with the self is his reflections on Moore’s *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*.⁶ An

⁵ In 1917 Russell adds “or to find some other analysis of self-consciousness” (Russell 1992, 149).

⁶ See, e.g., Moore on “acts of consciousness.” (Moore 1953, 4). Lectures 1-10 are the unpublished writings mentioned in the preface to *Problems of Philosophy*, as noted

additional reason to consider the attractions of neutral monism is Perry's *Present Philosophical Tendencies* (Perry 1912). However, the overriding philosophical influence on Russell at this time is Wittgenstein. From their meeting in Oct. 1911 through to the beginning of the first world war, Wittgenstein challenged Russell's philosophical commitments and methods in fundamental ways. Among other effects, Wittgenstein led Russell to abandon his ambitious *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript. Russell worked on this project from April through June of 1913. The first six chapters of this book were published as articles in the *Monist* under the heading "The Nature of Acquaintance". The second article, corresponding to the second chapter of the book, is the 1914 "Neutral Monism" article.⁷

Russell notes his agreement with neutral monism on the central point that knowledge of objects in experience is direct and unmediated by any idea or content (Russell 1984, 22). However, where neutral monism goes wrong is in supposing that "if anything is immediately present to me, that thing must be part of my mind" (Russell 1984, 22). In *Theory of Knowledge* Russell offers a wide range of arguments against this claim, and he takes the failures of neutral monism to offer indirect support for his fundamental cognitive relation of acquaintance. Distinctively mental facts involve acquaintance, and subjects are defined as what stands in acquaintance

in Moore's preface to Moore 1953. Russell 1911 was read in March 1911, while *Problems of Philosophy* was completed in Aug. 1911 (Russell 1992, lxv).

⁷ We lack manuscripts for these articles, so it is not possible to know if anything was changed when Russell published these articles (Russell 1984, xxviii).

relations to objects (Russell 1984, 35). Three kinds of worries about neutral monism are raised.

The weakest argument that Russell gives against neutral monism develops one aspect of his earlier discussions of introspection and self-awareness. Russell first assumes that there are objects that can be experienced by multiple subjects. So, we must distinguish A's experiencing of O from B's experiencing of O. Furthermore, A may experience A's experiencing of O, but B is not capable of experiencing A's experiencing of O. Crucially, Russell adds that "A can experience his experiencing of O without logically requiring any other experience" (Russell 1984, 35). Russell concludes that A's experiencing of O is different from O. This follows from Russell's assumptions because if A's experiencing of O were identical with O, then B's experiencing of O would just be B's experiencing of A's experiencing of O, but this is said to never occur.

The argument is a weak one because the neutral monist has no reason to grant these assumptions, and it is not even clear how to square these assumptions with the account of introspection that Russell develops two pages later. There Russell analyzes a subject's awareness of the fact that it is acquainted with some object using the existential quantifier:

$$S' - P - [(\exists S). S - A - O] \text{ (Russell 1984, 38)}$$

S' is presented with the fact that some subject S is acquainted with O. This must be Russell's account of what is going on when we ordinarily say that A is experiencing his experiencing of O. Russell adds that "there is no good reason why the two subjects S and S' should be numerically the same: the one "self" or "mind" which

embraces both may be a construction ...” (Russell 1984, 38-39). This undermines the above argument against neutral monism as the neutral monist can say exactly the same thing. For the neutral monist what makes A’s experiencing of O different from B’s experiencing of O is the difference between one series that links O to other objects, and which constitutes A, and a second series that links O to other objects, which constitutes B. A at t_2 ’s experience of A at t_1 ’s experiencing of O obtains when the right kind of relation obtains between O and some other object O’.⁸

Russell also argues that the neutral monism developed by James and others has serious difficulties with propositional attitudes. He focuses on the problem of false beliefs and how to distinguish knowing some proposition from other cognitive attitudes. Russell first argues that “belief involves a different kind of relation to objects from any involved in sensation and presentation” (Russell 1984, 25). For A to sense O, O must exist. However, for A to believe that O is red, there does not have to be any fact or state of affairs of O’s redness. That is, some beliefs are false. The problem, according to Russell, is that neutral monists assimilate belief to sensation, and so are forced to ignore this basic difference. Related issues arise for James’ view that S’s knowing that p is just S being part of a “process of leading” that links S’s experiences: for James “knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of

⁸ Russell’s account of consciousness in *Analysis of Mind* has exactly this structure, but with images playing the role of object O’. It is also worth noting Russell’s bold assertion that a mind could exist for a “fraction of a second” and experience only one object (Russell 1984, 23). However, this statement is not much of an objection to neutral monism.

relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter” (given at Russell 1984, 17). However, Russell argues that many processes leading from S’s desire to find his dog to his finding his dog would fail to constitute knowing where the dog is, e.g., if S found the dog by falling into a cellar (Russell 1984, 26). The basic problem is that the “logical relation” between a propositional attitude and its object has been lost (Russell 1984, 27).

The natural response is that neutral monists do not need to assimilate belief to sensation or to identify states of knowing in these simple terms. Russell might counter by noting that neutral monists arrive at their position by supposing that what is present to the mind is a part of the mind. As beliefs are present to the mind, then they are parts of the mind, just as with sensations. However, the determined neutral monist could reject this assumption, and argue for their neutral monism on some different basis. Russell himself here mentions the importance of Occam’s razor as “the supreme methodological maxim in philosophizing” (Russell 1984, 21). As we will see, this is a crucial factor in Russell’s later adoption of neutral monism. So, at best, what these objections based on propositional attitudes show is that the proposals offered by neutral monists are inadequate. In 1913 Russell left open the possibility of acceptable neutral monist accounts of propositional attitudes.

Russell’s third and “most conclusive” (Russell 1984, 41) consideration against neutral monism emphasizes the differences within the objects of experience at any given time. It is these differences that provide the best sort of indirect evidence for his fundamental cognitive relation of acquaintance. Russell now admits that we are not acquainted with our selves, even when we are presented with the

fact that something is acquainted with O. This is why he opts for the analysis of these cases in terms of $S' - P - [(\exists S). S - A - O]$. How, then, he asks, can we use the word "I", if it is not a genuine proper name for an object of our acquaintance? The answer turns on a tight series of connections between the words "this", "I" and "now". As Russell summarizes his position, "such "emphatic particulars" as "this" and "I" and "now" would be impossible without the selectiveness of mind" (Russell 1984, 40-41). Russell's positive proposal is that at any given time a subject is acquainted with many objects. There is a second relation of attention that the subject bears to one of the objects of his current acquaintance.⁹ A subject can name that object using "this". Once "this" has acquired its referent via attention, "I" and "now" are analyzed descriptively: "The subject attending to "this" is called "I", and the time of the things which have to "I" the relation of presence is called the present time" (Russell 1984, 40-41). This is how Russell proposes to make sense of our ability to think of ourselves and our experiences despite our lack of acquaintance with ourselves.

In 1913 Russell thus endorses a descriptive analysis of "I" and overcomes his 1911 objections to such an approach. In this way, he frees himself from the uncomfortable assumption that we are acquainted with the self. Now that he admits that we not acquainted with ourselves, he is happy to admit that we lack knowledge

⁹ Russell adds the puzzling qualifier "or at most some very small number of objects" (Russell 1984, 40). This may be proposed to make sense of a subject's attending to both a present and past particular. See Russell 1984, 73 on immediate memory.

of the intrinsic character of the self. Subjects are whatever stand in the acquaintance relation to objects: “we reach subjects only by description, and cannot know whether they are among objects are not” (Russell 1984, 35). Mental facts are those that involve the relation of acquaintance, but Russell is unsure about the existence of intrinsically mental particulars.

In retrospect, this must be seen as a decisive move towards a neutral monist metaphysics. However, in 1913 Russell used this very position to present his “emphatic particulars” argument against neutral monism:

What I demand is an account of that principle of selection which, to a given person at a given moment, makes one object, one subject and one time intimate and near and immediate ... In a world where there were no specifically mental facts, is it not plain that there would be a complete impartiality, an evenly diffused light, not the central illumination fading away into outer darkness, which is characteristic of objects in relation to mind?
(Russell 1984, 40)

This problem does not concern how to make sense of the difference between those objects that make up A’s experience and those objects that make up B’s experience. An allocation of objects to subjects does not yet address the problem of emphatic particulars. Russell supposes that each subject’s experience at each moment has an internal structure that involves a center and increasingly peripheral bands of objects. Russell claims that the neutral monist is unable to make sense of this partiality within the experience of a given subject.

The significance of this objection is made clear in a letter that Russell wrote to Carr in April 1918 as Russell prepared to enter prison. Now, five years after *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell distinguishes three issues for the neutral monists: sensation, belief and emphatic particulars.

This [neutral monism] works admirably so far as sense is concerned, but raises great difficulties as regards Belief. If Belief could be dealt with on James's lines, I think desire, volition and feeling could be dealt with. I do not see clearly whether a Theory of Belief on such lines is possible or not, but I wish to find out. There is a special problem which raises difficulties, namely the problem of "emphatic particulars", such as "this", "here" and "now" (Thompson 1975, 18).

The next three sections will consider how Russell overcame these three problems in his logical atomism lectures and the work leading up to and including 1921's *Analysis of Mind*. Once these problems were solved, Russell was in a position to give a qualified endorsement to the neutral monist metaphysics that he had previously rejected. However, even then he did not express much confidence in neutral monism based on systematic reasons until considerations from physics gave the final push.

III. Sensation

From January through March of 1918 Russell gave eight lectures that were published with the title *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Neutral monism is presented in these lectures as a serious alternative to Russell's own metaphysics. At one point Russell mentions the earlier discussion of neutral monism that we have just reviewed, but cautions his audience that "some of the arguments I used against

neutral monism are not valid” (Russell 1986, 195-196). He does not say which arguments he has in mind, but we can infer that he now rejected the arguments tied to the difference between some object, A’s experiencing that object and B’s experiencing that object. Worries about belief and emphatic particulars are raised in the lectures, while the earlier worries concerning sensation are absent. What had prompted Russell to withdraw this line of attack on neutral monism?

Russell’s last lecture presents two “purpose[s]” for the lectures as a whole. The first motivation is the difference between simples and facts. Simples include not only particulars, but also qualities and relations (Russell 1986, 234). These simples are the “atoms” that give “logical atomism” its distinctive metaphysics. The only genuinely complex entities that remain are facts. Russell now endorses a metaphysical distinction between simples and facts based on the logical point that you cannot name facts. This insight is credited to Wittgenstein (Russell 1986, 199), and is absent from the *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript.¹⁰ The second purpose that Russell notes here is Occam’s Razor. As Russell interprets it, this maxim requires one to minimize the number of kinds of “undefined things” and “undemonstrated premisses” that are needed to recover the collection of propositions that make up a science like physics (Russell 1986, 235). Some investigations along these lines were developed in Russell’s 1914 *Our Knowledge of the External World* and related papers. The basic idea is to replace a posited entity with a class (or series of classes) whose members are sense-data or potential sense-data (“sensibilia”). This

¹⁰ For example, “there is certainly a one-one correspondence of complexes and facts, and for our present purposes we shall assume they are identical” (Russell 1984, 80).

replacement restricts one's posits to entities whose kind overlaps with entities that are to be found in one's experience.

It is surely not a coincidence that the "ultimate constituents" (Russell 1986, 236) that appear in Russell's logical constructions of ordinary physical objects have the simplicity required by the categorial distinction between logical simples and facts. The two aims for his lectures that Russell here identifies work together to force his dramatic reinterpretation of physics. In addition, Russell applies the very same technique to persons (Russell 1986, 241).¹¹ The basic idea is to take whatever relation one uses to collect experiences as the experiences of a single person, and to use that relation to define a person as a series of classes of sense-data. There is thus no need to posit "a sort of pin-point ego" (Russell 1986, 239) that unites all of these experiences. In addition, many of the elements that we collect in one way in the logical construction of ordinary physical objects like chairs will also appear when we collect elements in the logical construction of persons. These two sorts of logical

¹¹ In 1914's "Relation of Sense-Data to Physics" Russell still speaks of "a mental particular as a constituent" of the world (Russell 1986, 8, noted by Wishon 2015). This suggests that he is not yet ready to view the subject as a logical construction, even though he is here showing how to construct physical objects from sense-data and sensibilia. However, in a note added in 1917 to Russell 1911, Russell says that he uses the phrase "a mind" "merely to denote the something psychological which enters into judgment, without intending to prejudge the question of what this something is" (Russell 1992, 161). So, minds or subjects may now be targets for logical construction.

constructions serve to effectively rebut Russell's argument from 1913 that experience involves a relation between a subject and an object: "That actual appearance that the chair is presenting to me now is a member of me and a member of the chair, I and the chair being logical fictions. That will be at any rate a view that you can consider if you are engaged in vindicating neutral monism. There is no simple entity that you can point to and say: this entity is physical and not mental" (Russell 1986, 241). One component of his earlier resistance to neutral monism has been removed.

I conjecture that it is the surprisingly wide scope for this project of logical construction that led Russell to take neutral monism much more seriously. However, it is a mistake to think that Russell endorses neutral monism simply because he rejects the "pin-point ego". The worries tied to belief and emphatic particulars lead Russell to stop short of endorsing neutral monism in 1918.

There is also a new and increasingly urgent problem for neutral monism tied to experiences that are not sensations. Recall that in the letter to Carr Russell says only that neutral monism "works admirably so far as sense is concerned". However, in *Theory of Knowledge* and *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* Russell emphasizes that our experience is made up of more than just sense-data. In addition, there are images, or what Russell sometimes calls phantoms or hallucinations (Russell 1986, 224). What distinguishes a sensation from an act of imagination is not the reality of the objects. Russell insists that both objects, the sense-datum and the image, are real. The only difference is that the phantom lacks the usual relations to other sense-data: "The phantom is in itself just as much part of the world as the normal sense-

datum, but it lacks the usual correlation and therefore gives rise to false inferences and becomes deceptive” (Russell 1986, 225).

This way of distinguishing between sense-data and images basically guarantees that a genuine sense-datum will appear in both the logical constructions of physical objects and of persons. This is why Russell admits that one will be unable to point to a particular that is physical, but not mental. However, Russell has no reason to accept the converse claim. If some of my experiences are images, then I may very well be able to point to particulars that are mental, but not physical. The “usual correlation” that groups sense-data are the relations used in the logical constructions that make sense-data physical. Images are special because they fail to stand in those very relations. They should, of course, stand in the relations that make them part of a person’s experience, e.g. memory. As such, images stand as a stark counterexample to the strident neutral monist claim that every particular is known to be both mental and physical. A more qualified attitude to neutral monism need not include this strong assertion and can allow particulars that fail to be part of physical objects. The core claim is just that there is nothing special intrinsically about these particulars.

The assumptions needed for this sort of objection to strident neutral monism are present in *Theory of Knowledge*, but it took Russell until 1919’s “On Propositions: What They Are and How They Mean” to present the argument explicitly. There Russell singles out “images of public sensations, i.e. especially visual and auditory images” (Russell 1986, 286) such as imagining a friend in a

chair. These images are not physical because they cannot be located in physical space:

you cannot locate the image in the body because it is visual, nor (as a physical phenomenon) in the chair, because the chair, as a physical object, is empty.

Thus it seems that the physical world does not include all that we are aware of, and that introspection must be admitted as a source of knowledge distinct from sensation (Russell 1986, 287).¹²

In this way, introspection still serves to block Russell's acceptance of strident neutral monism, even though there are no longer any problems with sense-data and sensation. I conclude that even if the problems for belief and emphatic particulars had been resolved, the problem of locating images would have remained. In fact, as we will see in the next two sections, images became Russell's means of solving his own difficulties with belief and emphatic particulars. The viability of neutral monism thus comes to turn on the possibility of a neutral monist account of images.

IV. Judgment

One of the more puzzling questions for Russell scholars is what convinced Russell to abandon the theory of judgment from *Theory of Knowledge*. It is clear that Wittgenstein's objections to this theory in 1913 were a decisive factor, but debates continue concerning exactly what the objection was and how Russell understood

¹² This argument can be traced to Russell's prison manuscripts. See Russell 1986, 260, 322. Russell is especially focused on the work of Knight Dunlap on introspection.

it.¹³ According to the multiple relation theory of judgment there are no free-standing objectively existing propositions composed of the objects of the judgment. The act of judgment takes center stage. It involves the subject standing in a complicated relation (or series of relations) to the objects that the judgment is about. For example, when Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, Othello bears a relation to Desdemona, loving and Cassio. In this way, Russell is able to avoid free-standing false propositions. Still, the judgment fact contains the objects that the judgment is about, and it is true just in case a certain fact obtains in the world.

In *Theory of Knowledge* when Russell wrote that neutral monists ignore the “logical relation” between a belief and what makes that belief true or false, he must have thought that his own multiple relation theory avoided this problem. However, Wittgenstein convinced Russell that the theory was flawed. The flaw turns either on what I have called the proposition problem or the correspondence problem. The proposition problem involves saying which complexes involving the subject count as judgments, and which judgments they involve. The correspondence problem is to say what fact in the world must obtain for a given judgment to be true.

In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* lectures Russell advances a peculiar two-verb fact account of judgment that preserves some elements of the earlier multiple relation theory. He admits that “the theory of judgment which I set forth once in print some years ago was a little unduly simple, because I did then treat the object verb as if one could put it as just an object like the terms, as if one could put

¹³ See Pincock 2008, Bostock 2012, ch. 12 and MacBride 2013 for some recent discussions.

“loves” on a level with Desdemona and Cassio as a term in the relation “believe” (Russell 1986, 199). In 1911 Russell had indeed supposed that Othello stands in a relation to the objects Desdemona, loving and Cassio, and had not distinguished any special way for the relation loving to occur in the judgment complex. In 1918, however, Russell insists that “when A believes that B loves C, you have to have a verb in the place where “loves” occurs” (Russell 1986, 198). So, a fact of this sort not only has a relation or “verb” for believing, but another relation or “verb”, occurring as a relation, for loving. This is so even when B does not love C. This is what Russell calls “the puzzle about the nature of belief” (Russell 1986, 198).

Russell tentatively suggests that we can resolve this puzzle by positing a new sort of fact over and above the atomic facts such as that A loves B and that A is not to the right of B. Wittgenstein is said to have discovered this new sort of fact (Russell 1986, 198), but unfortunately Russell does not say what convinced either Wittgenstein or Russell to countenance these facts. It is likely to have to do with either the proposition problem or the correspondence problem.

The significance of neutral monism for understanding this shift is that Russell sees neutral monism as a way to avoid two-verb facts. As we have seen, James proposed an account of belief and knowledge that tied these propositional attitudes to the behavior of individuals. In the 1918 lectures Russell supposes that neutral monism mandates a thoroughgoing behaviorism for such states.¹⁴ For example, S’s

¹⁴ Russell admits that neutral monism does not entail behaviorism. One suspects that even at this stage Russell was considering non-behaviorist approaches to belief that could vindicate neutral monism.

belief that a train leaves at a certain time is just S's acting in a such and such a way. The truth of the belief is analyzed in terms of the satisfaction of S's aims. Russell's description of the view anticipates his own later account of belief in *Analysis of Mind*:

The logical essence ... will be a relation between two facts having the same sort of form as a causal relation, i.e. on the one hand there will be your bodily behaviour which is one fact, and on the other hand the fact that the train starts at such and such a time, which is another fact, and out of a relation of those two the whole phenomenon is constituted ... It is quite a different logical form from the facts containing two verbs that I am talking of today (Russell 1986, 195).

Russell sees here that one could try to make sense of the truth or falsity of a belief in ordinary causal terms. The difficulty for this proposal is that the belief is no longer a fact that has what it is about as its parts. In 1918 Russell is unwilling to give up this core commitment.

In the lectures Russell notes that the behaviorist strategy of the neutral monist requires that beliefs never occur as an "isolated phenomenon" (Russell 1986, 193). What it is to have a belief, and the truth or falsity of that belief, are analyzed in terms of the person's behavior. But this "is a subject belonging to psychology" (Russell 1986, 193). While in prison Russell read some psychology, with a special emphasis on behaviorist approaches to belief. He found behaviorism to be inadequate, primarily because of its inability to deal with images. However, Russell pressed forward with this attempt to concoct an account of belief that would avoid two-verb facts. He hit on the plan of identifying a belief fact with a fact composed of

mental images standing in relations. The belief's truth or falsity is thus determined by what these images are about, and whether or not these targets stand in the appropriate relation. These image propositions mark a decisive rejection of the core platonic atomist assumption that a belief has as parts the objects that the belief is about. Now the belief only has images as parts, and the intentionality of the belief is secured via the links between those images and what they are about.

This new approach to belief is unveiled in "On Propositions" and occupies a central place in 1921's *Analysis of Mind*. As Russell summarizes the view,

The most important thing about a proposition is that, whether it consists of images or of words, it is, whenever it occurs, an actual fact, having a certain analogy of structure – to be further investigated – with the fact which makes it true or false. A word-proposition, apart from niceties, "means" the corresponding image-proposition, and an image-proposition has an objective reference dependent upon the meanings of its constituent images (Russell 1986, 297).

All Russell says here to account for this shift is that his earlier multiple relation view "is rendered impossible by the rejection of the subject" (Russell 1986, 295).

However, it is not clear if Russell has independent motivations for rejecting the subject or if his main reason for rejecting the subject is this shift in his view of propositions. He does insist that "The act, or subject, is schematically convenient, but not empirically discoverable. It seems to serve the same sort of purpose as is served by points and instants, by numbers and particles and the rest of the apparatus of mathematics" (Russell 1986, 294). A determined defender of a multiple

relation approach could admit the need to logically construct the self, but view this construction as merely an addition to the account of judgment.¹⁵ Of course, this move would not address whatever worried Russell about the multiple relation theory. A reasonable conjecture, then, is that Russell felt pressures of two sorts: first, to revise his account propositions and judgment and, second, to extend his logical constructions into the domain of the mental. He certainly does emphasize the virtues of his new approach to propositions in particular: image propositions have “[t]he advantages ... derived from the rehabilitation of the content, making it possible to admit propositions as actual complex occurrences, and doing away with the difficulty of answering the question: what do we believe we believe falsely?” (Russell 1986, 296). This is what I have called the correspondence problem. Image propositions also seem well-placed to address Russell’s judgment problem.

Clearly, if Russell thought the neutral monist had an adequate account of images, then he would have had a satisfactory response to his earlier worries about belief and neutral monism. But, as we have seen, in this paper Russell argues that images are distinctively mental entities (Russell 1986, 295). The subject has been eliminated and plays no role in belief, but new mental entities have taken its place. Russell thus rejects neutral monism in 1919.

V. Images and Emphatic Particulars

It is commonly supposed that Russell accepted neutral monism in his 1921 book *The Analysis of Mind*. As noted in the introduction, Russell only affirms a qualified form of neutral monism in 1921: no intrinsic difference is known directly.

¹⁵ See footnote 11 for some hints of this strategy in 1917.

The more confident attitude is based on Occam's Razor. Russell explicitly defends the claim that every particular is neither mental nor physical starting only in 1925. Famously, the conclusion of *The Analysis of Matter* says: "There is therefore no ground for the view that percepts cannot be physical events" (Russell 1927, 384). Prior to 1925 there is little evidence that Russell supported anything more than the qualified view that no intrinsic difference is given in experience. As we will see, there are even passages in 1921's *Analysis of Mind* that suggest a rejection of neutral monism. Russell's concluding discussion in that book fits best with the qualified attitude as he there sketches out a future program of research that he suggests would be needed to be any more confident in the neutral monist metaphysics.

As one would expect from "On Propositions", the viability of neutral monism turns on making sense of images. In the first chapter of *Analysis of Mind* Russell says "I should say that images belong only to the mental world" (Russell 1921, 21, noted at Russell 1986, xxii). As in "On Propositions", images obey different laws from sensations, and so resist incorporation into the logical construction of physical objects and matter. However, in 1921 Russell is less enamored of the location argument that he deployed in 1919:

If regarded as a sensation, my image has all the marks of the supernatural. My image, therefore, is regarded as an event in me, not as having that position in the orderly happenings of the public world that belongs to sensations. By saying that it is an event in me, we leave it possible that it may be *physiologically* caused: its privacy may be only due to its connection with my body (Russell 1921, 153).

Elsewhere I have argued that Russell is here influenced by the materialistic account of memory proposed by Semon (Pincock 2006). Semon claimed that sensations leave a trace or engram in the brain that is then capable of generating images on later occasions. This special sort of “mnemic” causation suggests that images may be parts of physical objects after all, namely brains. More generally, as Russell puts the point, “it is by no means certain that the peculiar causal laws which govern mental events are not really physiological” (Russell 1921, 139).

Russell’s concluding chapter “Characteristic of Mental Phenomena” is meant to draw out the conclusions of his earlier analysis for the mental as a whole. Russell notes “the suggestion that many things which seem essentially mental are really neural” (Russell 1921, 295). He thinks he has shown that beliefs, desires and other mental states are all just “complex phenomena consisting of sensations and images variously related” (Russell 1921, 300). As sensations are distinguished from images in a way that guarantees that each sensation is part of a physical object, “it is the causation of images that is the vital problem” (Russell 1921, 303). Here Russell considers two options. One is that Semon’s materialistic analysis of mnemic causation is correct, and so images will bear causal relations of the sort found in physiology. If so, then every image will be part of the logical construction of some physical object. A second option is that “mnemic causation is ultimate”. What this means is that the trace left by a past sensation is causally efficacious in generating a present memory image, but this causation is not mediated by any ordinary physiological process. Understandably Russell says that Semon’s “materialistic answer” is more likely to be true (Russell 1921, 303).

However, Russell also raises severe reservations about materialism about minds. This is the view that the subject matter of psychology is merely tacked on to the subject matter of physics. Instead, what would be preferable would be a science that dealt directly with the particulars encountered in the logical constructions that both of these sciences rely on:

if our scientific knowledge were adequate to the task, which it neither is nor is likely to become, it would exhibit the laws of correlation of the particulars constituting the momentary condition of a material unit, and would state the causal laws of the world in terms of these particulars, and not in terms of matter (Russell 1921, 306).

These laws will either be differential equations or “finite-difference equations, if the theory of quanta should be correct” (Russell 1921, 306n). Russell is thus well-motivated to turn to a detailed engagement with the physics of his time. This project culminated in 1927’s *Analysis of Matter*, which we turn to in the next section.

Given the prominence that the argument from emphatic particulars had received in 1914 and 1918, it is somewhat disappointing to find Russell offering no explicit discussion of these issues in 1921. However, a passage in this last chapter of *Analysis of Mind* shows how Russell may have thought he could use images to solve the problem. Recall that the challenge is to single out one sensation that is at the “center” of one’s experience. In certain circumstances, Russell says that an image will perform this function: “When a sensation is followed by an image which is a “copy” of it, I think it may be said that the existence of the image constitutes consciousness of the sensation” (Russell 1921, 289). Thus the selective role that was

previously performed by the self is now performed by an appropriately caused image. However, Russell is quick to add that the image alone is not sufficient for this sort of consciousness: this image constitutes consciousness only “provided it is accompanied by that sort of belief which, when we reflect upon it, makes us feel that the image is a “sign” of something other than itself” (Russell 1921, 289). The link to the emphatic particular “this” is then made explicit: “This is the sort of belief which, in the case of memory, we expressed in the words “this occurred” ” (Russell 1921, 289). Other images can be referred to the present. The combination of images and beliefs about those images is needed to make sense of our ability to single out “this” sensation. This is what consciousness amounts to in 1921.

Russell does not here talk of “emphatic particulars” or use the evocative metaphor of selective illumination to characterize our experience. However, he remained attached to this conception of experience. The 1940 book *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* contains an entire chapter on “egocentric particulars”. By this point Russell uses the term “percept” to refer to what were formerly either sensations or images. This is a consequence of his more resolute embrace of neutral monism around 1925. After this shift Russell is still happy to talk of the contrast between physics and perception: “Physics views space-time impartially, as God might be supposed to view it; there is not, as in perception, a region which is specially warm and intimate and bright, surrounded in all directions by gradually growing darkness” (Russell 1940/1962, 102). As in 1914, this aspect of our experience is tied up with our use of the words “this” and “I”. Now Russell’s account of “this” is explicitly marked as physiological. In certain cases a “verbal reaction to a

stimulus” is “immediate” in the sense that “the afferent current runs into the brain and continues along the efferent nerve until it affects the appropriate muscles, and terminates in “this is””. In that situation the speaker’s words obtain the “temporary uniqueness” that is distinctive of “this” and the puzzle about egocentric particulars is resolved (Russell 1940/1962, 105-106). “I-now” is then “a set of occurrences” that co-occur with “this”, and “I” is fleshed out by the appropriate causal relations to this “I-now” (Russell 1940/1962, 107). The upshot is that egocentric particulars “are not needed in any part of the description of the world, whether physical or psychological” (Russell 1940/1962, 108). This marks Russell’s considered response to his most long-standing objection to neutral monism.

VI. Neutral Monism and Physics

Russell takes the development and confirmation of the general theory of relativity (GTR) as the decisive factor in favor of his considered support for a more confident attitude to neutral monism. One implication of GTR for Russell is that particulars are now thought of as events. Some events are perceptions, or what Russell calls percepts. Around 1925 Russell concludes that percepts should be identified with events that occur in the space-time of physics, and be located in the perceiver’s brain. Thus Russell arrives at the peculiar position defended in the *Analysis of Matter*: “The space of physics is connected with causation in a manner that compels us to hold that our percepts are in our brains, if we accept the causal theory of perception, as I think we are bound to do” (Russell 1927/1954, 383). On the causal theory, a percept is a perception of some event, such as a flash of lightning, when there is an appropriately related series of events that begins with

the flash and ends with the percept in the perceiver's brain. As all percepts are events in a person's brain, there is no difficulty locating them in the space-time of physics. Every known psychological event is a percept, and so every known psychological particular is also a physical particular. At earlier stages, a sensation could have as its object something that was spatio-temporally distant from the person, as in Russell's famous discussion of the table in *Problems of Philosophy*.

Developments in physics thus convince Russell that every known mental particular is also physical. But is there any reason to think that every physical particular is also mental, or at least that there is no intrinsic difference between them? This worry is now addressed from two directions. First, Russell is now explicit that events where there are no brains are not likely to have exactly the same qualitative character as the percepts that each of us is aware of. This is because the presence of brains is likely to change the character of percepts. Still, there is a "principle of continuity" that we should use to relate percepts to other events. Second, Russell now argues that we know only the structural relations that obtain between events that are not percepts and that this structural character is all that is required for the truth of physical theories like GTR. The denial of knowledge of the intrinsic qualities of events that are not percepts is a crucial ingredient in Russell's confidence in neutral monism. For given that we do not know the qualitative character of these events, there is no barrier to ascribing them a similar qualitative character to percepts. As there is no barrier, the principle of continuity counsels us to make this ascription. The result is that there are "no good grounds for excluding percepts from the physical world" (Russell 1927/1954, 384). As there is no reason

to exclude them, and some reason to include them, the balance of reasons supports a neutral monist metaphysics.

The core argument for admitting events that are not percepts is that this expanded class of events provides the best overall interpretation of the laws of physics. Ultimately, then, Russell is deploying his version of Occam's razor. This is most clear when Russell considers sparser alternatives that try to get by just with the percepts of one individual or the percepts of all individuals. Against these alternatives, Russell presents a causal theory of perception that adds additional events, and supposes that these events are "causally continuous with the visual percept" (Russell 1927/1954, 216). Summing up, he says that

The essential points are (1) the arrangement about a centre, (2) the continuity between percepts and correlated events in other parts of the space derived from percepts and locomotion. This first is a matter of observation; the second is a hypothesis designed to secure simplicity and continuity in the laws of correlation suggested by the grouping of percepts. It cannot be demonstrated, but its merits are of the same kind as those of any other scientific theory, and I shall henceforth assume it (Russell 1927/1954, 217).

It is difficult to pinpoint when Russell arrived at this position. In the 1924 paper "Logical Atomism" this version of neutral monism in terms of events is presented as "an outline of a possible structure of the world" (Russell 1988, 177). The unpublished 1925 "Philosophical Analysis of Matter" seems to go a step further by ending with a discussion of neutral monism and calling it the view that "does justice

to the strong points” of both idealism and materialism (Russell 1988, 284). In a summary of lectures published in 1926 called “Perception”, Russell finally comes out and says neutral monism is the theory that “I believe to be true” (Russell 1988, 187). The exact same language is used in *Outline of Philosophy* from 1927, which presents these lectures.

Russell’s route to a confident endorsement of neutral monism, then, is somewhat convoluted and elaborate. The overriding consideration is Occam’s razor and developments in physics. However, the way was surely prepared by the problems that Russell ran into in making sense of acquaintance with the self and his multiple-relation theory of judgment. Once Wittgenstein convinced him that particulars must be simple, and that only facts can correspond to facts, Russell was motivated to find simple, neutral particulars as the sole ingredients of his logical constructions of everything else. Given these twists and turns it is somewhat surprising to find a newly energized debate about “Russellian monism” (Wishon 2015). Philosophers of mind, in particular, wish to find out if Russell’s position offers a viable alternative to physicalism or whether it is perhaps just a version of physicalism in disguise. Our reconstruction of Russell’s arguments has emphasized Russell’s determination to solve his philosophical dilemmas, even at the cost of radically revising his metaphysics. This is a lesson that contemporary metaphysics is all too eager to learn.

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