

According to the treatment of logic bruited in the *Tractatus*, the internal structure of elementary propositions is not of concern to the logician. Propositions are articulate, but the particular forms of elementary proposition are immaterial to the essential nature of propositional combination, where that includes both what others call truth-functional and what others call quantificational combination.

What I've just said is not uncontroversial: despite Wittgenstein's explicit declaration that "we cannot give the composition of the elementary proposition.... The enumeration of any special forms would be entirely arbitrary" (§§5.55, 5.554), many commentators purport to find in the *Tractatus* a commitment to some particular account of the forms of elementary propositional articulation: that Tractarian simple names are names of objects in Frege's sense; or that they are, like early Russell's "terms," names of particulars, properties and relations; or again that they are names of sense data or material points.

I and others have already argued elsewhere against such readings, in favour of the view that the *Tractatus* is deliberately categorially indeterminate in its conception of elementary propositions and their constituents, and correlatively of atomic facts and their constituents. What I want to do in the present paper is to show how this reading makes better sense of Wittgenstein's transition from Tractarian to post-Tractarian ways of thinking about logic: in particular, of what he says in the notorious paper "Some remarks on logical form" (hereafter SR). In particular, I'll use as my foil what I'll call "Russellian" readings of the *Tractatus*, according to which Tractarian names are names of particulars, properties and n-ary relations—that is, that the categorial framework of the book is more or less Russell's¹, albeit only tacitly.

It is easy for me to sum up briefly how my reading of the *Tractatus* jibes with SR. The beginning part of Wittgenstein's paper describes a conception of the analysis of propositions through their truth-functional structure down to a base level of elementary or (as he calls them here, after Russell) atomic propositions which are not truth-functionally compound. The investigation of the forms of these atomic propositions, we are told, is not a matter for pure logic as is the investigation of the truth-functional development of all propositions from them. Rather, it is "the task of the theory of knowledge," and requires "what might be called, the logical investigation of the phenomena themselves, *i.e.*, in a certain sense *a posteriori*, and not by conjecturing about *a priori* possibilities." Now, so far, none of this is presented as news: while as we shall see in a moment, Wittgenstein does, later in the paper, flag some of what he says as in contradiction with the *Tractatus*, no such conflict is registered here. And indeed the conception seems to jibe with the §§5.55s of the *Tractatus*: although there the investigation of elementary propositional forms is not called "theory of knowledge" but rather "the application of logic" (as opposed to logic itself), much of the language is the same. Thus for instance, where SR rejects the suggestion that one might specify *a priori* the forms of atomic proposition by insisting that "An atomic form cannot be foreseen," §5.556 of the *Tractatus* reads, "There cannot be a hierarchy of forms of elementary propositions. Only that which we ourselves construct can we foresee."

The first substantially new point made in SR, the "first definite remark on the logical analysis of actual phenomena," is "that for their representation numbers (rational and irrational) must enter

¹ In this précis I abstract from the further details of Russell's theory of types.

into the structure of the atomic propositions themselves.” To arrive at this claim, Wittgenstein begins from the observation that attributions of different degrees of a property are logically incompatible, and then argues that (*pace Tractatus* §6.3751) such attributions cannot be analyzed as truth-functions of non-numerical propositions. As a kind of corollary of this, he concludes, momentarily, that the Tractarian doctrine of the logical independence of elementary propositions must be abandoned. But see how much of the *Tractatus* framework he is holding fixed, at least on my reading of that work: he accepts its conception of logic (and in particular its distinction between logic and its application), its conception of the analysis of propositions, and its conception of elementary propositional form. He presents himself as *carrying out* the project of the “application of logic” envisaged in the *Tractatus*, and simply discovering in the process that one of the axioms of that work must be abandoned. Now, I don’t mean to minimize the significance of this consequence; on the contrary, I imagine that his prompt renunciation of this paper was due in large part to the instability of the position it arrives at concerning the very idea of an atomic proposition. I simply want to emphasize that, if we understand the *Tractatus* in the way that I recommend, we can make good sense of the argumentative structure of SR.

A not uncommon reading of the TLP (cf. Stenius, Hintikka and Hintikka, and Hacker) has it that Tractarian objects include Russellian particulars, properties and relations, and correlatively that elementary propositional forms are the familiar ones of monadic predications, dyadic relational statements and so on. Proponents of this view, which I’ll call “Russellian,” argue on intra- and extra-textual grounds that this is the sort of propositional form that the author of the *Tractatus* has in mind, and that he simply refrains from saying so, perhaps because (as Hintikka and Hintikka would have it) his official view is that semantics is ineffable and can’t be spoken of. As I remarked earlier, I and others have already argued elsewhere against the “Russellian” reading of the *Tractatus*; and I’ve already said enough here to see why: again, the §§5.55s say explicitly not simply that we mustn’t *talk* about propositional forms but that “What lies in its application logic *cannot anticipate* (§5.557; emphasis added). The problem with Russellian forms, by Wittgenstein’s lights, is precisely that they are spun out to infinity *a priori*: but in response, Wittgenstein asks, “How could we decide *a priori* whether, for example, I can get into a situation in which I need to symbolize with a sign of a 27-termed relation?” (§5.5541); and more generally, “if there were a logic even if there were no world, how then could there be a logic, since there is a world?” (§5.5521)

What I want to argue here is that this anti-Russellian understanding of Wittgenstein’s conception of elementary propositional form also makes better sense of what happens in SR. If Wittgenstein’s conception of elementary propositional form were Russellian, it is hard to see why his argument would proceed in the way sketched above. On the Russellian reading, the elementary propositions of the *Tractatus* are standard, n-ary predications; what is left unspecified is simply what kinds of particulars and n-ary predicates enter into these propositions. Thus §6.3751, where Wittgenstein grapples with the case of colour ascriptions and concludes that they cannot be elementary propositions on the grounds that they are not logically independent, would presumably be interpreted to imply that colour ascriptions are truth functions of Russellian predications involving as yet unknown particulars and predicates. But on this reading, it is hard to see why Wittgenstein’s later realization that no such truth-functional reduction is available should prompt him to posit entirely new forms of atomic proposition. Rather, against the background assumption that elementary forms are Russellian and that the question is simply

what specific particulars, properties and relations occupy the positions in those forms, the realization of the truth-functional simplicity of colour ascriptions might as well have led him simply to conclude that colour ascriptions and other “statements expressing the degree of a quality” wear their forms on their sleeves—that is, are elementary subject-predicate propositions. Instead, the inference that elementary propositions are not logically independent is presented as a kind of *corollary* of the main discovery here, that “numbers... must enter into the structure of the atomic propositions.” This seems undermotivated if we envision Wittgenstein coming at this investigation from an antecedent “Russellian” perspective.