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THE ROLE OF ATTENTION IN RUSSELL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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In his *Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell distinguished knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. This paper argues for a new interpretation of the relationship between these two species of knowledge. I argue that knowledge by acquaintance of an object neither suffices for knowledge that one is acquainted with the object, nor puts a subject in a position to know that she is acquainted with the object. These conclusions emerge from a thorough examination of the central role played by attention in Russell's theory of knowledge. Attention bridges the gap between knowledge by acquaintance and our capacity to form judgements about the objects of acquaintance.

KEYWORDS: Bertrand Russell; acquaintance; knowledge; attention; perception

In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Russell draws a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. Knowledge by acquaintance is a kind of non-propositional knowledge of a *thing* (e.g. sense-datum), whereas knowledge of truths is propositional knowledge or knowledge *that* something is the case:¹

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

¹Though this quotation appears to identify all knowledge of things with acquaintance, earlier in *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge of things: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 46). Knowledge by description is knowledge where one knows something *about* a thing. Though a kind of knowledge of things, knowledge by description is a species of propositional knowledge or knowledge-that: 'I shall say that an object is "known by description" when we know that it is "*the so-and-so*", i.e. when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property ...' (Russell, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance', 113). For a thorough discussion of the relationship between knowledge of truths and knowledge by description, see Proops (forthcoming).

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*.

(Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 44)

My primary goal is to argue against a dominant reading of Russell’s conception of the relationship between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. The reading endorses one (or both) of two theses. Call them the ‘strong transparency thesis’ and the ‘weak transparency thesis’. On the strong transparency thesis, if a subject *S* is acquainted with an object *o*, she knows *that* she is acquainted with *o*. Both David Pears, in ‘The Function of Acquaintance in Russell’s Philosophy’ and (more recently) Sajahan Miah, in *Russell’s Theory of Perception* endorse this thesis. On the weak transparency thesis, *S*’s acquaintance with an object *o* puts her in a *position* to know that she is acquainted with *o*, where one is in a *position to know* just in case all preconditions for knowledge (including the background preconditions for belief) are in place except for belief.² I will argue that both theses are false on Russell’s view, and thus that a good deal of Russell scholarship is mistaken. In particular, I demonstrate that the strong transparency view is in tension with Russell’s stated characterizations of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths, and cannot explain the role of attention in Russell’s early theory of knowledge. The role of attention in the acquisition of knowledge of truths also highlights Russell’s commitment to the falsity of the *weak* transparency thesis. This result calls for a reconceptualization of the status of knowledge by acquaintance in Russell’s theory of knowledge. The negations of the strong and weak transparency theses are (respectively) the weak and strong *anti-transparency* theses. I will argue that the anti-transparency theses both accommodate Russell’s own statements about the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths, and explain why attention takes centre-stage in the acquisition of knowledge of truths.

²Anscombe, in *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Gertler, in *Self-Knowledge*, and Kripke, in *Reference and Existence* all ascribe to Russell the view that objects we are acquainted with are immune to doubt, i.e. we cannot doubt the existence of objects we are acquainted with. I later show that this view amounts to the weak transparency thesis – the thesis that knowledge by acquaintance of an object puts us in a position to know that one is acquainted with it. Evans, in *The Varieties of Reference* and McDowell, in ‘Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space’, hold a slightly different reading. They ascribe to Russell a ‘Cartesian’ doctrine: we cannot be wrong about whether or not we are acquainted with an object, since we cannot be in error about whether our thoughts about the object are singular (i.e. acquaintance-based). Whether this different reading amounts to an ascription to Russell of the weak transparency thesis is a question that lies outside the scope of this paper.

The paper has five parts. In the first section, I argue that Russell's adoption of the multiple relation theory of judgement c. 1909 provides the resources to explain his distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. While the distinction may be present in Russell's work prior to his adoption of the multiple relation theory, it would at that stage have been ungrounded, or brute. In the second section, I present the transparency theses and identify some of their adherents. In the third section, I present evidence that Russell rejected the strong transparency thesis. But it is not enough to simply show that Russell rejected this view; we must also explain why he rejected it. So in the fourth section, I argue that the strong transparency thesis cannot accommodate the role of attention in Russell's theory of knowledge. In the fifth section, I show that the role Russell accords attention also serves to rule out the weak transparency thesis.

THE MULTIPLE RELATION THEORY OF JUDGEMENT

This section lays out the relationship between Russell's adoption of the multiple relation theory of judgement and his formulation of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. Russell explicitly draws the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths in 1912 (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 44). This postdates his adoption of the multiple relation theory, an adoption which perhaps occurred as early as 1907 (Russell, 'On the Nature of Truth', 47). On the multiple relation theory, when a subject stands in a propositional attitude such as belief or knowledge, the subject stands in a multiple relation (e.g. the relation *believes*) to the constituents of a proposition. For example, Cassio's belief that Desdemona loves Othello is a four-place relation between Cassio, Desdemona, Othello, and the relation *loving*. Thus the logical form of the sentence 'S believes that aRb' is Believes (S, a, R, b).

By contrast, acquaintance is a direct cognitive relation between a subject and an object, and the converse of the relation of presentation (Russell, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance', 108).³ When a subject stands in the non-propositional attitude of knowledge by acquaintance, she instantiates the dyadic relation of acquaintance between a subject and an object of acquaintance. I argue below that this feature not only distinguishes knowledge by acquaintance from knowledge of truths, but also serves as an explanatory

³That is, to say that S has acquaintance with O is essentially the same thing as to say that O is presented to S' (Russell, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance', 108). Russell also often characterizes knowledge by acquaintance as direct, unmediated access to an object of acquaintance: 'I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself' and 'We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths' ('Knowledge by Acquaintance', 108; *The Problems of Philosophy*, 46).

ground for Russell's distinction in kind between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths (i.e. propositional knowledge).⁴

In 'The Nature of Sense-data – A Reply to Dr. Dawes Hicks' Russell explains the difference between acquaintance and knowledge of truths in terms of the fact that acquaintance is a two-term relation of a subject to a single object, whereas knowledge of truths (a variety of *judgement*) consists in a subject standing in a multiple relation to several objects.

There seem to be two main cognitive relations ... namely presentation (which is the same as what I call *acquaintance*), and *judgement*. These I regard as radically distinguished by the fact that presentation (or acquaintance) is a two-term relation of a subject ... to a single (simple or complex) object, while judgement is a multiple relation of a subject ... to the several objects concerned in the judgement.

(Russell, 'The Nature of Sense-Data', 76)

The passage strongly suggests that adicity marks the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. But a mark (or criterion) need not be a ground. For instance, one might argue that the distinction is also marked by the fact that knowledge by acquaintance, not knowledge of truths, provides the 'foundation' for all knowledge.⁵ But this fact does not *explain* the difference between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. By contrast, I contend that adicity explains the difference for Russell. My argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. The best explanation for why Russell did not draw an explicit distinction between knowledge of truths and knowledge by acquaintance until after his adoption of the multiple relation theory is that prior to this adoption he lacked the resources to *ground* such a distinction. The adoption of the multiple relation theory made available an explanation of the distinction in terms of the differing adicities of the two kinds of knowledge.

At this point, it is important to note that Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths is not equivalent to his distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description: knowledge by description is a species of knowledge of truths, but does not exhaust it (see fn. 1). A consequence of my argument will be that even if Russell might have construed knowledge by description as knowledge of truths prior to his adoption of the multiple relation theory, and thereby conceptually drawn the distinction between

⁴'Experiencing is a two-term relation; we call the relation acquaintance, and we give the name *subject* to anything which has acquaintance with objects' (Russell, *Theory of Knowledge*, 44). Acquaintance is 'a two-term relation in which the object can be *named* but not *asserted*' (Russell, 'Relation of Sense-data', 142). Russell represents this relation by the schema 'S-A-O' (*Theory of Knowledge*, 38).

⁵'All our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation' (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 48).

knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths, the distinction nevertheless lacks explanatory ground until Russell adopts the multiple relation theory.

Prior to his adoption of the multiple relation theory, Russell could not have explained the distinction by appeal to adicity. On Russell's 1903 view, judgement is a two-place relation between a subject and a proposition.⁶ Thus when Cassio believes that Desdemona loves Othello, Cassio stands in the relation *believes* to the proposition expressed by 'Desdemona loves Othello'. However, knowledge by acquaintance involves a two-place relation between a subject and the object of acquaintance. Thus, on the pre-multiple relation view, it would not have been possible to draw the distinction in terms of adicity: both are dyadic relations.

But one might contend that Russell could have explained the distinction in some other way on his pre-multiple relation view. In particular, he could have explained it by appeal to the *object* of the knowledge state: for instance, knowledge of truths might be distinct from knowledge by acquaintance because knowledge of a truth has a proposition as its object.

I argue that the distinction cannot successfully be explained on Russell's pre-multiple relation view (i.e. in his 1903 *Principles of Mathematics*). On Russell's 1903 view, propositions are possible objects of acquaintance.⁷ Nothing in Russell's theory rules out the possibility that, *in principle*, propositions are the *only* objects of acquaintance: objects of acquaintance are those known to us in an immediate way, and it is a contingent matter whether non-propositional objects qualify as objects that can be known in such a way. Of course, on Russell's view, we are acquainted with non-propositional objects (sense-data, universals, etc.). But we could have failed to be acquainted with non-propositional or sub-propositional objects, for it is not *constitutive* of the notion of knowledge by acquaintance that we are acquainted with non-propositional objects.

At this point, one might be tempted to respond: surely knowledge of truths can be distinguished from knowledge by acquaintance by the fact that necessarily, propositions are the only objects of knowledge of truths. But while this would provide a way to distinguish the two forms of knowledge, it would not suffice as an explanatory ground for the distinction. Modal facts cannot be explanatorily basic on Russell's view, as he was committed to a

⁶See Russell's 'On the Nature of Truth' for a characterization of this view.

⁷Indeed, Russell's first formulation of the principle of acquaintance in his unpublished paper 'Points about Denoting' requires acquaintance with the proposition as a whole, as well as its constituents:

It is necessary, for the understanding of a proposition, to have *acquaintance* with the *meaning* of every constituent of the meaning, and of the whole; it is not necessary to have acquaintance with such constituents of the denotation as are not constituents of the meaning.

('Points about Denoting', 307; underline emphasis added).

reductive account of modal notions both before (in 1905) and after (in 1914) his adoption of the multiple relation theory of judgement (Russell, ‘Necessity and Possibility’, 508; ‘Nature of Acquaintance’, 153).

Even after Russell’s adoption of the multiple relation theory, an explanation of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths in terms of their respective objects would have been implausible. On the multiple relation theory, the proper objects of the propositional attitude are constituents of the judgement complex, and not the proposition as a whole.⁸ But these constituents are also objects of acquaintance. This is a consequence of the Principle of Acquaintance (which states a constraint – a necessary condition – on our understanding of propositions): ‘Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted’ (Russell, ‘Knowledge by Acquaintance’, 117; *The Problems of Philosophy*, 58). Since on the multiple relation theory a ‘proposition’ is merely a non-unified complex of constituents, knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths take the same kind of object or objects.

Perhaps we can draw a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths if we do not conceive of the distinction as exclusive. We might say that knowledge of truths is a species of knowledge by acquaintance.⁹ But drawing the distinction in this way is inconsistent with the claim that acquaintance with an object is insufficient for knowledge of a truth about it. If knowledge of truths is a mere species of knowledge by acquaintance, some instances of knowledge by acquaintance of an object will be sufficient for knowledge of truths about it. But as I shall argue in the fourth section, Russell must reject such a possibility.

Absent a viable, alternative explanatory ground for the distinction, I propose that prior to the adoption of the multiple relation theory, Russell’s theory of judgement did not have the resources to explain the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that he drew the distinction earlier, albeit without explanatory ground.

My primary goal in this section has been to characterize Russell’s distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths, and argue that his adoption of the multiple relation theory provided an explanatory ground for his distinction in terms of adicity. In the next section, I present the transparency theses.

⁸I use ‘a proposition’ or ‘propositional’ here in the loose sense in which Russell uses it after he adopts the multiple relation theory: a proposition is just the set of entities that constitutes the *judgement complex* (what is left once we abstract away from the particular subject and propositional attitude that compose the judgement). On the multiple relation theory, Russell is no longer committed to propositions as unified entities to which we bear attitudes.

⁹I owe this suggestion to Ian Proops.

THE TRANSPARENCY THESES

David Pears and more recently Sajahan Miah hold versions of the strong transparency thesis. Let us consider the following two sample passages, the first from Pears's 'The Function of Acquaintance in Russell's Philosophy' and the second from Miah's book *Russell's Theory of Perception: 1905–1919*. Pears is clearly an adherent of the strong transparency thesis (namely that a subject is acquainted with an object only if she knows that she is acquainted with it):

When someone is acquainted with a contemporary object he can refer to it directly without any doubt about its identity or existence, especially if it is a sense-datum; but, when the object lies in the past, its identity and even its existence may be problematic, although his memory is of the privileged, direct kind, which Russell at first counted as acquaintance. For if the existence of an object is doubtful, then acquaintance with it, as Russell defines it, is doubtful too, *but it is supposed to be a kind of knowledge that is known to occur when it does occur.*

(‘The Function of Acquaintance’, 227; emphasis added)

Miah argues that it is a constraint on acquaintance that when S is acquainted with an object (in this case, a sense-datum: Russell's paradigm object of acquaintance), S knows that the object exists. He says:

The direct awareness is such that if a person S is aware of a sense-datum x, then the following are true:

- (a) x exists
- (b) S cannot be mistaken about x
- (c) S cannot doubt whether x exists
- (d) S cannot fail to believe that x exists
- (e) S cannot fail to know that x exists

All these follow from Russell's claim that sense-data are what we are directly aware of in any perceptual situation.

(Miah, *Russell's Theory of Perception*, 57)

In the fourth section, I argue that Miah's claim that knowledge by acquaintance of an object is sufficient for knowledge that it exists presupposes that knowledge by acquaintance of an object is sufficient for knowledge that one is acquainted with it. If my argument is successful, Miah is also committed to the strong transparency thesis.

One source of apparent support for the strong transparency thesis is Russell's suggestion that acquaintance with a sense-datum gives rise to our inability to doubt its existence. As Russell says in a representative passage: ‘We have

seen that it is possible, without absurdity, to doubt whether there is a table at all, whereas it is not possible to doubt the sense-data' (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 47). Russell's claim that 'it is not possible to doubt the sense-data' is plausibly elliptical for 'it is not possible to doubt the existence of sense data'. And one explanation for our inability to doubt the existence of sense-data is that we know that we are acquainted with them. If we know that we are acquainted with a sense datum, it would be rationally incoherent (in Russell's terminology, 'absurd') to doubt its existence. To doubt would generate something akin to Moore's paradox: we know (and thus believe) that we are acquainted with *x*, yet doubt that there is such an *x* (i.e. believe that for all we know, *x* might not exist).

Now someone might wish to explain the indubitability of the existence of sense data by means of a weaker thesis than the strong transparency thesis. The Weak Transparency Thesis holds that if a subject is acquainted with an object then she is in a position to know that she is acquainted with it. Recall that one is in a *position to know* just in case all preconditions for knowledge (including the preconditions for belief) are in place except for belief. With the weak transparency thesis, we can generate a less stringent version of the Moore paradox-like situation described above. If one were in a position to know that one is acquainted with a sense datum, then in some (perhaps weak) sense, one would be rationally incoherent to doubt the existence of the sense datum. Many authors hold that Russell is committed to the claim that the existence of sense data (as objects of acquaintance) cannot be doubted (Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, 14–15; Anscombe, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 42–3; Gertler, *Self-Knowledge*, 89). More generally, these views hold that if a subject is acquainted with an object, she cannot doubt whether the object exists. Of course, these theorists might seek other reasons for why one cannot doubt. For instance, it might be the case that the subject lacks the cognitive capacity to doubt whether an object she is acquainted with exists. But if there is no cognitive impediment to doubting the existence of a table on Russell's view – and there is not – there is no reason to think there is a cognitive impediment to doubting the existence of objects of acquaintance such as sense-data. In the absence of a better explanation, I contend that those who claim that Russell held that subjects could not doubt the existence of sense data are committed to (at least) the weak transparency thesis.

In this section, I have identified several prominent readers of Russell who have ascribed, either directly or indirectly, one of the two transparency theses to him. My aim in the remainder of the paper is to show that these thinkers are mistaken.

AGAINST STRONG TRANSPARENCY

Russell held that knowledge by acquaintance is logically independent of knowledge of truths: 'Knowledge of things, when it is of the kind we call

knowledge by *acquaintance*, is essentially simpler than any knowledge of truths, and logically independent of knowledge of truths ...' (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 46). Call this the *logical independence thesis*. If knowledge by acquaintance is logically independent of knowledge of truths, then knowledge of an object by acquaintance does not require any knowledge of truths about the object.¹⁰ The logical independence thesis commits Russell to a view on which knowledge by acquaintance of an object is not sufficient for knowledge of truths about it.

The *Problems of Philosophy* provides further textual evidence for the logical independence thesis: 'We may have knowledge of a thing by acquaintance even if we know very few propositions about it – theoretically we need not know any propositions about it' (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 144). Also in a letter to Gilbert Murray (one of the editors of *The Problems of Philosophy*) dated 20 August 1911, Russell writes: 'Acquaintance with a thing does not (theoretically) involve *any* knowledge of truths about the thing, and in practice involves often very little such knowledge' (Russell, *Logical and Philosophical Papers: 1909–13*, xlv). These passages suggest the possibility of knowing a thing by acquaintance without knowledge of any propositions (i.e. truths) about it, and so knowledge by acquaintance of an object is not sufficient for knowledge of truths about it.

The logical independence thesis entails the *weak* anti-transparency thesis: knowledge by acquaintance of an object is insufficient for knowledge that one is acquainted with it.¹¹ By contrast, on the strong transparency thesis, knowledge by acquaintance of an object is sufficient for knowledge that one is acquainted with it. So the strong transparency thesis and the logical independence thesis are mutually inconsistent.

WHY RUSSELL REJECTS STRONG TRANSPARENCY

I have argued that if we ascribe the logical independence thesis to Russell – and I have shown that there is good reason to do so – we must abandon the strong transparency thesis. In this section, I investigate the depth of Russell's

¹⁰On the multiple relation theory, a proposition is 'about' a thing (or object) when the thing occurs in the proposition as one of its constituents. This notion of 'aboutness' differs from Russell's view in the *Principles of Mathematics*, where a proposition is about its logical subject or subjects, and not every constituent the proposition is composed of. For instance: 'We may say, broadly, that every proposition may be divided, some in only one way, some in several ways, into a term (the subject) and something which is said about the subject, which something I shall call the *assertion*.' (Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, 39).

¹¹Russell arguably also holds a related thesis – the thesis that my acquaintance with an object *o* is insufficient for my acquaintance with the fact that I am acquainted with *o*. For Russell says: 'We may have acquaintance with an object, without being acquainted with our own acquaintance. All objects of sense that *we do not attend to* seem to be instances.' (*Theory of Knowledge*, 121; emphasis added). A plausible way to interpret 'acquainted with our own acquaintance' is as expressing acquaintance with the *fact* of our own acquaintance.

commitment to the logical independence thesis. I contend that deep philosophical motivations lie behind its adoption, and thus behind Russell's implicit rejection of the strong transparency thesis. I show that within Russell's larger theory of knowledge, acquaintance with an object is not alone sufficient for knowledge of any truths about it; *attention* is also necessary. I argue for this claim in three steps. I first show that the relation of acquaintance is distinct from the relation of attention, and that acquaintance is not sufficient for attention. I then show that acquaintance is not sufficient for knowledge of a certain subset of truths – knowledge Russell calls 'judgements of perception'. Finally, I argue that if acquaintance with an object is not sufficient for judgements of perception, it is not sufficient for any knowledge of truths about the object. This last claim vindicates the weak anti-transparency thesis (i.e. the negation of the strong transparency thesis).

In *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell argues that attention is a cognitive relation, and that all cognitive relations presuppose acquaintance (*Theory of Knowledge*, 5). Thus, if a subject stands in an attentional relation to an object, he must already be acquainted with it. Russell argues as follows:

Thus the question we have to consider is whether *attention* constitutes experience, or whether things not attended to are also experienced. It seems that we must admit things to which we do not attend, for attention is a selection among objects that are 'before the mind', and therefore presupposes a larger field, constituted in some less exclusive manner, out of which attention chooses what it wants.

(*Theory of Knowledge*, 9)

If acquaintance (which Russell in *Theory of Knowledge* uses interchangeably with 'experience') is a precondition for attention, then the acquaintance relation is not identical to the attention relation. But a relation can be distinct from another and yet be such that the first suffices for the other. However, the above quotation clearly suggests that one can be acquainted with an object – have it 'before the mind' – and yet fail to attend to it. Acquaintance with an object is thus insufficient for attending to it. Again:

The relation of attention ... is of course different from that of acquaintance, and one point in which it differs is that a subject can only attend to one object, or at least a very small number, at a time.

(*Theory of Knowledge*, 39)

So the class of objects one is acquainted with at any given time is usually larger than the class of objects one attends to at any given time. I shall now argue that attention is required for all judgements of perception. If attention is required for all judgements of perception, then acquaintance with an object is not alone sufficient for a judgement of perception about it.

Judgements of perception are a special subset of *self-evident truths*: they are those truths ‘immediately derived’ from acquaintance (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 113). Russell’s use of the term ‘derived’ to characterize judgements of perception might misleadingly suggest that the judgement is inferred. This would be a mistake, for inferences only hold between propositions. Self-evident truths are those known immediately (i.e. not by inference from other truths), and knowledge of these truths is what Russell calls ‘intuitive knowledge’.¹² On Russell’s view, ‘all our knowledge of truths depends upon our intuitive knowledge’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 109). It follows that all our knowledge of truths depends upon self-evident truths. Russell recognizes three kinds of self-evident truths: judgements of perception, knowledge of the truths of logic, and judgements of memory. Unlike judgements of perception, the truths of logic are not ‘derived’ from acquaintance, and as I shall argue, there is good reason to believe that judgements of memory require attention as well as acquaintance. Thus, if knowledge by acquaintance is not sufficient for the remaining class of self-evident truths – the judgements of perception – then it will not be sufficient for any knowledge of truths.

In the *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell distinguishes two kinds of judgements of perception: (1) *Simple judgements* that assert the existence of the object of acquaintance (this type of judgement is not restricted to logically simple objects of acquaintance); (2) *Complex judgements* that involve analysis of the object of acquaintance, i.e. involve isolating the constituents or properties of the object (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 114). For an example of (1) Russell says: ‘We see a patch of red, and we judge “there is such-and-such a patch of red”, or more strictly “there is that”’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 114).¹³ For an example of (2) Russell offers: if ‘we see a round patch of red, we may judge “that patch of red is round”’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 114). The distinction between a simple and a complex object, or at least the version of the distinction relevant to this discussion, consists in the awareness (or lack there-of) of the parts or properties of an object. An object is complex if and only if a subject is aware of its parts or properties as a result of attention.¹⁴ The distinction between simple and complex

¹²‘We may now take a survey of the sources of our knowledge, as they have appeared in the course of our analysis. We have first to distinguish knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. In each there are two kinds, one immediate and one derivative ... Our immediate knowledge of *truths* may be called *intuitive* knowledge, and the truths so known may be called *self-evident* truths ... Our *derivative* knowledge of truths consists of everything that we can deduce from self-evident truths by the use of self-evident principles of deduction.’ (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 109).

¹³Russell’s example of a simple judgement of perception ‘there is such-and-such a patch of red’ is not of the form ‘o is F’, which I argue here qualifies as a complex judgement of perception. It is rather of the form ‘F exists’.

¹⁴For evidence that Russell sometimes conceives of the distinction in this fashion, compare:

Visual space may, in a sense, be infinitely *divisible*, for by attention alone, or by the microscope, the immediate object of perception can be changed in a way which

judgements of perception does not lie in the object of judgement (i.e. in whether the object of judgement is simple or complex), for a simple judgement of perception can be made about a complex object. We thus get a three-fold classification of pairs based on the type and object of judgement:

- 1 Simple judgement, simple object
- 2 Simple judgement, complex object
- 3 Complex judgement, complex object

On Russell's view, only the judgements included in (3) admit analysis of the object. He argues in *Principia Mathematica* that when the object of judgement is complex, the judgement of perception requires attention to discern the various constituents of the complex object (note that he uses 'complex' in an ontological sense in this passage, but captures our notion of complexity when he talks of a subject being 'shown' the complexity of the object by attention). He says:

Let us consider a complex object composed of two parts a and b standing to each other in the relation R . The complex object ' a -in-the-relation- R -to- b ' may be capable of being perceived; when perceived, it is perceived as one object. Attention may show that it is complex, we then *judge* that a and b stand in the relation R . Such a judgement, *being derived from perception by mere attention*, may be called a 'judgement of perception'. This judgement of perception, considered as an actual occurrence, is a relation of four terms, namely a and b and R and the percipient. The perception, on the contrary, is a relation of two terms, namely ' a -in-the-relation- R -to- b ', and the percipient.

(Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, 43; underline emphasis added)

This passage shows that attention is required for complex judgements of perception about complex objects, such as ' a -in-the-relation- R -to- b '. This complex object is a fact, or equivalently, a state of affairs. Russell treats facts – such as that expressed by 'the sun is setting' – as objects of acquaintance in both *Principia Mathematica* and *The Problems of Philosophy*. The judgement that a and b stand in the relation R is a complex judgement for it does not merely assert the existence of a complex object of acquaintance, a state of affairs; it also involves an analysis of the object.

Attention is thus required for at least complex judgements of perception. But do simple judgements of perception about objects (both complex and

introduces complexity, where formerly there was simplicity; and to this process no clear limit can be set. But this is a process which substitutes a new immediate object in place of the old one, and the new object, though more subdivided than the old one, will still consist of only a finite number of parts.

(Russell, 'Relations of Universals', 12).

See also (Russell, 'Relations of Universals', 18).

simple) also require attention? Attention is required for all judgements of perception only if we can show attention to be necessary for both types of judgements of perception: those that involve analysis and those that do not.

The paradigm case (if not the only case) of a judgement of perception that does not require analysis of its object is one that asserts the existence of an object of acquaintance without analysing it, such as ‘there is that’ (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 114). It is not obvious at first glance that attention is required for such simple judgements of perception. The passage from the *Principia Mathematica* suggests that a role of attention is to discern the complexity in an object so that a subject can then make a judgement about it. As simple judgements of perception do not require a subject to discern any complexity in the object of judgement, they do not admit analysis. The notion of ‘analysis’ is understood minimally: a judgement involves analysis if it requires a subject to discern the complexity in an object of acquaintance. That simple judgement does not admit analysis suggests that attention has no role to play in the formulation of a simple judgement of perception.¹⁵

I argue, however, that attention is required for simple judgements of perception, just as for their complex counterparts. My argument has two parts. I first highlight and discuss a puzzle: how Russell’s claim that a proposition of the form expressed by ‘*a* exists’ where ‘*a*’ picks out an object of acquaintance could qualify as a simple judgement of perception, in light of his contemporaneously held view that the proposition expressed by ‘*a* exists’ is meaningless when ‘*a*’ is a logically proper name. I then propose a solution to the puzzle, one that illuminates how attention might figure in simple judgements of perception.

Russell’s paradigm example of a simple judgement of perception is the judgement of the proposition expressed by ‘*a* exists’, where ‘*a*’ picks out an object one is acquainted with. In *Principia Mathematica* (1910), Russell is committed to the view that the proposition expressed by ‘*a* exists’ is meaningless when *a* is a logically proper name, i.e. a name that picks out an object of acquaintance.¹⁶

It would seem that the word ‘existence’ cannot be significantly applied to subjects immediately given; *i.e.* not only does our definition give no meaning to ‘E! *x*,’ but there is no reason, in philosophy, to suppose that a meaning of existence could be found which would be applicable to immediately given subjects.

(*Principia Mathematica*, 175)

¹⁵Attention might of course play a different role in simple judgements of perception: that of selecting an object to judge about. *Theory of Knowledge* clearly suggests that Russell thinks attention also plays a role in selection (*Theory of Knowledge*, 8). However, this role of attention would not show that attention is required for judgements of perception, for nothing would rule out the possibility of a judgement of perception based solely on acquaintance.

¹⁶The question of why Russell would have held such a view goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The view that assertions about the existence of an object are meaningless when the object is ‘immediately given’ – i.e. when it is an object of acquaintance – is later reiterated in *Theory of Knowledge*: ‘Of an actually given *this*, an object of acquaintance, it is meaningless to say that it “exists”’ (*Theory of Knowledge*, 138). Given that Russell held that assertions about the existence of an object one is acquainted with are meaningless both in 1910 and 1913 (i.e. both prior to writing *The Problems of Philosophy* and immediately after its publication), he also likely held the view in *The Problems of Philosophy*. But the question then arises: if Russell’s statement that if ‘I am acquainted with a thing which exists, my acquaintance gives me the knowledge that it exists’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 45) is meaningless, why would Russell have said it?

I propose that ‘I am acquainted with a thing which exists, my acquaintance gives me the knowledge that it exists’ admits two different readings. One renders the statement meaningless on Russellian grounds, while the other does not. On the reading that renders the statement meaningless, the pronoun ‘it’ in ‘it exists’ functions as a logically proper name that picks out an object of acquaintance. On the reading that renders the statement meaningful, ‘it’ does not pick out an object of acquaintance but operates as a description (a description such as ‘the object I am acquainted with’ or ‘the object I am attending to’). If the assertion of existence is not about an object of acquaintance, but about the same thing picked out by a description, the statement is no longer meaningless on Russellian grounds. Russell is indeed aware of this polysemy and says:

... the very same word which, at one moment, is used as a true proper name for a given object, may be used the next moment as a description. We may say ‘this exists’, meaning ‘the object of my present attention exists’, or ‘the object I am pointing to exists’. Here the word ‘this’ has ceased to function as a proper name, and has become a descriptive word, in which an object is described by its properties ...

(*Theory of Knowledge*, 138)

Likewise, Russell’s example in *The Problems of Philosophy* of the judgement of perception expressed by ‘there is that’ can be read as equivalent to that expressed by ‘the object if I am indicating exists’. With this second statement, one asserts that an object that satisfies a certain description exists; but this assertion is perfectly meaningful for Russell.

Thus, we get around the problem of a meaningless assertion about existence by interpreting Russell’s claim ‘If I am acquainted with a thing which exists, my acquaintance gives me the knowledge that it exists’ as the claim that my acquaintance with an object gives me knowledge that an object that satisfies a certain description exists. My suggestion is thus that in a simple judgement of perception expressed by the ‘there is that’ or ‘that exists’, ‘that’ is not a logically proper name. This analysis would

apply to all judgements of perception that assert the existence of an object. However, this does not yet show that simple judgements of perception require attention.

But now consider what is required to know the proposition expressed by 'the object I am acquainted with exists'. Knowledge of this proposition presupposes that there is *something* that I am acquainted with. For I cannot know that the object I am acquainted with exists without knowing that I am acquainted with it, just as I cannot know that the present King of France is bald without knowing that there is a present King of France. (Notice that this conclusion vindicates my earlier claim that Miah is committed to the strong transparency thesis. Miah claimed that we cannot fail to know that the objects of our acquaintance exist. But I have shown that to know that an object of our acquaintance exists requires that we know that we are acquainted with it). But knowledge that I am acquainted with the object results from a judgement of perception that presupposes attention: 'It would seem, however, that, when we are acquainted with an object, our acquaintance with it can usually be discovered by an effort of attention ...' (*Theory of Knowledge*, 121). The passage does not show that attention is necessary for knowledge that I am acquainted with an object, though it does show that something more than mere acquaintance is required in order to 'discover' our own acquaintance with an object. It remains possible that our acquaintance can be discovered in some other way. However, since Russell does not provide any alternatives, we can assume that attention is required to discover our own acquaintance with an object.

Simple judgements of perception are limited to those that assert the existence of an object of acquaintance. As I have shown that attention is required for such judgements, it follows that attention is required for all simple judgements of perception. Since both simple and complex judgements of perception require attention, acquaintance alone is therefore insufficient for any judgement of perception.

The third and final step of my argument for the weak anti-transparency thesis is to show that if acquaintance is not sufficient for any judgement of perception, it is not sufficient for any knowledge of truths. Recall that on Russell's view, 'all our knowledge of truths depends upon intuitive knowledge' (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 109). Intuitive knowledge is the immediate knowledge of truths and contrasts with derivative knowledge. Derivative knowledge is *deduced* from intuitive knowledge by 'self-evident principles of deduction' (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 109). However Russell divides intuitive knowledge into three kinds: judgements of perception, knowledge of the truths of logic, and judgements of memory.

I have shown that acquaintance alone is not sufficient for judgements of perception. What about knowledge of the truths of logic? Russell held that truths of logic are evident as soon as they are understood. This follows from his claims that truths of logic are a priori,¹⁷ and that a priori truths

are evident as soon as understood (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 113). Moreover, a priori truths only contain universals as constituents and we can understand what an a priori truth means as soon as ‘we understand the universals involved’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 106). Russell’s principle of acquaintance states a necessary condition on the understanding of propositions: ‘Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted’ (‘Knowledge by Acquaintance’, 117; *The Problems of Philosophy*, 58). But it does not state a sufficient condition. Thus, while understanding a logical truth is sufficient for it to be evident, and for us to thereby have intuitive knowledge of it, it does not follow that acquaintance with the constituents of the logical truth is sufficient for knowing it. The principle of acquaintance does not provide a reason to think that acquaintance is sufficient for knowledge of a logical truth. But knowledge of a logical truth is not *derived* from acquaintance either: nothing beyond understanding the logical truth is required to know it. Thus, in the absence of any further consideration that might suggest that acquaintance is sufficient for knowledge of a logical truth, I suggest that Russell does not take it to be sufficient.

In the *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell recognizes a third kind of intuitive knowledge: judgements of memory. On Russell’s view, all knowledge of the past depends on intuitive judgements of memory (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 115). An intuitive judgement of memory is one that involves ‘having immediately before the mind an object which is recognized as past’ (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 115). Intuitive judgements of memory are analogous to judgements of perception in that both derive from acquaintance – the first from past acquaintance with an object. While a thorough discussion of memory would take me too far afield, it can plausibly be argued that ‘remembering’ or ‘calling up an object’ is an active rather than passive capacity and thus requires attention. In this it is unlike perception, which arguably is passive.

I argued in this section for a two-fold conclusion: (1) that acquaintance is not sufficient for knowledge of a subset of truths: the judgements of perception; (2) if acquaintance is insufficient for judgements of perception, it is insufficient for all knowledge of truths. Thus, a subject’s acquaintance with an object is insufficient for her to know *that* she is acquainted with it. This refutes the strong transparency thesis and vindicates the weak anti-transparency thesis. More importantly, it also demonstrates *why* Russell must hold the weak anti-transparency thesis: the thesis accommodates the role of attention in Russell’s theory of knowledge, i.e. that of bridging the gap between acquaintance and judgement. In contrast, the strong

¹⁷It must be taken as a fact, discovered by reflecting upon our knowledge, that we have the power of sometimes perceiving such relations between universals, and therefore of sometimes knowing general *a priori* propositions such as those of arithmetic and logic’ (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 105).

transparency thesis not only fails to accommodate this role, but also simply ignores it.

AGAINST THE WEAK TRANSPARENCY THESIS

I argue in this section that the right account of the role of attention in Russell's theory of knowledge warrants a conclusion even stronger than the weak anti-transparency thesis. It warrants the conclusion that knowledge of an object by acquaintance is not sufficient for a subject to be in the position to know that she is acquainted with it (i.e. the *strong* anti-transparency thesis).

Consider what it means for acquaintance to put a subject in a position to know a truth about the object of acquaintance. At the beginning of the paper, I provided the following gloss on the notion: a subject is in a *position to know* just in case all preconditions for knowledge (including the background preconditions for belief) are in place except for belief. But we should seek a more precise formulation, since there are many potential preconditions for knowledge that are plausibly irrelevant to whether or not one is in a position to know. For example, an agent might suffer from some cognitive impairment that impedes their ability to form the relevant belief. But we might still say, perfectly reasonably, that such a person is in a position to know. So I propose the following restriction: acquaintance with an object puts a subject in a position to know that she is acquainted with the object only if acquaintance is the only *perceptual* precondition for such knowledge. Obviously this new construal of 'position to know' generates a correspondingly weaker version of the weak transparency thesis. But it is clear that even this weakened version of the thesis is incompatible with the role of attention sketched in the last section. If judgements of perception and judgements of memory require both acquaintance and attention, then acquaintance cannot be the only perceptual precondition for judgement, and thus cannot be the only perceptual precondition for knowledge of a truth.

We now have a rather tidy argument against the ascription of the weak transparency thesis to Russell. The majority of the argumentative burden lies with the detailed work done in the last section. Once it becomes clear that attention is required for judgements of perception and memory, the move to the rejection of the weak transparency thesis is straightforward.

On the other hand, if knowledge by acquaintance does not put us in a position to know that the object of acquaintance exists, then we are at a loss as to why Russell might have held that when one is acquainted with an object one cannot doubt that it exists. Recall from the second section that this claim motivates the ascription of the weak transparency thesis to Russell. But perhaps Russell never held such a view: 'All our knowledge of truths is infected with some degree of doubt, and a theory which ignored this fact would be plainly wrong' (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 135). But

if we are to take this statement seriously, we require an alternative interpretation of Russell's claim that 'it is not possible to doubt the sense-data' (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 47). I propose the following: It is not possible to doubt sense-data because they are not the kind of objects that *can* be doubted. An object of doubt must be capable of being true or false. If propositions are the only sort of objects capable of truth or falsity, then all objects of doubt must be propositions. As Russell says, '[t]he actual sense-data are neither true nor false. A particular patch of colour which I see, for example, simply exists: it is not the sort of thing that is true or false' (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 113).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My goal in this paper has been to argue for a new reading of the relationship between Russellian knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of truths. One standard reading ascribes to Russell what I call the 'strong transparency thesis': if a subject knows an object by acquaintance, she thereby knows that she is acquainted with it. I argued that not only does the strong transparency view run counter to Russell's commitment to the logical independence thesis – the claim that knowledge by acquaintance is logically independent of any knowledge of truths – but it also fails to accommodate the role of attention in Russell's theory of knowledge. Finally, I argued that the role of attention in Russell's theory of knowledge commits Russell to a view even stronger than the weak anti-transparency thesis: knowledge of an object by acquaintance is insufficient to even put a subject in a position to know truths about it. But if Russell held the strong anti-transparency thesis, readers of Russell must seriously reconsider the role of acquaintance in Russell's theory of knowledge.¹⁸

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