

**David Bostock**

*Russell's Logical Atomism.*

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David Bostock provides an exposition and evaluation of Bertrand Russell's logical atomism. Bostock's book is organized into three main sections: these canvas Russell's views on (1) logic and mathematics, (2) knowledge, and (3) metaphysics, respectively. Each section provides a very well-versed and in-depth discussion of Russell's views in an organized manner. The book should be of great value to Russell scholars and to faculty and advanced students alike who study analytic philosophy.

Bostock, along with other Russell scholars, identifies the years between 1911 and 1924 as the period when Russell was a strict logical atomist. Russell's goal was to determine the ultimate constituents of reality by way of logically analyzing propositions that purport to be about reality. Bostock, in the preface, identifies the core elements of logical atomism as realism, logical analysis, and atomism. Russell's philosophy is realist in the sense that he believes that there are things existing independently of minds. He uses logical analysis as a method of doing philosophy, whereby one attempts to determine what exists in reality by appeal to logical analysis of propositions. Finally, Russell's philosophy is atomistic in the sense that the logical analysis of propositions will yield the atoms or simples which are the ultimate constituents of reality.

Russell believes that the world in itself is complex, and not just the propositions we use in understanding and describing the world. Bostock states that Russell in "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918) accepts this view of the world merely on a priori grounds: Russell holds that it is a self-evident truth that the world is complex and that it is made out of simples (258).

In "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" Russell distinguishes two kinds of propositions: atomic and molecular propositions. An atomic proposition is one which does not include any logical connectives, such as 'and' or 'if ... then', or any quantifier words, such as 'all' or 'some'. Logical analysis of an atomic fact yields atoms or simples. As Bostock explains, "etymologically, the word 'atomic' means 'not split-able. Of course Russell's atomic facts can be split, not into further facts, but into a universal and the one or more particulars that are its terms. But he wishes to say that their ingredients are 'atomic particulars', which cannot be split into further particulars, and 'atomic universals', which again cannot be split into further universals" (258). (In his epilogue, Bostock concludes that Russell placed more emphasis on logical method than on atomism [279].)

An analysis of an atomic proposition such as 'Assos is beautiful' seems at first sight to yield the object, the town of Assos, as an atomic particular, and the universal, beautiful. Yet, according to Russell, 'Assos' is not logically a proper name. It is in fact an abbreviation for a definite description, such as 'The small village on the Aegean coast where Aristotle lived for a

short period of time'. (Note that the ordinary proper name 'Aristotle' will also have to be further transformed into a definite description.) And this definite description does not stand for an atomic particular either. It needs to be further analyzed so as to yield a variable, i.e., an undetermined particular, and some sense-data, which are atomic particulars. Russell formulates this theory of denoting phrases in his article "On Denoting" in 1905. And in his 1924 article, "Logical Atomism", Russell cites his 1905 theory of definite descriptions as a prime example of logical atomism.

Bostock discusses Strawson's criticism of Russell's theory of definite descriptions. Strawson in "On Referring" (1950) argued that Russell is not able to give a correct account of definite descriptions as they are used in ordinary language since definite descriptions *presuppose* the existence of certain objects, but they do not assert the existence of what they describe. Thus, according to Strawson, someone asserting that Assos is beautiful does not assert that Assos exists, but merely presupposes that it does. Bostock's evaluation of this criticism is that it is effective on the assumption that Russell's theory is meant to be a theory of how ordinary language works. And Bostock argues that this is the case in the period when "On Denoting" was written. I find plausible one of the reasons that Bostock gives when arguing that Russell was indeed trying to analyze ordinary language. Bostock points out that Russell in "On Denoting" criticizes Frege's proposal of assigning an empty set to a definite description which does not in fact denote any object as a "plainly artificial" solution. So, Russell must have believed that his own theory is not artificial. Bostock acknowledges that Russell, in his reply to Strawson in 1957, said he never had the intention of laying out a theory of how we naturally use language (45, n. 29). Bostock claims Russell changed his mind in this late period (44–45).

The other kind of ultimate constituent that a logical analysis of a proposition yields is a universal, which may be a quality or a relation. Bostock discusses the debate between nominalists and realists with respect to universals, specifically the Berkeley-Locke controversy and Russell's regress argument. I agree with Bostock, who argues that Russell's regress argument relies on his referential theory of meaning (243). The following is Russell's regress argument for the existence of universals, construed on semantic grounds:

The referential theory of meaning is true. A proposition, when true, corresponds to a fact; so, its constituents must refer to particulars and universals, in order for the proposition to be meaningful, i.e., to have a truth-value. Therefore, universals must exist in order for predicates or relations to refer to. The nominalist theory is not satisfactory because even if we refrain from positing universals for most quality-words and relations-words by means of a resemblance relation to an exemplar, the predicate 'resembles' will need to refer to a universal in order for propositions in which this predicate occurs to be meaningful.

Without the requisite semantic grounds the regress argument seems to lose its force against the nominalist. For if words have meaning by ways other than standing for an object, then Russell's requirement that the nominalist has to give an explanation of 'resemblance' seems to beg the question against the nominalist. The nominalist holds that similarity facts are fundamental facts about reality and that as such they do not require explanation. So, the nominalist, as long as she adopts a theory of meaning other than the referential theory, can consistently deny the existence of universals.

Logical analysis of propositions yields atoms, which are particulars and universals. The next question then becomes: how do we acquire knowledge of these atoms and how do we understand what they mean? In Russell's strict period of logical atomism, there is a strong link between Russell's theory of meaning and his theory of knowledge. In order to understand the meaning of a proposition and to acquire knowledge of it we must be acquainted with the atoms that the propositions are about.

In *The Analysis of Mind* (1921) we are not acquainted with universals anymore in the sense of a mental subject getting into a relation of acquaintance with a non-mental object. Bostock quotes Russell from *The Analysis of Mind*: "Words of which the logical meaning is universal can therefore be employed correctly without anything that could be called consciousness of a universal" (cited at 125). Bostock takes this quote to be an indication of Russell's acceptance that an acquaintance with universals is not as essential as he thought it was earlier. To point at an interesting contrast, Bostock reminds us that Russell in *My Philosophical Development* (1959) said that he never abandoned the principle of acquaintance (125, n. 19).

I think that what Russell, in retrospect, claims to have maintained is merely a form of direct knowledge. In Russell's earlier works, this way of knowing, i.e., acquaintance, involved a mental substance as the subject of knowledge. And as Bostock explains, this notion was accompanied by the referential theory of meaning, which meant that understanding a word required being acquainted with what the word stood for (134). But in the later period, Russell preserves acquaintance solely as a form of direct knowledge, for he needs it as part of his case for moderate foundationalism: he changes his views on the nature of the relation of the acquaintance relation, however, as well as his theory of meaning. Russell recognizes in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940) that there is more to meaning than the object it refers to, as Bostock urges Russell to do (130).

Bostock, while acknowledging the important contributions Russell's logical atomism has made to philosophy, remarks that logical atomism, which views the world as ultimately composed of simple particulars and their properties or relations to each other, is not quite compatible with how science views the world today. Bostock notes that later, in *The Analysis of Matter* (1927), Russell is "still wedded to the idea that the basic events must occupy small regions of space-time, and so can be thought of as deserving to be called 'particulars'. It is not obvious that today's science would endorse that assumption" (278).

I would like to note that the later Russell did recognize this shortcoming. As a result, in *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* and *Human Knowledge* (1948) he analyzed particulars further: consequently, what logical analysis reveals are merely universals. One of the main reasons why the later Russell eliminated particulars was probably this need to align his ontological views with that of contemporary science.

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