

RUSSELL, WITTGENSTEIN,  
AND THE PROBLEM OF THE RHINOCEROS

Joseph F. McDonald

*Harvard University/University of Ottawa*

One of the earliest encounters between Bertrand Russell and the young Ludwig Wittgenstein involved a discussion about whether there was a rhinoceros in their room. Apparently, when Wittgenstein "refused to admit that it was certain that there was not a rhinoceros in the room," Russell half-jokingly looked underneath the desks to prove it. But to no avail. "My German engineer, I think, is a fool," concluded Russell. "He thinks nothing empirical is knowable—I asked him to admit that there was not a rhinoceros in the room, but he wouldn't."<sup>1</sup>

The crux of the dispute appears to be a thesis held by Wittgenstein at the time concerning "asserted propositions." According to Russell, Wittgenstein maintained that "there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions" and refused "to admit the existence of anything except asserted propositions."<sup>2</sup> But what this thesis amounts to and how it is related to his remarks about nothing empirical being knowable and about whether there is a rhinoceros in the room is difficult to determine. For one thing, it is difficult to see how Wittgenstein could be arguing that nothing empirical is knowable given the central importance for his early thinking of his idea that only propositions of natural science can be said. For another, his reported claim that there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions is hard to square with his contention in the "Notes on Logic" that there are only *unasserted* propositions. What we need is an interpretation that can make sense of Wittgenstein's reported remarks, while taking into account their relation to his fundamental ideas and his views in the "Notes on Logic" and elsewhere. Also, it must offer some account of Russell's

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*Joseph F. McDonald is a post-doctoral fellow of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and is stationed at Harvard University and the University of Ottawa. He is writing a book on representation and therapy in Wittgenstein's philosophy.*

extreme reaction to Wittgenstein and his worry that Wittgenstein may have been a fool.

In his recent biography, *Wittgenstein: A Life*, Brian McGuinness proposes an interesting interpretation of Russell and Wittgenstein's conversation, one echoed by Ray Monk in his *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. In what follows, I criticize McGuinness' interpretation and in its place propose an alternative way of reading "asserted proposition." This alternative provides us with a way of seeing Wittgenstein's earliest thoughts as continuous with fundamental insights expressed not only in the *Tractatus*, but in his later philosophy as well. Indeed, if I am right, Wittgenstein's objection to Russell anticipates ideas normally associated with *On Certainty*.<sup>3</sup>

McGuinness' interpretation depends on sorting out what Wittgenstein meant by an "asserted proposition" and why he thought that Russell's remark about the rhinoceros did not qualify as one. To this end, he insists that we must see Wittgenstein's objection as expressing a thesis that is more adequately expressed in the *Tractatus*. This thesis, says McGuinness, concerns the logical composition of the world. His view is that "the claim that only asserted propositions exist is clearly intended as a correction of Moore's position in his 1899 article ['The Nature of Judgement'] according to which the world is formed of concepts."<sup>4</sup> According to McGuinness, Wittgenstein's correction is based on the idea that the world consists of facts—facts being asserted propositions—not of things or what Moore called simple concepts. The correction thus seems to anticipate the idea that "the world is the totality of facts, not of things," the second remark of the *Tractatus*.<sup>5</sup>

McGuinness reminds us that the phrase "asserted proposition" is central to the accounts of the nature of a proposition defended by Russell and Moore, accounts that Wittgenstein is practically certain to have known about. The situation, as McGuinness has it, is that Wittgenstein had already formed an objection to Russell and Moore, which he then attempted to express in his conversation with Russell. In sum, McGuinness assumes that Wittgenstein meant by the phrase "asserted proposition" what Russell and Moore had meant by it.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of an "asserted proposition" is connected with Russell and Moore's belief that the content of a proposition is its essential feature and their view that the psychological processes involved in judgments concerning this content have a secondary status. On their conception, a proposition

is not a psychic phenomenon as it is for Locke but rather is what Lockean ideas and the like are about.<sup>7</sup> Moore called the entities that make up propositions "concepts" and Russell called them "terms." A proposition, on this view, is what Moore took to be a complex or what Russell called a set of terms. It is not something mental, but rather a complex or collection of subsistent, Platonic, entities.

On Russell and Moore's conception, facts are *identified* with true propositions. Truth is not—as it is on the correspondence theory—a relationship between a proposition (considered as a mental or linguistic entity) and something else. Rather it is a property of a proposition, now considered as a complex or configuration of terms. Some proposition just happens to be true, and those propositions are facts. As Moore says,

Once it is definitely recognized that the proposition is to denote not a belief (in the psychological sense), nor a form of words, but the object of belief, it seems plain that it differs in no respect from the reality to which it is supposed merely to correspond, i.e. the truth that "I exist" differs in no respect from the corresponding reality "my existence."<sup>8</sup>

What differentiates a true proposition, or a fact, from a false proposition is the quality it has of "being asserted." Russell says,

True and false propositions alike are in some sense entities, and are in some sense capable of being logical subjects; but when a proposition happens to be true, it has a further quality over and above that which it shares with false propositions, and it is this further quality which is what I mean by assertion in a logical as opposed to a psychological sense.<sup>9</sup>

An asserted proposition, then, is Russell's term for differentiating a true proposition, a fact, from a false proposition; true propositions have the property of "being asserted," which false propositions lack.

McGuinness thinks that Wittgenstein was harking back to this use of the phrase "asserted proposition" in his conversation with Russell. He thinks that by saying "there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions," Wittgenstein was intending to challenge Russell and Moore's basic assumption that there was something *more* fundamental than facts. On the view being attributed to Wittgenstein, false propositions are not "entities," as Russell and Moore believed; there is not a complex of terms (or concepts) in

virtue of which something is not; the world is composed of facts, not of terms, concepts, or things.

For McGuinness, then, the discussion between Wittgenstein and Russell amounted to the question "What complex can reasonably be supposed to exist in virtue of there not being a rhinoceros in the room?"<sup>10</sup> He holds that Russell was of the view that such a complex existed, whereas Wittgenstein in arguing that there was nothing except asserted propositions, was denying this claim. As McGuinness puts it,

[Wittgenstein was] denying existence in this sense to everything except asserted propositions or facts. Thus he had already reached the position expressed in the first propositions of the *Tractatus* that the world consists of facts . . . [and that] things, objects, or what Moore called simple concepts do not go to make up the world.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of McGuinness' insistence that Wittgenstein's remark was "clearly intended" as a correction of Moore's position, we must surely regard his interpretation as conjectural. Other than the appearance of the phrase "asserted proposition," there is no direct evidence to be found in Russell's letters to Lady Ottoline to suggest that the two men were discussing Moore's article or indeed any of Moore's or Russell's earlier views. In fact, if we are to discern anything definite on the basis of Russell's letters, it is that Russell was worried about whether the two men were discussing anything at all; what emerges from his reports to Lady Ottoline is not that Russell was alarmed by *what* Wittgenstein was saying but rather by *whether* he was saying anything.

These conversations, it must be remembered, occurred very early in their relationship, in fact within the first three weeks or so after they met. At this stage, Wittgenstein's intellectual credentials were not yet clear to Russell and he worries that Wittgenstein may be "a fool," "an infliction," and "a crank."<sup>12</sup> McGuinness' claim that Wittgenstein's remark "was clearly intended as a correction of Moore's position" does not take into account the serious doubts Russell had about Wittgenstein; it presumes that the framework of discussion between the two men was much more settled than appears to have been the case.<sup>13</sup>

This point is especially telling given that the position McGuinness attributes to Wittgenstein was, as McGuinness himself points out, already considered and rejected by Russell in his discussion of Meinong.<sup>14</sup> If McGuinness is right, it is extremely puzzling how Wittgenstein's proposing

a sophisticated view about the nature of false propositions and complexes which Russell had earlier considered and rejected could have driven Russell to suspect that Wittgenstein may have been, not merely wrong, but rather a fool and an infliction and a crank. Even if Wittgenstein had articulated his position poorly, Russell would presumably have (at the very least) been able to recognize the possibility of a position he had earlier considered.

Another serious difficulty with McGuinness's interpretation is that Wittgenstein states in the "Notes on Logic" of 1913 that "there are only *unasserted* propositions."<sup>15</sup> If Wittgenstein's remarks to Russell about asserted propositions anticipate the opening remarks of the *Tractatus*, we must suppose that Wittgenstein changed his mind between 1911 and 1913, and then changed it back again by the time of writing the *Tractatus*. Besides being implausible, this runs counter to a fact that McGuinness himself uses to support his contention that the early conversation anticipated ideas later expressed in the *Tractatus*, namely that Wittgenstein claimed that his fundamental ideas came to him very early.<sup>16</sup> The continuity in Wittgenstein's thinking makes it even more difficult to see how Wittgenstein could have changed his mind about "asserted propositions" and yet have had the same ideas in 1911 and 1918. At the very least, if McGuinness is to appeal to the continuity between Wittgenstein's earlier and later remarks, he owes us an account of the remarks from the "Notes on Logic" concerning *unasserted* propositions.

A further difficulty with McGuinness' reading is his failure to offer an account of Wittgenstein's remark that "nothing empirical is knowable" and how it squares with Wittgenstein's idea that only propositions of natural science can be said. Indeed, McGuinness argues that any conclusions about our knowledge that Wittgenstein drew from his view about the contents of the world is too "conjectural" and cannot be stated "without falling into confusion with different and more usual assumptions about the nature of propositions."<sup>17</sup> On McGuinness' account, then, an important piece of the puzzle concerning that early conversation remains essentially unaccounted for.

Finally, on McGuinness' interpretation, remarks from the *Tractatus*, such as "the world consists of facts, not of things" are assumed to be ontological claims, ontological claims anticipated by Wittgenstein in his conversation with Russell. McGuinness' view is that Wittgenstein was "correcting Moore," both in the opening remarks of the *Tractatus*

and in his earlier objection to Russell. This suggests that Wittgenstein, Moore, and Russell shared a similar program: to offer an account of the furniture of the world. Where they differed, thinks McGuinness, was only over whether the furniture consisted of facts (or asserted propositions) or, concepts.<sup>18</sup>

However, the logical status of the opening remarks concerning the world and facts, and indeed the status of all the remarks of the *Tractatus*, has by no means been settled. Indeed, it is clear that for Wittgenstein the question "What does the world consist of?" is in some sense illegitimate and nonsensical, and so too are the propositions that are proposed as answers to it. Moreover, Wittgenstein makes it abundantly clear that his aim is not to propound philosophical doctrines, but to show that such doctrines stem from a misunderstanding of the logic of the language.<sup>19</sup> By taking Wittgenstein to have been proposing ontological theses (even if these theses are seen as undermining all such theses) McGuinness downplays the centrality of Wittgenstein's antitheoretical remarks.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, McGuinness' interpretation fails to deal adequately with Russell and Wittgenstein's early conversation. Not only does it fail to account for Russell's extreme reaction, it attributes a view to Wittgenstein concerning asserted propositions which is inconsistent with the views that he expressed shortly afterwards. As well, McGuinness presents very little explanation of Wittgenstein's reported remark that "nothing empirical is knowable" and how this squares with his idea that only propositions of natural science can be said. Finally, McGuinness' interpretation assumes that Wittgenstein's interest lies in proposing philosophical theories, an idea which runs counter to a fundamental theme of his early (and later) philosophy.

As a first step towards clarifying Wittgenstein's objection to Russell, it is helpful to distinguish two uses that Wittgenstein makes of "assertion" in the "Notes on Logic," notes written within two years of that early conversation. In one use, Wittgenstein speaks of "assertion" when criticizing what he takes as Russell's confusion of the logical with the psychological. He says,

Judgment, question and command are all on the same level. What interests logic in them is only the unasserted proposition.

There are only unasserted propositions. Assertion is merely psychological.<sup>21</sup>

In this use, Wittgenstein criticizes Russell and Frege for confusing the psychological aspect of asserting something with the logical properties of a proposition. For Wittgenstein, assertion isn't a property of a proposition, as it is for Russell, and when we disentangle assertion from the real logical properties of a proposition, we are left only with "unasserted propositions." For our purposes, the important thing to see is that Wittgenstein's only use for "assertion" in Russell's sense is critical. At this stage he would not have said that "there are only asserted propositions" meaning by "asserted proposition" what Russell meant by it. For that would presuppose that he thought that "asserted proposition" expresses a coherent concept, contrary to the argument of the "Notes on Logic."

In his second use, Wittgenstein speaks of "assertion" in the context of determining what cannot be asserted, of indicating what it would be *meaningless* to assert. Thus Wittgenstein says "A proposition cannot possibly assert of itself that it is true." He says,

Russell's "complexes" were to have the useful property of being compounded, and were to combine with this the agreeable property that they could be treated like "simples." But this alone made them unserviceable as logical types, since there would have been *significance* in *asserting* of a simple, that it was complex.

As well, he declares,

Types can never be distinguished from each other by saying (as is often done) that one has these *but* the other has those properties, for this presupposes that there is a *meaning* in *asserting* all these properties of both types.<sup>22</sup>

In the "Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway," written in 1914, Wittgenstein again uses this second sense of assertion when he speaks of "what is sought to be expressed by the nonsensical assertion" of Russell's theory of types.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear then that in the "Notes on Logic" Wittgenstein thought Russell's notion of "assertion" to be incoherent and that this belief is related to his concern with what can be meaningfully asserted, with his use of assertion in the second sense mentioned. If the "Notes on Logic" give any clues as to what Wittgenstein might have meant in his early conversation with Russell, the evidence is thus against his having used "asserted proposition" in Russell's sense. In fact, if we stress the continuity of his ideas, it is likely that he would have been opposed to the terminology of asserted propositions in Russell's sense. For, as he said, Russell's

sense of assertion is psychological, despite what Russell himself believed, and betrays a confusion about the nature of a proposition. What is more likely is that Wittgenstein was using "assertion" in the sense of determining what counts as a meaningful assertion or not.

If we follow out the hypothesis that by "assertion" Wittgenstein was concerned with meaning in his conversation with Russell, an interesting line of interpretation comes into focus. For we are able to see Wittgenstein's objection to Russell as questioning whether Russell's proposition that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" meaningfully asserts anything. On this interpretation, in saying "there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions," Wittgenstein is arguing that Russell's proposition, that there is no rhinoceros in the room, only appears to assert something, but in fact does not. Since Russell's proposition does not assert anything, the utterance makes no sense for the simple reason that only propositions that assert something make sense. Russell's proposition about the rhinoceros would thus represent what Wittgenstein called in "Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway," a "nonsensical assertion," and what he called in the *Tractatus*, a "nonsensical pseudoproposition."<sup>24</sup>

In opposition to McGuinness, I am saying that the notion of an "asserted proposition" that Wittgenstein was employing in his conversation with Russell may have been radically different from what Moore and Russell meant by it. Far from Wittgenstein embracing Russell and Moore's conception of the proposition, he may have been challenging it on the grounds that Russell had confused nonsensical pseudopropositions with propositions proper. On this interpretation, he was challenging the very framework with which Russell and Moore pursued their investigations into the nature of proposition. He was not working within their framework and "correcting Moore," as McGuinness assumes, but aiming to undercut it.

The main difficulty for this line of interpretation is that there doesn't seem to be anything problematic about Russell's statement about the rhinoceros. "Of course," we want to say, "there is no rhinoceros in Russell and Wittgenstein's room"; "of course the proposition 'there is no rhinoceros in the room' can be asserted." Indeed, if Russell's room was at all like ours, what could be a better example of a true proposition? How, then, can it be suggested that Wittgenstein thinks such a statement to be a nonsensical pseudoproposition?

Before agreeing, however, that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" obviously counts as a meaningful assertion, we should pause and consider Wittgenstein's much later remarks in *On Certainty*, in which Wittgenstein argues that "propositions" remarkably similar to Russell's proposition about the rhinoceros are nonsensical. Some examples are: "Here is a hand," "I know that there is a chair over there," "The earth existed long before one's birth," "I am here." These apparent "assertions" are grist for Wittgenstein's mill in *On Certainty*, and are seemingly at least as commonsensical and undeniable as Russell's assertion that "there is no rhinoceros in the room."

Part of Wittgenstein's story in *On Certainty* is that these so-called assertions, which appear to be about the way the world is, are assertions "about" how we talk about the world, about the logic of the world, not assertions about the world at all. Moore thinks, for example, that he knows that he has a hand and that "I have a hand" is an assertion about the world. But for Wittgenstein such a proposition is not an assertion, but "stands fast" for us when we make assertions about the world. He says, for instance,

I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry.<sup>25</sup>

Insofar as Moore intends us to believe that his proposition is something that we can know and assert, Wittgenstein regards it as nonsensical. In his "misfiring attempt," Moore is, says Wittgenstein, trying to describe what "belong[s] to our frame of reference."<sup>26</sup> That is, he is enumerating propositions that are true only in the sense that if they did not hold, we would lose our standards of correct judgment:

We are interested in the fact that about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all. Or again: I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Wittgenstein harks back to the terminology of the *Tractatus* and of his earlier writings to make his point about what can be asserted. He says, for instance,

My life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on.—I tell a friend e.g. "Take that chair over there," "Shut the door," etc. etc.<sup>28</sup>

Wittgenstein thinks it makes sense to say "take that chair over there," but that it makes no sense (at least under normal

circumstances) to assert "there is a chair over there." This last assertion may appear commonsensical but it cannot, says Wittgenstein, be meaningfully asserted. For him, only the former remark can be asserted; we might say that, despite appearances to the contrary, "there is a chair over there," taken as a straightforward assertion, "does not exist."

There is a relationship, however, between so-called "facts" such as "I have a hand" and my saying "I have hurt my hand." The former is *shown* in my saying the latter; that I have a hand is presupposed and forms the "background" for the assertion "I have hurt my hand."<sup>29</sup> But precisely because it forms the background, it makes no sense on Wittgenstein's account to assert or say anything about it.

When we keep the remarks of *On Certainty* in mind, our initial assumption that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" is a perfectly legitimate thing to say, begins to waiver. The issue for us, then, is not whether we can question the meaning of such propositions, for, as we have seen, propositions like Russell's are exactly the type that Wittgenstein spends so much time criticizing in his later philosophy. Rather, the question is whether Wittgenstein in his early philosophy and in particular in his conversation with Russell was making discriminations between propositions like those he makes in *On Certainty*. The question is whether Wittgenstein, in his early conversation with Russell, already had a sense of what counted as a proposition, as opposed to what belonged to the "background" for making propositions. Is it plausible to think that Wittgenstein regarded Russell's claim that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" as a "background proposition" which Russell had unwittingly assimilated to an everyday proposition? And is it plausible to think that in responding that "there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions" Wittgenstein intended to point out to Russell that what Russell thought were propositions about the world were in fact not propositions at all?

On this interpretation, Wittgenstein was protesting that "propositions" about the "background" are not propositions or assertions at all and that the only kind of propositions that exist are the everyday ones used in everyday life, propositions like those of natural science referred to in the *Tractatus*, which have "nothing to do with philosophy" and are the only ones that can be said.<sup>30</sup> An "asserted proposition" is, on this reading, something like a proposition used in everyday situations, something that can be said to be true

or false, to be bipolar, to say something, to have a use. By contrast, Russell's statement, being about the background for asserting propositions in everyday situations, does not qualify as an asserted proposition since it cannot be said to be true or false and is not bipolar.<sup>31</sup>

Wittgenstein did not use the phrase "background" in the *Tractatus* or in his earlier notes but he had the means for distinguishing sense and nonsense which lies behind that later idea. Specifically, his idea of the "Form der Abbildung" or form of representation of a picture and hence of a proposition anticipates his later idea of a "background."<sup>32</sup> Stated in these terms, the trouble with Russell's assertion about the rhinoceros is that it purports to represent something that cannot be represented, something that belongs to the form of representation.<sup>33</sup> From Wittgenstein's point of view, Russell has "inflated" the proposition about the rhinoceros and created an "illusion of a perspective" in which he appears to be making a claim about the world. While under this illusion, Russell does not even contemplate that his proposition could be anything other than a straightforward everyday assertion.<sup>34</sup>

This reading of the early conversation has the advantage of dovetailing with Russell's report that Wittgenstein "thinks nothing empirical is knowable." If Russell took "propositions" about the form of representation as empirical propositions, then he would have quite naturally interpreted Wittgenstein's objection as a rejection of empirical propositions as such. But Wittgenstein was not rejecting empirical propositions; he would have accepted propositions like "the chair in the other room is black" as empirical and knowable. Rather, he was rejecting propositions that purported to be empirical propositions, but were not. Likewise, we can make sense of Russell's later recollection that Wittgenstein "maintained that all existential propositions are meaningless." Again, Wittgenstein would not have had any problem in accepting "there is a black chair in the other room" as a meaningful existential proposition. Rather it was Russell's purported proposition that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" that he considered to be meaningless.<sup>35</sup>

We can also make better sense of Russell's extreme reaction to Wittgenstein, and why he suspected that Wittgenstein may have been a fool, inflection, and crank. For Russell would have had, as indeed anyone who has read Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* is sure to have had, a feeling of bafflement that such apparently innocent "propositions" as "here is a hand" could be viewed as objectionable. Indeed,

it is important to emphasize how natural Russell's response is. After all, most of us would not have any problem thinking that "there is no rhinoceros in the room" is true. All that we have to do is look about our room and it seems absolutely certain that there is no rhinoceros in it.

True, in philosophy classes we do indeed raise skeptical questions about such beliefs. But Russell gives no indication in his reports of their conversations that he and Wittgenstein were following in the skeptic's well-trodden path. In fact, Russell differed from Wittgenstein in regarding skepticism as a genuine, if mistaken, position and his reaction would surely have been less extreme had Wittgenstein been arguing a skeptical position.<sup>36</sup> Russell's ridiculing of Wittgenstein by looking underneath the desks in the room seems more connected with his dismissing Wittgenstein as a crank than it does with his rejecting an implausible skeptical argument. Moreover, we must not forget that Wittgenstein's objection to the rhinoceros remark was part and parcel of his positive contention that "there is nothing in the world except asserted propositions"; this does not sound like the remark of a skeptic. (And remember too that, according to Russell's later anecdote, his objection concerned the meaning of existential propositions.) In short, it would seem that Wittgenstein was making a point about what can be meaningfully said, not about what we don't know.

It is unlikely, then, that what annoyed Russell was that Wittgenstein was venturing a skeptical hypothesis. What is more likely is that he was annoyed—to the point of suspecting that Wittgenstein may have been a fool, infliction, and crank—with Wittgenstein's actually objecting to his apparently innocent assertion that there was not a rhinoceros in the room. On my interpretation, Wittgenstein was questioning the sense of Russell's statement insofar as it pretended to be a species of an everyday assertion. And it is no more immediately obvious why there could be anything objectionable about the sense of the proposition about the rhinoceros than it is obvious that there is something objectionable about the sense of the proposition that, say, "I know that I've never been to the moon."<sup>37</sup>

So, if Wittgenstein's objection to Russell was indeed motivated by a concern with nonsense of the sort discussed in *On Certainty* and elsewhere,<sup>38</sup> there is a significant line of continuity between his views expressed in his first meetings with Russell and the very last days of his life. Establishing this line of continuity, however, requires our recognizing a much greater gap between the early Wittgen-

stein and Russell (and Frege) than is ordinarily seen. Another way of saying this is that if the *Tractatus* is to be interpreted as expressing a concern with nonsense, as Diamond and others have argued, we must be willing to take a serious second look at the development of these ideas in his early "collaboration" with Russell. To this end, it is worth remembering what it was that Russell said Wittgenstein refused to admit in that earliest of conversations, namely that "it was *certain* that there was not a rhinoceros in the room."<sup>39</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Information about Russell and Wittgenstein's conversation is derived from two main sources: Russell's letters to Lady Ottoline Morell and Russell's article in *Mind*, printed on the occasion of Wittgenstein's death. The first appearance of Wittgenstein is recorded in Russell's letter of the 18th of October, 1911, and the discussion about the rhinoceros appears in his letters written between the 19th of October and the 2nd of November.

It is interesting to note that in his article in *Mind*, Russell says that the discussion concerned a hippopotamus, not a rhinoceros. Also, Russell's claim to have looked underneath the desks does not appear in his letters to Lady Ottoline Morell. See Bertrand Russell, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Mind* 60 (1951), 297-298. Russell's letters are reprinted in Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1988), 88-89 and Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1990), 38-40. The quotations are from McGuinness, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein's reported remarks about "asserted propositions" occur in Russell's letters of the 7th and 13th of November, 1911. See Monk, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> My objective is to raise questions about McGuinness's hypothesis so as to suggest an alternative way of reading Wittgenstein's earliest remarks. I am not claiming to offer a definitive interpretation of that early conversation. As McGuinness points out, there is too little information for that to be possible.

<sup>4</sup> McGuinness, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (trans.) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), remark 1.1.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Griffin echoes McGuinness' interpretation: "We do know that Wittgenstein at one point defended the views that no empirical propositions are knowable and that the only things that exist are asserted propositions. Few conclusions about Wittgenstein's philosophy can be drawn from these remarks, except that the second of the them is based on Russell's account of asserted propositions in *The Principles of Mathematics*." See Nicholas Griffin, "Ludwig in Fact and Fiction," *The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives* 12 (1992), 79-93. The quotation is from p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> It must be kept in mind that though Moore develops his realist conception of the proposition in opposition to Bradley's idealism, his version of realism is also antithetical to the conception of ideas derived from British Empiricism. For more on this topic see John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 202-204. For a detailed analysis of the realist reaction to idealism, see Peter Hylton,

Russell, *Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is from Passmore, p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1938), 49.

<sup>10</sup> McGuinness, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> McGuinness, p. 89. Russell's later anecdote about the rhinoceros conversation sheds light on his earlier misgivings about Wittgenstein. He says, "quite at first I was in doubt as to whether he was a man of genius or a crank, but I very soon decided in favour of the former alternative. Some of his early views made the decision difficult. He maintained, for example, at one time that all existential propositions are meaningless." Note that Russell says that Wittgenstein maintained that "all existential propositions are meaningless" whereas in his letter to Lady Ottoline at the time, he says that Wittgenstein "thinks nothing empirical is knowable." As I shall suggest, Russell's later remark about propositions being "meaningless" as opposed to being knowable, is closer to the heart of the issue, though it is quite likely that in Russell's mind little rested on these different formulations. See McGuinness, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> The conversation in which, according to another of Russell's famous anecdotes, Wittgenstein asks Russell whether he (Wittgenstein) is "utterly hopeless at philosophy" and thus whether he should go into aeronautics or philosophy was not to take place until November 27, 1911, more than three weeks after the rhinoceros conversation. In response to Wittgenstein's question, Russell says "I told him I didn't know but I thought not. I asked him to bring me something written to help me to judge." It would seem that three weeks after the rhinoceros conversation, Russell was still having doubts. See Monk, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> McGuinness, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Notes on Logic," Notebooks 1914-1916, 2nd rev. ed., G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (ed.) G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 95. Both the "Notes on Logic" and the "Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway" are printed in Notebooks 1914-16. Hereafter, I shall refer simply to "Notes on Logic" or "Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway" followed by the page number as it occurs in Notebooks 1914-16.

<sup>16</sup> See M. O'C. Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," in R. Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 158: "my fundamental ideas came to me very early in life."

<sup>17</sup> McGuinness, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> When I insist that McGuinness has an ontological reading of the *Tractatus*, I am saying that he thinks Wittgenstein is (at least initially) presenting an account of the nature of language and of the world (and so in that broad sense is similar to Russell and Moore). I am aware that McGuinness differs from most interpreters in holding that the ultimate purpose of Wittgenstein's aims is to show the absurdity of all such accounts. Nevertheless, on McGuinness' interpretation, success in showing the absurdity of philosophical accounts of language and the world must rest on our understanding of the correctness of the account Wittgenstein initially presents. In other words, we must understand and be assured that Wittgenstein's (linguistic) ontology is correct before we can draw the consequence of ultimate "unsayableness." In my view, to interpret Wittgenstein in this manner is to admit that he has a doctrine after all, even if this doctrine cannot properly be said, contrary to Wittgenstein's disclaimer about philosophical doctrines. For more on McGuinness' view,

see Brian McGuinness, "Language and Reality in the *Tractatus*," *Teoria* (1985), 135-144.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *Tractatus*, p. 3, 4.003, 4.112, and 6.53. This rejection of philosophical theories appears in the "Notes on Logic" as well as in the *Tractatus*. See p. 106 where Wittgenstein says "In philosophy there are no deductions; it is purely descriptive" and "Philosophy gives no pictures of reality."

<sup>20</sup> Another way of saying this is that McGuinness has not taken seriously enough the question raised by Cora Diamond concerning how to read the *Tractatus* without "chickening out." If, as Wittgenstein says, his own propositions are nonsensical, it is difficult to make sense of how Wittgenstein can be offering an account of language and reality, whether that account be linguistic or otherwise. If Diamond is right, the status of the propositions of the *Tractatus* is altogether different from what McGuinness supposes. See Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M. I. T. Press, 1991), 179-204.

<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein, "Notes on Logic" pp. 95 and 96.

<sup>22</sup> "Notes on Logic," p. 103 and pp. 100-101 (my emphasis in the case of both occurrences of "asserting" and in the case of "significance").

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, "Notes dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway" p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> "Notes dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway" p. 110 and *Tractatus*, 4.1272.

<sup>25</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), paragraph 151.

<sup>26</sup> *On Certainty*, paragraphs 37 & 83.

<sup>27</sup> *On Certainty*, paragraph 309.

<sup>28</sup> *On Certainty*, paragraph 7.

<sup>29</sup> *On Certainty*, paragraph 94.

<sup>30</sup> *Tractatus*, 6.53.

<sup>31</sup> In his later philosophy, a statement about the background would be considered a rule of grammar. In this connection, it is interesting to note that in a lecture in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein discussed "the changes that would be required by accepting the hypothesis [i.e., by taking it as a rule of grammar] that there is a hippopotamus in the room." Wittgenstein's point is that accepting "there is a hippopotamus in our room" as a rule of grammar, as something belonging to the "background" would radically upset our ordinary way of seeing things; it would necessitate, as he says, "queer alterations." Though Wittgenstein does not explicitly mention it, it seems obvious that he thinks that we don't accept that proposition as a rule of grammar and that "there is no hippopotamus in the room" is our accepted rule of grammar, and belongs to our form of representation. I might note that a distinguishing mark of the later Wittgenstein is that he sees propositions such as "there is no hippopotamus in the room" as playing different roles, i.e., as rules of grammar or as empirical propositions, depending on the context. See Alice Ambrose (ed.), *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge 1932-1935*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 70.

<sup>34</sup> The expression "Form der Abbildung" has been translated by Pears and McGuinness as "pictorial form" and by Ogden and Ramsey as "form of representation." For the purposes at hand, I do not think much importance rests on distinguishing these two translations. I shall use "form of representation" as it brings out more clearly Wittgenstein's interest in distinguishing the means of representation from what is represented. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2nd rev. ed., C. K. Ogden and F. P. Ramsey (trans.) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933), 2.15 and 2.17.



<sup>33</sup> We can perhaps see elements of the idea that the form of representation cannot be represented anticipated in Wittgenstein's often mentioned use of the phrase "form of a proposition" in the "Notes on Logic." For example, he criticizes Russell for confusing the form of a proposition for a thing. See "Notes on Logic" p. 105. A full discussion of this idea of its origins in his early philosophy would take me too far afield.

<sup>34</sup> The term "illusion of a perspective" comes from Cora Diamond and refers to the illusion that she thinks is created in philosophy by propositions which strictly speaking are nonsense. I disagree, however, with her interpretation that for Wittgenstein these "nonsense propositions" must be understood as containing signs that have not been given a meaning, e.g., "Socrates is identical" is nonsense since "identical" hasn't been given an adjectival meaning. In my view, Wittgenstein has a more robust conception of nonsense having to do with "uninformativeness" and misconstruing the elements of our means of representation. Again, it would take me too far afield to defend this view here. See Diamond, p. 196.

<sup>35</sup> Some years later, when Wittgenstein had an opportunity to explain the *Tractatus* to Russell in conversation, Russell disagreed with Wittgenstein's view that any assertion about the world was meaningless. During the discussion, Russell apparently took a sheet of white paper and made three blobs of ink on it and asked Wittgenstein to admit that since there were three blobs, there must be at least three things in the world. According to Russell, Wittgenstein "would admit there were three blobs on the page, because that was a finite assertion, but he would not admit that anything at all could be said about the world as a whole." Russell added, "this part of his doctrine is to my mind definitely mistaken." It is possible that what Wittgenstein means by a "finite assertion" is similar to what I am suggesting he meant by an "asserted proposition" in the early conversation under discussion and it may very well be that this later conversation is going over terrain similar to that covered in the early conversation. Russell's remark is quoted in Monk, p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> Recall that Wittgenstein says that "scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical." See *Tractatus*, 6.51.

<sup>37</sup> *On Certainty*, paragraph 111.

<sup>38</sup> To say that Wittgenstein's philosophy is similarly motivated in this regard is not to deny the substantial differences between his two philosophical periods. One thing we must avoid is the fallacy that Wittgenstein's criticisms of the *Tractatus* do not contain developments of views first expressed in the *Tractatus*, though perhaps in an inadequate form.

<sup>39</sup> Emphasis added. I wish to thank Paul Genest, Paul Forster, and especially Andrew Lugg for their helpful comments.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGISM OF THE *TRACTATUS*\*

Richard McDonough  
*University of Tulsa*

Compare Hertz's *Mechanics* on dynamical models.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.04

The agreement between mind and nature can be likened to the agreement to two [material] systems which are models of one another, and we can even account for this agreement by assuming that the mind is capable of making actual dynamical models of things, and working with them.

Hertz, "Dynamical Models" in *The Principles of Mechanics*, 177

Is the *Tractatus* psychologistic in the sense of holding that an account of meaning involves a mentalistic notion of thoughts (*Gedanke*), or are *Tractatus* thoughts to be interpreted linguistically? Carruthers, following Dummett's lead, adopts the linguistic interpretation and holds that there is nothing mentalistic about *TLP* thoughts: Wittgenstein's remarks "suggest a quasi-Fregean" notion, that "cover[s] all significant uses of signs" (Carruthers, 1990, 11; 1989, 81; see Dummett, 1978, 443; 1981, 679). Carruthers thinks that the *Tractatus* is similar to the *Investigations* in that both have a use-conception of meaning (but see McDonough, 1989b, 321-322), and that talk about thoughts in the *Tractatus* is just talk about meaningful uses of signs.

Accordingly, Carruthers (1990, 161) rejects the view, which he attributes to Malcolm (1986) and myself<sup>1</sup> (1986), though he could have included Favrholt (1967), Goldberg (1968), (Katz, 1971; 1990), Miller (1980), Kenney (1981), Heil (1981), Baker and Hacker (1984), Wilson (1989), and probably McGinn<sup>2</sup> (1984), that the *Tractatus* is psychologistic insofar

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Richard McDonough is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa. He is the author of *The Argument of the Tractatus* (SUNY Press, 1986). He has also published papers in *Mind*, *Language and Communication*, *Philosophical Investigations*, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *The Thomist*, *Ancient Philosophy*, and numerous books. Most of his papers center around a criticism of the mechanistic world view (particularly in its application to mind and meaning).