A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LOGICAL ATOMISM

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Ali Benmakhlouf. *Bertrand Russell: L'atomisme logique.* (Philosophies.) Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. Pp. 126. FF45.00.

This book appears in a French series (*Philosophies*) which seems (at least from this example) to be a blend of such series as *Past Masters* with the older Monarch or Cliff notes. The book is primarily an exposition of the 1918 lectures, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (*PLA*), which were published in the *Monist*, Vols. 28 and 29, 1918–19, and have since been reprinted, most notably in the 1956 collection edited by Robert Marsh, *Logic and Knowledge*, and in Volume 8 of the *Collected Papers*. They also appear in French translation in *Écrits de logique philosophique*.[1] Given the length of the book, the exposition is surprisingly detailed—even for a book to be used by a student in conjunction with the text—with detailed expositions of Russell's remarks on facts and propositions, Russell's criticisms of James' theory of truth, proper names and descriptions, atomic and molecular propositions, negative facts, general facts, the remarks on facts about beliefs and even the remarks on the theory of types as they occur in these lectures.

Given that the book's focus is on *PLA*, the overall picture Benmakhlouf gives of Russell is reminiscent of the one given by Pears in his 1967 *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy*, as Benmakhlouf sees Bertrand Russell very much in the tradition of Hume and Ockham. These lectures, probably more than most of Russell's work, lend support to this view. Russell presents his logical doctrines hand in hand with an empiricist doctrine of sense-data as the given and the Ockhamist maxim to substitute logical constructions for inferred entities whenever possible. Not surprisingly, Benhakhlouf suggests that logical atomism is a theory of knowledge grounded on a blend of psychology and logic (p. 122). Now while *PLA* gives support for this reading, as a general introduction to Russell's philosophy this is somewhat of a distortion. Many of the logical doctrines Russell uses in these lectures are

[1] Trans. Jean-Michel Roy, Paris: P.U.F., 1989.

independent of the epistemological use to which he puts them, and were in fact developed before Russell contemplated the construction of physical objects and public spaces in terms of private sense-data and private spaces. While he concentrates on *PLA*, Benmakhlouf does make remarks in the Introduction and the Conclusion which suggest that he is speaking about Russell's overall philosophy, and he makes reference to several other works, particularly *Our Knowledge of the External World*, *The Analysis of Mind*, *An Outline of Philosophy* (which he does not mention in his bibliography, but does cite and refers to as *OP*), *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, and *Human Knowledge*, as though they are all part of the same position. Now while there is more unity in Russell's work than had been popularly thought, there are also crucial differences among various stages of his philosophy which a reader of this book would not pick up. Benmakhlouf's lack of concern here for historical development is surprising, as he is more careful in his treatment of Frege in a companion volume.[2]

Much of Benmakhlouf's exposition of Russell's philosophy in *PLA* is thorough and careful. While the exposition would no doubt be of help to a student working through *PLA* for the first time, for someone already familiar with the texts it contains too much simple restating. And yet at times the discussion is fairly technical, as with the discussion of the theory of descriptions and with the discussion of the axiom of infinity and the axiom of choice, where the reader will require a fair amount of logical acumen to read (and correct!) the symbols on pages 96 and 97.

Occasionally Benmakhlouf digresses from the path of exposition, and such digressions are refreshing, as for example, when he discusses certain arguments against Russell's "private idiolects" (p. 51) and contrasts Russell's use of analysis with the method of later Oxford philosophy (pp. 52–3). There is also a good discussion of the difference between Russell's views and those of the logical positivists (pp. 116–20) which, while drawing much from Russell's 1950 article "Logical Positivism", also includes some discussion of various issues in verification which would be helpful for a student previously unfamiliar with these issues.

It would have been good for Benmakhlouf to discuss a bit more the relation between Russell's logical atomism and that of Wittgenstein, the latter probably being more familiar to his readers. There are points where *PLA* comes very close to Wittgenstein, such as when Russell says that facts cannot be named and when he suggests, at the beginning of Lecture VIII, that "practically all traditional metaphysics is filled with mistakes due to bad grammar"

[2] Benmakhlouf, *Frege: logicien philosophe*. Paris: P.U.F., 1997.

(*Papers* 8: 234). It is in fact this last section which prompts Benmakhlouf to discuss the difference between Russell's logical atomism and the views of the logical positivists. Wittgenstein's atomism, as presented in the *Tractatus*, is far less a "theory of knowledge which is a blend of psychology and logic", and far more a theory of language and logical necessity. Had he discussed these differences, Benmakhlouf would have given the reader a better sense of what we should understand by "logical atomism". He does mention Wittgenstein a few times, but his remarks are misleading. On page 54 he points out the resemblance between Russell's concern with structure and Wittgenstein's concerns, but he incorrectly states that Russell had the manuscript of the *Tractatus* when he gave these lectures, despite Russell's preface to *PLA*, where he states that he has no way of knowing of Wittgenstein's views since August 1914 nor even whether he is alive or dead. Part of Benmakhlouf's mistake here is that he has the date Russell gives for the lectures wrong.[3]

Another place where Benmakhlouf could have been more careful is in his discussion of Lecture IV, particularly the discussion of belief. Russell begins this discussion (*PLA, Papers* 8: 193) with a discussion of James and neutral monism, but then moves on to his criticism of the position that belief is a relation between a person and a proposition, and finally to a critique of the multiple-relation theory (pp. 198–9). Benmakhlouf mixes all this together, not even mentioning the multiple-relation theory of judgment, and suggesting that it was pragmatism which Russell was embracing when he held that "*A* believes *p*" was a two-place relation, and that it was this pragmatism from which Wittgenstein woke him.[4] In fact, behaviourism, neutral monism, and the claim that beliefs are relations between persons and propositions are all distinct positions that Russell keeps separate. Wittgenstein's criticism was of the multiple-relation theory which Russell had advocated from 1907 until 1913.

One other point I should mention is that when he is discussing Russell's Lecture V remarks on the axiom of infinity and the multiplicative axiom, Benmakhlouf takes Russell's problem to be that these axioms are not analytic. In fact, in *Principia Mathematica*, Whitehead and Russell took logic itself to be non-analytic, and it is in *PLA* that Russell moves away from this position

[3] He gives the dates as 1918–19 (p. 54), when in fact they were given between January 1918 and March 1918. They were published in *The Monist* beginning in October 1918. Russell didn't hear from Wittgenstein until February 1919 and didn't get the manuscript until the summer of 1919.

[4] Benmakhlouf echoes Kant (p. 72) saying, "c'est bien Wittgenstein qui l'a réveillé de son sommeil pragmatiste." But the reference is to Russell's earlier attempt to map "Desdemona loves Cassio", an attempt which is quite alien to pragmatism.

when he states "Everything that is a proposition of logic has got to be in some sense or other like a tautology" (p. 211). However, right after this he professes ignorance as to what the "peculiar quality" is that belongs to logical propositions and not to others, and earlier he had stated that it is possible that logical propositions might be interpreted as being about forms (p. 210).

While this book could perhaps serve as an introduction to some general themes in Russell's philosophy, given the overall level of the discussion, and the various errors, it should be approached somewhat sceptically by scholars or more advanced students.