

## A Russellian Approach to Philosophy of Education

**Paul Hager**

*University of Technology, Sydney*

### INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, uniquely amongst the disciplines, makes problematic its own nature as a discipline. The nature of philosophy, itself, appears to be a perennially unresolved philosophical problem. The favored answer to the question "What is philosophy?" seems to relate more to the historical and social circumstances in which it is asked than to anything else. However, recent postmodernist/post-structuralist writers, such as Derrida and Rorty, have not just proposed a new conception of philosophy; rather, they have argued *philosophically* for the end of philosophy. As Couture and Nielsen<sup>1</sup> point out, a common reaction by philosophers has been that "such anti-philosophy philosophy self destructs. If it succeeds, it refutes itself, and if it fails, it of course fails." Nevertheless, anti-philosophy philosophy has struck a chord with philosophers dissatisfied with their subject. Nor is anti-philosophy philosophy something unprecedented in the history of philosophy. Yet so far, "philosophy has always lived on to bury its self-appointed grave diggers."<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I consider arguments presented in the philosophy/anti-philosophy debate which some, for example Stone,<sup>3</sup> find important for both philosophy of education and educational practice. I proceed indirectly by considering some views of Russell on the methods of philosophy and related matters. I do this not only because Russell's views are interesting in themselves, but also because they illuminate some of the central arguments in the philosophy/anti-philosophy debate. However, I begin by proposing a fourfold classification of approaches to philosophy and, hence, to philosophy of education, which provides a framework for much of the subsequent discussion.

### INTRODUCTION APPROACHES TO PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

The first approach characterizes philosophy as rational and foundational. Philosophy aims to identify ultimate foundations or criteria that apply to all other disciplines. This approach views philosophy as rational in that, once the ultimate foundations or criteria have been identified, they serve as the basis of the systematic structures (usually deductive) that constitute the other disciplines. Extreme versions of this approach incorporate all the disciplines into a single systematic structure based on the foundations or criteria supplied by philosophy. In some cases, for example conceptual analysis, the focus of this approach is language. Here, the foundations are sought in concepts -- the units of our conceptual scheme -- and in the logical connections between the various basic concepts. In other cases, the focus switches to connections between language and the world. In classical positivism, for example, the foundations are sought in sense experience and the names of simple sense data. In still other cases the ultimate foundations or criteria are sought elsewhere, for example, in intuition or in self-evidently true first principles or in the prerequisites for thought to be possible.

While there are many distinctly different examples in its history of philosophy being cast as rational and foundational, certain features are common to most of these cases. These include a focus on the independent individual self or observer, and a representational or logocentric approach to meaning and truth which seeks to establish one-to-one correlations between words or sentences and the physical world. This usually leads to a sharp distinction between facts and values. There is also a strong tendency to favor monistic theorizing -- that is, to attempt to incorporate all disciplines into a

single systematic structure based on the foundations or criteria supplied by philosophy. Since this structure that incorporates all the disciplines is typically modeled on logic, mathematics, and science, it tends to be viewed in an ahistorical and timeless way.

A typical description of this approach is:

First philosophy not only aspired to an external standpoint on discourses, but also one that had normative authority. It would reveal and defend a common logic of scientific method, and referee intellectual activities by its rules.<sup>4</sup>

This first approach views philosophy of education as providing foundations that underpin the contribution of all other disciplines to the understanding of education. Philosophy of education becomes the arbiter of boundary disputes and integrates the contributions from the various disciplines into a coherent whole that accurately describes education as a field. This was certainly an aim of analytic philosophy of education before it encountered difficulties that cast severe doubt on the whole project.<sup>5</sup> It was also characteristic of analytic philosophy of education that the logic of concepts tended to be viewed in a timeless, ahistorical way. Thus, general propositions about education were regarded as applicable in all times and places.

The second approach characterizes philosophy as rational and non-foundational. It accepts that certainty, even in philosophy, is largely unattainable. Hence, all knowledge claims are treated as provisional. Popper's falsificationism is a well-known example of this approach. Likewise the pragmatism of Peirce, James, Dewey, and, more recently, Quine belongs here. The later Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Habermas (perhaps) are other candidates for inclusion under this general approach to philosophy. While all of these diverse thinkers would agree that philosophy is non-foundational, perhaps what distinguishes their distinctive and diverse contributions to philosophy is their account of its rationality. Later, it will be argued that Russell's philosophy also belongs in this approach.

Once again, though there are distinctive differences in the views of many of these philosophers who emphasize philosophy's rational and non-foundational character, there are also features that are largely common. Within this approach there is some rejection of the isolated individual (for example, by Dewey and Wittgenstein), though this is not so clear-cut in others like Quine. However, there is a more holistic approach to meaning and truth than is the case in our first approach, accompanied by the collapse of a rigid fact/value distinction. There is also a more pluralistic and piecemeal approach to theorizing, along with a recognition that reality is complex and changing. Knowledge is viewed partly as a human construction, but not entirely. Though knowledge and language are assumed to connect with non-linguistic reality, this connection is more complex than mere direct representation. Also, while the importance of system is not denied, the piecemeal approach to theorizing means that there is recognition that the logic of some disciplines may be very different from the logic of science and mathematics.

This second approach has impacted so strongly on philosophy of education through the work of Dewey, that no more need be said here.

The third approach characterizes philosophy as non-rational and non-foundational. It discards all notions of meaning and truth consisting in relations between language and some extra-linguistic reality. On this view discourse can only be related to other pieces of discourse. This is seen as entailing the end of metaphysics. While the work of philosophers such as Nietzsche show that this approach is not entirely new, it has become prominent due to the work of recent writers including Derrida, Rorty and Baudrillard. Rejecting the strong links between philosophy and science favored by many in the first two approaches, Rorty views philosophy as more like literature-- that is, as "enlightening discourse."

Although it is not easy to find philosophers who are committed postmodernists, some have urged philosophers of education to delineate the implications of postmodernism for classroom practice<sup>6</sup> (though, on postmodern views of the world, it is unclear that we should have classrooms as the site of educational practices, or, indeed, that we should have educational practices -- certainly not compulsory ones).

The fourth approach characterizes philosophy as social critique driving social change. On this approach, it is not enough for philosophy to develop rational understanding that underpins practice. Rather, philosophy should result in significant political change. Proponents include Marx, the Frankfurt School and Foucault. In philosophy of education, proponents have included Freire, Giroux, and Mezirow. Due to lack of space, I will not detail this approach further now.

Recently, these four approaches to philosophy have fared differently. The first has been under severe attack and shows no signs of recovery. The second is more robust. Its various proponents have received the usual amount of philosophical critique. Nevertheless, Dewey's and Wittgenstein's work is probably creating more interest than ever. Though more recent, the work of Popper and Quine maintains a continuing influence. Similarly, the fourth approach, despite fluctuating fortunes, continues to exert an important influence. Finally, the third approach has been very influential recently due to the enormous interest created by postmodern/post-structuralist writings. The present situation could be summarized, perhaps, as the second and fourth approaches facing constant and vocal challenges from supporters of the third.

#### RUSSELL'S APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHY

Throughout his career Russell adhered to a two-stage characterization of philosophical analysis. According to Russell, philosophy first proceeds backwards from a body of knowledge to its premises and, second, proceeds forwards from the premises to a reconstruction of the original body of knowledge. Russell often referred to the first stage of philosophical analysis simply as "analysis," in contrast to the second which he called "synthesis." While the first stage was seen as being the most philosophical, both were, nonetheless, essential to philosophical analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Now I will outline and discuss some features of Russellian analysis that have largely gone unnoticed because they clash with the common perception that Russell viewed philosophy as rational and foundational. While this common perception is probably due to Russell's well-known interest in such things as sense-data and logical atoms, it is nonetheless mistaken. In fact, Russell viewed philosophy as rational and non-foundational. This is clear from a consideration of three features of his method of analysis that he repeatedly emphasized. These are:

*Analysis is never final.* This applies in several ways. Not only is analysis never final in that new premises may be discovered in relation to which existing premises are results, but also, there is always the possibility of alternative sets of premises for the same results. In the former case, further stages of analysis in no way invalidate earlier ones. As Russell repeatedly emphasizes, no error flows from taking complex objects as simples at one level of analysis, as long as it is not assumed that such objects are incapable of further analysis. Thus, "points may be defined as classes of events, but that does not falsify anything in traditional geometry, which treated points as simples."<sup>8</sup>

In the latter case, to ask what are the minimum premises for a given set of results "is a technical question and it has no unique answer."<sup>9</sup> Hence, philosophy is assigned the task of devising alternative sets of premises:

Philosophy should be comprehensive, and should be bold in suggesting hypotheses as to the universe which science is not yet in a position to confirm or confute. But these should always be presented *as* hypotheses, not (as is too often done) as immutable certainties like the dogmas of religion.<sup>10</sup>

Note that philosophical analysis is of results and premises -- that is, linguistic statements or propositions. So analysis is primarily of language, but for Russell, the language itself can refer to extra-linguistic items.

*Analysis enlarges particular subject domains.* What was a development within philosophy, as it becomes more well-accepted, is incorporated into the appropriate discipline such as mathematics or science. Indeed, for Russell, this role may well exhaust the usefulness of philosophy; that is, all sound philosophy may be parasitic on science or mathematics.<sup>11</sup> This view locates philosophy at the frontiers of the particular exact sciences. As the frontier is extended, territory that once belonged to philosophy becomes exact enough to be incorporated into science. Thus “every advance in knowledge robs philosophy of some problems which formerly it had.”<sup>12</sup> It remains for philosophy to move to the new frontier. Hence Russell's description of philosophy as occupying the “No Man's Land” between “theology and science”<sup>13</sup> and the maxim that “science is what you more or less know and philosophy is what you do not know.”<sup>14</sup>

Russell's *territorial* metaphor for knowledge puts certainty in the center well away from the frontiers, suggesting that, as the frontiers expand, so does the certainty they enclose. Russell's metaphor is similar to Popper's *swamp* one where piles are driven deep enough to carry the structure without ever reaching bed-rock.<sup>15</sup> In contrast the *bed-rock* metaphor goes naturally with the foundationalist view that Russell opposes.

*Analysis leads to decreasingly self-evident premises.* Russell emphasized this point:

When pure mathematics is organized as a deductive system -- i.e. as the set of all those propositions that can be deduced from an assigned set of premises -- it becomes obvious that, if we are to believe in the truth of pure mathematics, it cannot be solely because we believe in the truth of the set of premises. Some of the premises are much less obvious than some of their consequences, and are believed chiefly because of their consequences. This will be found to be always the case when a science is arranged as a deductive system. It is not the logically simplest propositions of the system that are the most obvious, or that provide the chief part of our reasons for believing in the system... Electro-dynamics, for example, can be concentrated into Maxwell's equations, but these equations are believed because of the observed truth of certain of their logical consequences. Exactly the same thing happens in the pure realm of logic; the logically first principles of logic -- at least some of them -- are to be believed, not on their own account, but on account of their consequences.<sup>16</sup>

This feature of Russellian analysis is the one most at odds with common interpretations of his work. What is undeniable, self-evident, and indubitable is not the premises, but rather, the results -- that is, the other end of the analysis. This implies that *meaning* is likely to be unclear for the premises. Hence Russell's view that different *interpretations* of the premises are crucial.<sup>17</sup> Another implication is that *truth* is not established in the current premises. This led Russell to the notion of *minimum vocabularies* -- a useful way of talking about premises -- which is easily adapted to wider or narrower areas of knowledge.

A minimum vocabulary for a given system of propositions is a set of terms having the two properties, (a) that no one of them can be defined in terms of the others, (b) that by means of all the terms, but not of any sub-class of them, all the propositions of the given system can be expressed.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, for example, Peano reduced the minimum vocabulary of arithmetic to the *three terms* required by his five axioms. Frege, Russell, and Whitehead held that the minimum vocabulary for mathematics is the same as for logic.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, a reduced minimum vocabulary will lead to revised premises. But, says Russell:

broadly speaking, minimum vocabularies are more instructive when they show a certain kind of term to be indispensable than when they show the opposite.”<sup>20</sup>

Such, for example, is the case with *relation words*. Hence, relations play a central role in Russell's philosophy. "In general, perhaps always," stresses Russell, "there will be many minimum vocabularies for any given system of propositions."<sup>21</sup> Usually in such circumstances, simplicity and elegance are a useful guide. The possibility of finding a better minimum vocabulary was a major impetus for Russell's characteristic modesty about the finality of his analysis -- a striking contrast with his many *a priori* predecessors. Importantly, relation words were typically part of minimum vocabularies.

Also, *Russellian analysis tends to proliferate relations*, that is, relations figure increasingly in the analyzed results as analysis proceeds.<sup>22</sup> Russell found repeatedly in his philosophical analyses that putative ontological entities corresponding to the basic premises were *universals* (pre-eminently *relations*) and *particulars*. However, relation words, more than words for properties or particulars, seemed to be inescapably required in minimum vocabularies for mathematics, logic, and science. This trend becomes more pronounced as analysis is pushed further.

There are strong links between analysis, minimum vocabularies, and relations in Russell's philosophy. As philosophical analysis becomes more advanced, the minimum vocabulary decreases: "a science is apt to acquire a smaller minimum vocabulary as it becomes more systematic."<sup>23</sup>

Relations are connected to minimum vocabularies by way of the concept of *structure*. "To exhibit the structure of an object is to mention its parts and the ways in which they are interrelated."<sup>24</sup> Note that structure incorporates particulars and relations. So, the structure of a language includes the words and the relations between them. However,

an analysis of structure, however complete, does not tell you all that you may wish to know about an object. It tells you only what are the parts of the object and how they are related to each other; it tells you nothing about the relations of the object to objects that are not parts or components of it.<sup>25</sup>

The identification of structure with complexes of relations is absolutely clear: "structure always involves relations: a mere class, as such, has no structure."<sup>26</sup> "A structure may be defined by several relations."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, there is an important connection between minimum vocabularies and structure:

a minimum vocabulary cannot contain names for complexes of which the structure is known... It follows that every discovery of structure enables us to diminish the minimum vocabulary required for a given subject-matter."<sup>28</sup>

I return to these matters towards the end.

Another consequence of the centrality of relations in Russell's philosophical analyses is that he was sharply critical of the importance that subject-predicate propositions had assumed in philosophy. This assumption underlay the ascendancy of substances and their attributes in metaphysics, with relations being downgraded. This was a crux in Russell's early critique of Leibniz, and in his own revolt against idealism in 1899.<sup>29</sup> Both Leibniz and idealism simply assumed that genuine propositions are of the subject-predicate kind.

In short, Russell clearly belongs in the second approach to philosophy, which views it as a rational and non-foundational activity.

I conclude this section by describing briefly a weakness in Russell's approach. Russell starts with the perceptual experiences of an individual. He wants to build his account of the world on what is given to the sense organs of an individual. I agree with Donald Davidson in the denial that "whatever happens at our nerve endings has some special epistemological significance."<sup>30</sup> Like Davidson, I favor a more Deweyan perspective of our experience of moving among, and interacting

with, things in the world. I do not think that adjusting Russell's project in this way would interfere with its basic integrity.

### RUSSELL'S VIEWS AND THE PHILOSOPHY/ANTI-PHILOSOPHY DEBATE

This final section of the paper discusses some issues in the philosophy/anti-philosophy debate and suggests that Russell's work offers important insights into that debate. First, I will focus on Derrida's notion of *différance* which plays a basic and wide-ranging role in his thought. *Différance* relates to the structure of differences which is the precondition of the possibility of language. It seems that *différance* is the precondition of there being concepts, though it is not, itself, a concept. *Différance* is also what Derrida calls "the originary constitution" of time, space, and consciousness. Thus, *différance* generates metaphysical categories, at the same time as it undermines them.

However, as Green has argued: "The notion of *différance* is in many ways more obscure than the 'linguistic' and 'metaphysical' effects it is alleged to produce."<sup>31</sup> I take this further and argue that *différance* is obscure in the same ways that the notion of substance in traditional metaphysics is obscure. Here are some similarities between substance and *différance*:

1. Both are hidden or shadowy.
2. Substance explains what something really is, as opposed to what it appears to be. *Différance* plays the same role in Derrida's thought.
3. Substance is what remains the same through change. *Différance* is the general law that underpins the changing system of signs that is language.
4. Something is a substance only if it has a truly independent existence. In Derrida's thought, everything else seems to be ultimately dependent on *différance*. In this respect it resembles Spinoza's philosophy in which there could be no more than one truly independent substance.

Nevertheless, Derrida is definitely not presenting *différance* as some kind of ineffable metaphysical being. For him, there is nothing outside of writing, but *différance* is what makes writing possible. But when we try to make sense of this obscure position, the parallels with substance inevitably arise.

Green further identifies the source of the obscurity in Derrida's notion of *différance*, namely, "the lack of a decent logic of relations."<sup>32</sup> Through Hegel and the phenomenological tradition (Husserl, Heidegger), Derrida has inherited a basically Aristotelian logic centered on subject and predicate with no way of expressing relational propositions. This logic encourages us to think of relations as absences in contrast to the presences of objects. Such thinking is evident in key assertions in Derrida's work: "the difference which establishes phonemes and lets them be heard remains in and of itself inaudible, in every sense of the word."<sup>33</sup>

As Green suggests, Derrida here and elsewhere

turns the fact that a phoneme only is what it is in virtue of its relations with other phonemes into a puzzle... a texture of properties and relations becomes a dependence of the positive on the negative.<sup>34</sup>

However, if, following Russell (and Frege), we accept that relations (and properties) are just as much part of the world as are particulars, the basis of Derrida's thought is undercut. Quoting Green again,

The relationship of difference between two phonemes is something which can be heard... Such differences are as much something real as the things they relate. Certainly differences would not exist without the things which differ, and things would not exist without the differences between them, but this just shows that objects, properties and relations are all equally in the world.<sup>35</sup>

Accepting the positive significance of the relations between signifiers and what they signify also points to the possibility of holistic accounts of meaning and truth. Derrida's claim that undecidability inescapably infects language through and through is thereby rejected. Instead,

language and the world are seen as connected in complex ways whose elucidation is the ongoing central project of cognitive science. Meanwhile, Russell's ideas are suggestive. For example, if the case of sciences shows us that minimum vocabularies become smaller as a science becomes more systematic, is this to be interpreted as the connections between the propositions of the science and the world becoming better defined? Or does a science become more systematic by abstracting from reality?

Likewise, the point that minimum vocabularies cannot contain names for complexes of which the structure is known has important implications in that theories become simpler, while at the same time, successfully explaining a wider range of phenomena. (For example, the theory of protons, electrons and neutrons dispenses with the names of the chemical elements, while providing unprecedentedly detailed explanations of the chemical behavior of these elements). Is there a better explanation of this occurrence than that the propositions of the proton/electron/neutron theory relate more effectively (in some sense) to the state of the world than do rival accounts?

Given that Derrida's arguments for the view that "*all is language*" are rendered dubious by respectable philosophical theses, the theory that posits a non-linguistic reality, related in complex ways to language, appears to be still the most viable option. That being so, it should be treated as a hypothesis to be judged by the usual criteria of clarity, consistency, scope, simplicity, etc. It seems to me that Russell's notion of minimum vocabularies, and the ideas that surround it, are an interesting way of seeking to match up to some of these criteria.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite the recent strong influence of postmodern/post-structuralist theories, the main theses defended by Derrida are not compelling. The *philosophical* arguments advanced in favor of the end of philosophy are, themselves, open to significant philosophical objections. Although Russell did not favor philosophy of education, (as distinct from writing *about* education<sup>36</sup>), in principle I can see no obstacles to applying minimum vocabularies to the field of educational theorizing. Whatever other merits Derrida's work might possess, it does not undermine a Russellian project along these lines.

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2. Couture and Nielsen, "On Construing Philosophy," 5.

3. Lynda Stone, "Modern to Postmodern: Social Construction, Dissonance and Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13, no. 1 (1993): 49-63.

4. Simon Blackburn "Can Philosophy Exist?" in *Méta-Philosophie, Reconstructing Philosophy?* 85.

5. See, for example, J. Wilson and B. Cowell, "Philosophy and Making the Study of Education Respectable," *Australian Journal of Education* 27, no. 3 (1983) 211-23; Paul Hager, "Does the Generality of Philosophy of Education Ensure its Triviality?" *The Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 14, no. 1 (1989): 1-13.

6. Stone, "Modern to Postmodern."

7. For detailed discussion of Russellian philosophical analysis see Paul J. Hager, *Continuity and Change in the Development of Russell's Philosophy*, Nijhoff International Philosophy Series (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994).

8. Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948, 1966 printing), 269.

9. Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959, 1975 printing), 162.

10. Bertrand Russell, "Logical Atomism," in *Russell's Logical Atomism*, ed. David Pears (London: Fontana/Collins, 1970, first published 1924), 162.
11. Russell, "Logical Atomism," 145.
12. Bertrand Russell, *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919, 1970 printing), 141.
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14. Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," in *Russell's Logical Atomism*, 141.
15. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1968 revised edn.), 111.
16. Russell, "Logical Atomism," 145-6.
17. Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 251ff.
18. Bertrand Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1944), 687.
19. Bertrand Russell, "My Mental Development," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 14-15.
20. Russell, "My Mental Development," 15.
21. Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," 687.
22. For detailed discussion see Hager, *Continuity and Change in the Development of Russell's Philosophy*, chaps. 5-7.
23. Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 259.
24. *Ibid.*, 267.
25. *Ibid.*, 268.
26. *Ibid.*, 271.
27. *Ibid.*, 272.
28. *Ibid.*, 274.
29. See, for example, Nicholas Griffin, "The Legacy of Russell's Idealism for His Later Philosophy: The Problem of Substance," *Russell: the Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives*, n.s. 12, no. 2 (Winter 1992-93): 186-96.
30. Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations With Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, Macintyre, and Kuhn*, trans. R. Crocitto (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 49.
31. Karen Green, "Brain Writing and Derrida," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 3 (1993): 247.
32. Green, "Brain Writing and Derrida," 253.
33. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.
34. Green, "Brain Writing and Derrida," 252-3.
35. Green, "Brain Writing and Derrida," 253.
36. Largely due to a conviction that mathematics and science offered the best "results" for achieving genuine philosophical advances. (See Paul Hager, "Why Russell Didn't Think He Was a Philosopher of Education," *Russell: the Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives*, n.s. 13, no. 2 (Winter 1993-94): 150-67).