

An Examination of the Application of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Logical Atomism in Social Epistemology

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Abstract

Misconceptions on the nature of analytic philosophy exist among scholars. Many think that it is about language analysis and propositional knowledge. This paper has used the epistemology of Bertrand Russell to clarify this misunderstanding by providing an exegesis of Russell's philosophy of logical atomism. It argues that Russell's philosophy is a harmonious fusion of rationalism and empiricism. It aims to give an exposition of Russell's philosophy of logical atomism and to underscore its social and philosophical consequences using the method of analysis. It shows that Russell's philosophy is also consistent in its fusion of rationalism and empiricism. Russell simply branded his philosophy 'logical atomism'; which he held has two dimensions as impacting on the theory of symbol and proposition. The paper thus concludes by underscoring that Russell's philosophy of philosophy has both ontological and social relevance as a problem-solving philosophy. Employing the analytic and hermeneutic methods, the paper thus recommends the atomistic and pluralistic approach to understanding reality and solving social problems.

Key words: logical atomism, socio-epistemic relevance, analysis, propositions

Introduction

Bertrand Russell is interpreted by some scholars to be either an inconsistent empiricist; even in his attempt address weaknesses in the empiricism of David

Hume.¹ Russell called his philosophy the 'philosophy of logical atomism.' It has a fusion of rationalist and empiricist elements. The 'logical' in his philosophy can be interpreted to be an acknowledgement of rationalism. No doubt, lapses exist in this attempt to blend the two positions. This was also the case in Immanuel Kant, yet the beauty of Russell's philosophy is in this synthesis; just as the beauty of Kantianism is in his notion of 'synthetic *a priori*' knowledge. Russellianism is reinvented Kantianism. Russell did what Kant tried to do through his transcendental method. Nevertheless, Russell is arguably more successful through his logical analytic method, even without giving an advanced notice – as in Kant's Copernican Revolution - about his intentions.

Bertrand Russell's philosophy of logical atomism is not epistemologically and metaphysically (ontologically) a unified system of thought. “I shall try to set forth in a short of outline, rather briefly and rather unsatisfactorily ... a certain kind of logical doctrine and on the basis of this, a certain kind of metaphysic. The logic which I shall advocate is atomistic, as opposed to the monistic logic of the people who more or less follow Hegel.”² This became a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism.³ His method of 'a scientific attitude,' subscribed to a 'wide-view' of philosophy. Russell argued that philosophy should be 'logical'. Nevertheless, 'logical analysis' is not all there is to the philosophical enterprise. In his words, “On the accusation that I regard logic as all philosophy - that is by no means the case. I don't by any means regard logic as all philosophy. I think logic is an essential part of philosophy and logic has to be used in philosophy.”⁴ Epistemologically, Russell held that the 'proposition' is at the core of all knowledge-claims. Consequently, a theory

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1. David F. Pears, *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1967).
 2. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (London: Routledge Classics, 1918), 1
 3. Oghenekaro Moses Ogbinaka, “Bertrand Russell's Logical Atomism: A Synthesis of Empiricism and Rationalism”, PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Lagos, Nigeria, 2000
 4. Paul Edwards and Pap Arthur, ed., *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

of symbol (or meaning and analysis of propositions) should be added to the type of scepticism that provides the basis for all forms of positive epistemology.

Background to Russell's Logical Atomism

Russell's philosophy of logical atomism can be traced to his 1905 paper entitled "On Denoting."⁵ The substance of the principles that guided Russell's subsequent philosophy is rooted in this paper. Of note are his theories of Definite Description and Types. This was guided by his fidelity to his principle of Ockham's razor, i.e. the principle that ontological entities should not to be needlessly and unnecessarily multiplied. Russell thus frowns against unguarded 'postulations' that may lead to absurdities. His ground for this is for economy, i.e. parsimony in reasoning. He believes that the more entities one postulates, the greater is the risk of one believing in 'something' that lacks existence. Postulating, Russell held, is a form of philosophical laziness. In the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Russell says postulation has "the advantage of theft over honest toil." Postulation may give undue hostages to fortune. All these constituted the elements that guided the typical Russellian philosophical temperament.⁶ Where does analysis come in, for Russell, in all these?

For Russell, a form of intrinsic connection holds between logical atomism, the atomistic approach and the method of analysis. This is how he puts it:

When I say that my logic is atomistic, I mean that I share the common-sense belief that there are many separate things; I do not regard the apparent multiplicity of the world as consisting merely in phases and unreal divisions of a single indivisible Reality. *It results from that, that a considerable part of what one would have to do to*

5. Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", *Mind*, 114 (1905): doi:10.1903/mindfzi873. Reprinted in Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. R. C. Marsh (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.), 39-56

6. Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919), 71

justify the sort of philosophy I wish to advocate would consist in justifying the process of analysis. One is often told that the process of analysis is falsification, that when you analyse any given concrete whole you falsify it and that the results of analysis are not true. I do not think that is a right view.⁷

Russell usually engaged this method to investigate traditional problems of knowledge such as belief, truth, perception, self-consciousness and memory. All this ultimately influenced his conception of reality.

What is Logical Atomism?

Bertrand Russell says that by the term, “logical atomism”, he wishes to arrive at the ultimate constituent elements of reality. This is in a manner analogous to that in which in *Principia Mathematica*, he worked back from 'result' to the *ineliminable* logical 'premises'. But he is looking, of course, *for logical* and *not* physical atoms. Hence, the use of the adjectival term 'logical'. “The point is that the atom I wish to arrive at is the atom of logical analysis, not the atom of physical analysis”⁸ is how Russell explained his terminology of 'logical atomism'. Russell's theory of logical atomism is rationalist in nature, but directed towards realism and empiricism; setting out to ground claims of common sense and science. Russell's Logical Atomism carries along its track many, and yet, related aspects of philosophy. It is related to symbolism, logic, and metaphysics/ontology. It is also a judgmental epistemological tool. It is a tool, or a 'prolegomena' to achieving his fusion of rationalist and empiricist epistemology.

In spite of the originality of his contribution to philosophy, Russell was quite humble about his task. He states in the lectures on *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* that even though the views were mainly his own, he learnt them from his friend and

7. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 2

8. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 3

former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁹ He says: “I hope you will forgive the fact that so much of what I say today is tentative and consists of pointing out difficulties. The subject is not very easy and it has not been much dealt with or discussed. Practically nobody has until quite lately begun to consider the problem of the nature of belief with anything like a proper logical apparatus and therefore one has very little to help one in any discussion and so one has to be content on many points at present with pointing out difficulties rather than laying down quite clear solutions.”¹⁰

He also gave an innovative analysis of the verbs of “factual” propositions and the verbs of “attitudinal” propositions which he termed “prepositional verbs.” Having come to some philosophical conclusions as to the real status of beliefs and how proposition of beliefs are to be used by philosophers. Russell still felt that his programme cannot be regarded as exhaustive; and relying on the wise counsel of Baruch Spinoza, he held: “One should always remember Spinoza's infinite attributes of Deity. It is quite likely there are in the world the analogues of his infinite attributes. We have no acquaintance with them, but there is no reason to suppose that the mental and the physical exhaust the whole universe ...”¹¹ Such intellectual humility characterised the vantage Russellian spirit, a conclusion rooted in logic rationalism provides. Borne out of his 'scientific attitude', Russell had had cause to change his view about the atom's identity, i.e. sense data, for what he first called 'percepts' and later 'events'. He changed his belief in both 'sense-data' and 'percepts' because he adopted a position of 'neutral monism' that does not subscribe to a dualism between the 'perceived' in the process of perception and the objects of perception. These changes are largely so-called since they were rehabilitative representation of his earlier position.

There are two interrelated perspectives in Russell's philosophy of logical atomism. The first is the language perspective. Russell sees it as a theory of

9. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 1

10. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 59-60

11. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 60

symbolism. Russell says “a proposition is just a symbol. It is a complex symbol in the sense that it has parts which are also symbols: a symbol may be defined as complex when it has parts that are [also] symbols”¹² What type of symbol is a proposition? What does a proposition adequately symbolise?¹³

Theory of Symbolism, Proposition and Analysis

Another aspect of Russell's logical atomism falls within the focus of traditional epistemology. This is not ignored or treated less by Russell. The question may be raised: what is (i.e., language) symbolised? What is the object of cognition or knowledge? Here, we can classify Russell's philosophy as a blend of empiricism, on the one hand, and rationalism on the other. For Russell, the good philosopher or epistemologist is easily distinguished when his position on “symbols” is well-delineated from the *properties* of a thing. The bad philosopher lacks this. Russell thus differentiated between “language” (that is being used to talk about reality) and the properties of language, from 'reality' itself. He observes that the properties of “symbols”, and “the thing” being symbolised may be muddled and not properly delineated,¹⁴ by a bad philosopher or epistemologist, we can add. So, to be “the really good philosopher,” we should think about real objects and not the words used to symbolise objects. The ways words mean differ from one case to another. So, it is wrong to suppose that 'meaning' has just one meaning. Secondly 'meaning' is quite a different notion from 'definition'. In other words, Russell argues that the way names mean is different from the way some other words, say *quality* words as mortal, thick, thin, etc. would have their meaning. The same holds for a sentence.¹⁵ “For instance”, Russell says, “the word 'Socrates', you will say, means a certain man, the word 'mortal' means quality; and the sentence 'Socrates is mortal; means a certain fact.

12. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. In R.C. Marsh, ed. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1956):185.

13. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 185.

14. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 186.

15. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 185.

But these sorts of meaning are entirely distinct, a name would be a proper symbol to use for a person; a sentence (or a proposition) is the proper symbol for a fact.¹⁶

A proposition is not a name for a fact, from the mere circumstance that there are two propositions corresponding to each fact. Suppose it is a fact that Socrates is dead. You have two propositions. 'Socrates is dead' and 'Socrates is not dead'. And those two propositions corresponding to the same fact, there is one fact in the world which makes one true and one false.¹⁷

Consequently, each fact can be symbolised by two propositions - either true or false. Nothing in the nature of the symbol can show us which symbol is the true one and which is the false one. Truth and falsity belong to the fact which is symbolised. This explains why Russell is generally held to hold the correspondence theory of truth.

What is the relationship between a symbol and what is symbolised? Russell held the basic assumption that for a complete account of the world to be given, an account of facts has to be taken. This is not done by merely enumerating facts, i.e. the particular things, and their properties, and so forth.¹⁸ Ontologically, facts belong to the world of objects; they are *prima facie* more than the symbols that represent them. Also, it is not quite possible to explain facts away. Facts are ontologically 'related', and propositions attempt to capture this relation. But the complexity and analysability of symbols (propositions) is more obvious than that of a fact. Since propositions are made of various words (which may even go on to occur in other different propositions), it shows that they are complex and subject of analysis. Russell therefore proffers and argues that the complexity of a fact justifies why we have to begin with analysis in our epistemology. "The circumstance that the proposition which asserts a fact consists of several words; each of which may occur

16. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 186-7.

17. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 187.

18. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 192-5.

in other contexts,” [implies that there is] “a possibility of cutting up a fact into component parts, of which one component may be altered without altering others, and one component may occur in certain other facts though not in all other facts.”¹⁹

These claims by Russell can be regarded as *truisms*. The basis of the truisms rest on an assumption and postulate that that which applies to a proposition derivatively applies to a fact also. Thus, (i) Propositions are complex entities because they are made up of several words; (ii) The knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of a language, leads one to understand a proposition in that language even though you never *saw* it before; (iii) Only a word that expresses something simple can be understood (even where it is part of a proposition). This is possible only by “seeing” or “having seen” the object it symbolises. Analysis can only be carried out on an entity that is complex. The complex has the “simples” as its constitutive elements. Simples cannot be objects of analysis. They have to be known by acquaintance. “All analysis is only possible in regard to what is complex, and it always depends, in the last analysis, upon direct acquaintance with the objects *which are the meanings* of certain simple symbols. A simple symbol is quite a different thing from a simple thing.”²⁰

In the opinion of Russell, philosophical (especially ontological, and the same thing when he says “logical”) analysis should be “reality-focused”, “reality-based” and “reality-directed”. For Russell, Alexius Meinong missed this essential point by allowing his logic to go astray. Logic should not be allowed to lead us to just nowhere or into nothing. Otherwise, if perchance it does, it would be a mere dilution for us to infer, thereby, that *the nothing* arrived at logically is, therefore, *a something*. His “On Denoting” was to cure him of this sort of ontology. Russell believes that we should proffer no grounds to suppose that there is *a nothing* existing either in an unreal world (this, definitely is questionable) or in the real world.

19. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 193.

20. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 194

Nothing [as a concept], Russell would prove, is a proposition. And a proposition is not something [a percept] in the sense of a fact.

Time was when I thought there were propositions, but it does not seem to me very plausible to say that in addition to facts there are also these curious shadowy things going about such as “That today is Wednesday” when in fact it is Tuesday. I cannot believe that they go about the real world ... and I do not think no person with a vivid sense of reality can imagine it.²¹

Of course, the history of philosophy is replete with persons who have imagined nothing to be Being. Why? Russell identifies (i) a Meinongian basis for this, and (ii) a failure to base thought on realism. He comments on the two lapses. First, on Meinong, he says it “is rather deficient in just that instinct for reality, Meinong maintains that there is such an object as the round square only it does not exist, and it does not even subsist, but nevertheless there is such an object, and when you say the round square is a fiction', he takes it that there is an object 'the round square' and there is a predicate 'fiction'.” And second, on logic, he says, “One difficulty in the study of logic is that it is an exceedingly abstract study dealing with the most abstract things imaginable, and yet you cannot pursue it properly *unless you have a vivid instinct as to what is real*. You must have that instinct rather well developed in logic. I think otherwise you will get into fantastic things.”²²

Two points come to fore to be used in studying, analysing and understanding what Russell intends to argue for or against in the entire programme of the philosophy of logical atomism. These are his philosophy of logic as encapsulated above, and his belief in realism which he defines as: “Everything you would have to mention in the complete description of the world that would convey to you what I mean. Now I do not think that false propositions would have to be mentioned in a complete description of the world. False beliefs would; of course, false suppositions would, and desires for what does not come to pass.”²³ In short, that which is physical

21. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 223

22. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 223.

23. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 223-4.

and mental constitutes the facts of the universe. Not propositions. Nevertheless, reason is a prerequisite for a proper arrangement of things of the universe. This calls for logic. Richard Rorty qualifies this in a question as the “Problem about Fictional Discourse?” Rorty explains Russell's position on this extensively thus:

Bertrand Russell held various doctrines about both semantics and epistemology at various times during his life, but he did not waver from the view that: (1) Whatever is referred to must exist and that it follows that (2) statements apparently referring to something which does not exist must really be abbreviations for, be “analysed as,” statements referring to existents. Further, and more controversially, Russell sometimes held that: (3) one can only talk about what is directly given in “knowledge by acquaintance” (in the sense in which the intellect is acquainted” with universals and the senses with particular sense-data) this extends that: (4) All statements can be analysed into statements which contain “genuine names” (e.g., such “logically proper names” as demonstratives like “this”).²⁴

The Rationalist and Empiricist Divide

As A. C. Grayling stated, 'two principal schools of thought on how to achieve knowledge exist. These are: “the 'rationalists' school, which hold that the chief route to knowledge is the exercise of reason and the 'empiricist' school, which holds that the chief route to knowledge is perception (the use of the five senses of sight, hearing, smelling, taste, and touch, and their extension by means of such instruments as telescope, microscopes and the like).”²⁵ These two epistemological approaches obviously exist in the philosophy of Russell. Russell, unlike (for example John Locke) did not classify himself as an empiricist. In his philosophy, he

24. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 111-112

25. A. C. Grayling, *Philosophy 1* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), 9

did not set out to deliberately elevate empiricism over rationalism. The essential characteristics that A. C. Grayling identified with each of the two approaches do in fact make Russell to conveniently belong to the two approaches. Grayling notes that: “The model of the rationalists is *mathematics* and *logic*, where necessary truths are arrived at by *rational inference*. The model for empiricists is any of the *natural sciences* where *observation* and *experiment* are the chief motor of inquiry”.²⁶ Both are obvious elements in Russell's philosophy. John Tucker called Russell a Cartesian. To be a Cartesian is to be a rationalist. Tucker writes that: “Russell, in characteristically Cartesian fashion, looked for some distinctive introspect feature of memory, image, and thought that he had found it in 'feeling of familiarity' carried by those images and not by other sorts of image.”²⁷

Now, our task cannot be taken to be a new discovery concerning the philosophy of Russell. Some other scholars on Russell have noticed elements of rationalism in his thought. However, they wrongly conclude that such elements are inconsistent with empiricism. What has however set us apart from such positions is precisely our point that both empiricism and rationalism can be compatibly synthesised in logical atomism as Russell did. For anything, Russell has shown how philosophers must not to gag themselves with such labels as being either 'empiricists' or 'rationalists.' Wherever Russell recognised the limits of empiricism as an epistemological approach, he brought in reason. Between experiencing facts and the making judgement on that which is experienced, the mind (reason), as Kant has also shown, plays a prominent role. So, it really makes no sense for one to start separating rationalism and empiricism as two incongruent approaches to knowledge, especially as was the case in the Modern period. Given the apparent and well-known limitations and problems involved in both approaches, Russell, (Kant also), was justified in his approach. What one achieves in this method is a form of

26. Grayling, *Philosophy* 1, 9.

27. John Tucker, “Language, Meaning and Our Actual Procedures,” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy* X, nos. 1 & 2, (1981): 17

rationalistic-empiricism.

Towards a Social Atomistic Epistemology

Logical atomism is of tremendous significance and relevance within philosophical inquiries. An atomistic conception and temperament can be employed as a useful social tool. We are aware of the shortcomings this philosophy. First of all, there is the problem involved in trying to conceive nature from the perspective of language. This is there even if one does not strictly say that philosophy is all about the analysis of language. However, without contradiction, the analysis of language provides an insight into philosophy as a few scholars in African philosophy have successfully shown. Both Atomistic philosophy, as against holistic philosophy, have been shown to be 'a limited' form of philosophical scholarship. In spite of this, both are useful philosophical positions.

Reality is a process. It is not a fixed rigid 'event'. Even then, reality cannot be separated from the perceiver. The symbols of language are categories. But what type of categories are they? They are not (apparently as symbols) as dynamic as the reality (or even the subjective knower) they are meant to capture. The symbols, i.e. the words, may retain their locution in terms of 'utterance' and literary representation; but their meaning usually constantly change. In meaning, language reflects the dynamics of reality since it is indeed part of that which is real. Language belongs to the rational reality of man.

Recognition of "the same object" is only the function of the concept of objects as subject of knowledge. Concepts aid recognition though reality is a process. According to K. C. Anyanwu, language is a sign, when we examine the "thing" for which language stands as a sign and the person for whom it is a sign of that "thing", we come to appreciate the profound meaning of language; namely, that reality is a process that is inseparable from the person who perceives or knows it.²⁸

²⁸. K. C. Anyanwu, "The Role of Language in Perception and Cognition", *Uche*, vol. 6, (1986):32-47.

Anyanwu goes on to rightly argue that even though language tells us something about reality this may not be adequately conveyed by it, but it complements reality. It makes reality understandable. Hence, “constructs and concepts stem from perceptual world, and by definition we regard the perceptual world as the indication of the hypothetical, external world. Theoretical constructs like atoms, gene, mathematical space and time, etc. arise from the recognition that perception does not completely unfold everything we see in the world. So, the concealed elements of the world are to be represented in our theories through theoretical constructs.”²⁹ In other words, reality, given its motions and dynamism, is not really the kind of object language can *adequately* pin down. Language brings us closer to objects.

We cannot strictly hold the view that language does not provide philosophical insight. Since language is a symbol, it is to that extent a part of reality. Reality also penetrates the perceiver's state of mind. Somehow, reality belongs to both divides. Both provide an insight into what reality is. So, language facilitates our epistemology. Now, what are the philosophical implications of logical atomism?

The Socio-philosophical Consequences of Logical Atomism

Our analysis so far holds language's capability to penetrate reality in high esteem. Even though there are evident limitations in the capacity of language to achieve this. This brand of philosophy has emphasised the relationship that exists between language and what language ought to represent, i.e. between linguistic reality and extra-linguistic reality. This is not an entirely new position in philosophy. John Locke, for example, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* divided the sciences into three distinct fields of inquiry, thus: (i) natural philosophy, (ii) moral philosophy and (iii) doctrine of signs. Farhang Zebeeh, *et al* underscored this point in John Locke when they noted that even though Locke's *Essay* is essentially 'an

29. K.C. Anyanwu, “Hume's Problem of Induction”, *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 2, nos. 1 & 2, (1882): 43.

epistemological work', he devoted "a whole book (Book III, "of words") to semantics. According to Locke, significant words denote *not* things, but ideas, which are mental entities. He realised that significant words such as *nihil* in Latin and 'ignorance' and 'barrenness', 'Spirit' and 'Angel' in English may refer to ideas obliquely.³⁰ So, underlying language is what language ought to be about.

This point is evident in inquiries on African philosophy where scholars have successfully used insights provided by African languages - in forms of proverbs and wise-sayings especially of sages - to show that Africans had philosophical thought system in the past.³¹ Oral tradition in fact constitutes one of the approaches to the study of African philosophy through language analysis. Leo Apostel suggested a language and analytical approach for inquiries in African philosophy. So, if it is properly understood and used, the analytic approach will enhance studies in African thought system.³²

Another area of relevance is what can be termed the 'atomistic approach'. In the first place, and as Russell also notes, is that: there have to exist 'wholes' before 'atomisation' can occur. Yet the act of atomising provides deeper and better insight into the "inner structure", the "constitutive parts" and the "relating components" of the whole. Consequently, as an epistemic apparatus, atomism gives a thorough, deeper and scientific knowledge of its object of study. This point has often been ignored by those who hold that atomists [pluralists] fragment reality and leave it scattered. Irrespective of what the philosopher may say, things, reality, objects, etc., remain what they are unaffected, i.e., they are *wholes* if that is their being, and they are *atoms* if that is their constituting being. Nevertheless, knowledge is basically "propositional'-knowledge", i.e. statements bearing truth-value that the philosopher hopes would conform to the things-as-they-are. Depending on the

30. Farhang Zebeeh, *et al* eds., *Reading in Semantics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 2.

31. A. F. Uduigwomen, *Footmarks on African Philosophy* (Lagos: Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers Ltd, 1995), 36-43.

32. Leo Apostel, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality?* (Belgium: Scientific Publishers, 1981), 14

philosopher's conception, they may call these '*truth-statements*' or '*knowledge*'. Justifying this is a fundamental task of both the epistemologist and the metaphysician. Atomism recommends itself as one of the approaches to understanding man and his universe.

Invariably, even though Russell did not extend his logical atomism to social sphere, we could discern the possibility of such a programme. In the first place, it can be shown that all social problems are a complex and capable of being analysed into parts. Social problems can be broken down into 'steps'. These identified steps constitute the problems, and they are 'steps' which may be adopted in order to understand the problems, or to solve social problems. We can term such 'steps' arrived at through analysis as *soluble simples*. And depending on the purpose they serve, they may be qualified, if we are to humanise our epistemology, as “social epistemic simples”. Social epistemic simples constitute the kernel of the solution of a given social problem. It is a well-known fact and Descartes emphasised this greatly, that solving problems from the simple to the complex is a better approach to achieving results. He recommends the following procedures for philosophy to adopt in its method.

1. 'Avoid carefully precipitancy and prejudice and ... apply my judgement to nothing but that which showed itself clearly and distinctly to my mind that I should not have occasion to doubt it.
2. Divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible.
3. Conduct my mind in an orderly fashion, starting with what was simplest and easiest to know, and rising little by little to the knowledge of the most complex, even supposing an order where there is no natural precedence among the objects of knowledge.
4. Make so complete an enumeration of the links in an argument,

and ... pass them all so thoroughly under review, that I could be sure I had missed nothing.”³³

Conclusion

The advantages of the atomistic attitude over the holistic approach are quite evident and obvious. This is not to condemn the holistic approach. Rather it is to state that once the whole is given and known peripherally, a further thorough and deeper knowledge of it calls for the atomistic and analytical attitude. After all, in terms of creation, it is easier to produce the simple than the complex. It is easier to construct the part (i.e. unit) than the entire body. It is easier to comprehend the parts than the entire body. The atomistic attitude is therefore a call to consciously refocus on a familiar attitude of doing things. Since even in our educational programmes at school, the curriculum operates on the principles of atomism. We teach the letters of the alphabets “A, B, C...to Z”; then 'words' and what they stand for; then sentences and what they mean; etc. This progression is atomism at work.

Atomism is not a goal in itself. It is not an end. Rather, atomism is a means to achieving a goal, i.e. a synthesis. It is therefore a movement from synthesis through analysis to synthesis. It is paradoxically part of, and derived from, that which is given as a 'whole - complex'. Without the latter there can be neither analysis nor atomism. It is a different thing entirely to say that everything, i.e. reality, is made up of atom. And that atom constitutes substance, the unit of first creation. Leibniz's 'monad', and to go backwards in the history of philosophy, Democritus' 'atom' are a reflection of this position. Nevertheless, this is '*a -type-of-metaphysics*', i.e. ontology outside the scope of this paper. However, it does not subscribe to it but only ready to admit that things are made up of parts and are capable of being analysed into parts.

In another dimension, there is good evidence that Russell thought informs a

33. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*. In E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, trans. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge, CUP, 1911), 61

good deal of contemporary philosophy. His thought foreshadowed postmodernism. P.K. Sasidharan in his “Wittgenstein's Critique of Language Game: A Lyotardian. Dialectic” says “Wittgenstein's critique of language-games bespeaks of a motif which lies close to postmodernism as attributed to it by Lyotard.”³⁴ The language game of Wittgenstein - which we have pointed out to be one of Russell's unofficial theories of meaning earlier - envisages a 'pluralistic conception of reason' and knowledge, especially against the backdrop of what Lyotard qualifies as the 'modern'. That is:

When, on the one hand science is pursued on the basis of the rate of its own, and on the other hand, it appears to be a meta-discourse of politics or ethics as the rule for its legitimation. However, with the emergence of contemporary post-industrial society and post-modern culture, the question of the legitimation of knowledge has also undergone transformation in such a way, entailing the loss of its credibility of the unifying power of the grand narratives of progress and emancipation... Lyotard's attempt is to present language game investigation as a “general methodological approach” which is not far removed from the idea of post-modern perspective.³⁵

And in a clearer way, Sasidharan concludes that Wittgenstein's theory of games accepts

... agnosticism as a founding principle to understand social relations from a pragmatic point of view. This way of attempting to locate the focal point of post-modern concern around the notion of “language-games” signified that the whole issue is a matter of viewing the nature and status of knowledge and reason in the reflective endeavour. *Thus, as opposed to the absolutist and universalist*

^{34.} P. K Sasidharan, “Wittgenstein's Critique of Language Game: A Lyotardian Dialectic”, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, XXV, no. 3 (1998): 367

^{35.} Sasidharan, “Wittgenstein's Critique of Language Game,” 370.

conception of knowledge and reason, envisaged in the history of traditional philosophy throughout, the language game approach is said to have envisaged a “pluralistic conception of reason” and knowledge.³⁶

No doubt, the parallels between the above and atomism as a theory of knowledge is apparent. Russell remains a rigid advocate of interdisciplinary approach of inquiry. He always called for a scientific attitude.

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³⁶ Sasidharan, “Wittgenstein's Critique of Language Game”, 369.

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