

## THOUGHTS IN EXCHANGE: A NOTE ON FREGE'S *TRACTATUS* LETTERS

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In 1919, when his *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)*, was finished but still unpublished, Wittgenstein sent the manuscript to Frege, and, as a consequence of that, they exchanged several fairly polemic letters in 1919 – 1920. Only Frege's letters were preserved. The letters are highly compressed in content, and offer an interesting insight in how, mostly critically, one of the authors of whom Wittgenstein held highest esteem, thought about the content, style, and organisation of the manuscript. At the same time, we can get some impression from Frege's letters how Wittgenstein reacted to his initial letter addressing the *Tractatus*, and how the subsequent exchange went. In this paper, I offer several observations concerning their exchange, and I compare it to the parallel exchange on the same matter between Wittgenstein and Russell.

**Keywords:** Bertrand Russell – Elucidation – Fact – Gottlob Frege – Ludwig Wittgenstein – Sense – Thought – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

*Astonishingly, Frege did not understand the book at all  
and wrote to Ludwig quite frankly saying so.*  
Wittgenstein, H. (1984, 6)

*[Frege] wrote to me a week ago  
and I gather that he doesn't understand a word of it all.*  
Wittgenstein, L. (2008c, 98)

### I.

In Wittgenstein's own words, during his first encounter with Frege whom he visited in 1911 to discuss his views, Frege "absolutely wiped the floor with me, and I felt very depressed; but at the end he said 'You must come again', so I cheered up" (reported in Geach 1961, 130). After that episode (and keeping in mind how Frege typically dissected views of others in his writings), it should not have come as a surprise to Wittgenstein how Frege in their correspondence in the years 1919 – 1920 reacted to his newly finished manuscript to be published in the following years as the

*Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*, and then as *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. But it did.

Up to that point in their correspondence (1914 – 1918), Frege mainly praised Wittgenstein’s efforts to pursue scientific work, being at the period of the World War I a soldier, comparing him with himself who, in the same period, lost his scientific vigour (e.g. Frege 2011a, 35; 2011b, 37), etc. Whatever Wittgenstein communicated to Frege of his pre-*Tractatus* ideas, any sign of Frege’s disapproval or criticism of them is absent in the letters.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 1914 he writes in a letter to Jourdain, “I had lengthy conversations with [Wittgenstein] before Christmas, and I would like to write to him so that something fruitful will come out of them” (Frege 1980, 81). That remark shows that Frege was not merely polite to Wittgenstein in the letters but found something interesting and stimulating in his ideas (see also Floyd 2011). This is particularly evident from Frege’s letters in 1918, after Wittgenstein reported to him that he has “arrived at a certain closure” (Frege 2011c, 45), i.e., that he concluded his work (Frege 2011d, 49). So, Frege must have meant it when he later wrote to Wittgenstein that in “long conversations with [him he] have come to know a man who, like [him], has sought the truth, partly on different paths” (2011f, 57), and that he “came to know [him] as a thinker to be taken rather seriously” (Frege 2011g, 61). But, in spite of all the positive inclinations towards Wittgenstein, in 1919 the style of Frege’s letters drastically changed, the moment he received the manuscript which contained ideas he encouraged Wittgenstein to write down in the first place (Frege 2011c).

Unlike much of the philosophical community, still unaware of it, but soon to be affected and influenced by the upcoming *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Frege was rather critical of the manuscript. Indeed, one can hardly find a kind word regarding its style and content, although Frege tried to represent his criticism as “an encouragement” (Frege 2011e, 53), “a service of friendship” (Frege 2011e, 55), something “made with good intentions” (Frege 2011g, 63). But in spite of all the criticism, Frege was willing to help – and in fact did help – Wittgenstein in promoting his manuscript to a potential publisher (Frege 2011g, 61, f. 18; Floyd 2011). Whether that shows that, regardless of all the shortcomings he saw in the manuscript, Frege thought that the manuscript, and not just its author, was of *some* value, even though he was not able to grasp or appreciate it, remains unclear.

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<sup>1</sup> To enquire what Wittgenstein *might have had* communicated to Frege in that early period, see his correspondence with Russell and Moore in the years 1912 – 1915 (McGuinness (ed.) 2008, 29 – 86), as well as his notebooks and dictated notes from that period (Wittgenstein 1979).

On the one hand, in spite of all the criticism of the manuscript in his letters, it might be that Frege felt something like Russell, who in 1913 reported to Lady Ottoline Morell, “I couldn’t understand [Wittgenstein’s] objection—in fact he was very inarticulate—but I feel in my bones that he must be right, and that he has seen something I missed” (quoted in Pears 1977, 177). On the other hand, one should note that, while Russell (2008c, 102) reported to Wittgenstein, “I have written to your publisher, praising your book in the highest terms,” showing he was impressed with the book, Frege (2011g, 61) confessed to Wittgenstein, “I could write to [the publisher] that I have come to know you as a thinker to be taken rather seriously. About the treatise itself I can render no judgment, not because I am not in agreement with the content, but because the content is not sufficiently clear to me,” suggesting he was far less impressed with it than Russell. But to what extent Frege’s remark “the content is not sufficiently clear to me” should be interpreted as an acknowledgment of his own inability to grasp the manuscript and to what extent as a criticism of the manuscript itself for lacking the needed clarity remains an open question.

## II.

In the 1919 – 1920 period, Frege sent four letters to Wittgenstein, addressing his manuscript. Unfortunately, none of Wittgenstein’s replays was preserved, so one can mainly only speculate how *exactly* Wittgenstein reacted to Frege’s critical remarks and what he wrote in reply. Nevertheless, there *are* some recorded traces of his reactions, from which one might arrive at a partial reconstruction. For one thing, one can examine how Wittgenstein (2008c) reacted to Russell’s (2008a) initial take on his manuscript and assume that letters to Frege were written in the similar vein.<sup>2</sup> However, comparing Frege’s initial letter concerning Wittgenstein’s manuscript with Russell’s, one notices clear differences. Frege’s letter is considerably more critical – almost exclusively – and it focuses on fairly general matters, most notably on how the manuscript is written, differences between a *case*, a *fact*, and an *atomic fact*, and the purpose of the manuscript. Russell (2008a, 96) raised a similar question concerning the relation between facts and atomic facts, but at the same time he gives

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<sup>2</sup> As Wittgenstein’s sister Hermine later recalls, “It seems that Ludwig had developed in a direction that took him away from Frege, and the friendship was not resumed after the war. A similar thing happened with Russell” (Wittgenstein, H. 1984, 6). Since it is unlikely that Hermine herself read Frege’s and Russell’s letters and came to that conclusion, her recollection should be taken as the testimony of something Wittgenstein told her, thus showing in the first place how *he* perceived his relationships with Frege and Russell at the time. That is in accordance with Wittgenstein’s letters to Russell, where he expresses several times his fear that he will not reach any understanding with Russell (Wittgenstein 2008a, 89; 2008b, 93), as well as Frege’s (2011f, 57) letter, where Frege briefly addresses Wittgenstein’s opinion that they will *not* “come to agreement in the philosophical domain.”

a more positive evaluation of the manuscript. For example, in Russell's letter we find lines such as "I am convinced you are right in your main contention" or "*I am sure you are right in thinking the book of first-class importance.*"<sup>3</sup> In addition to such general praises, Russell expressed agreement with a number of key propositions in the manuscript (e.g., 3., 4.112, 5.15, 5.53). Frege did no such thing. So, we can imagine that Wittgenstein's reply to Frege was harsh, certainly harsher than the one sent to Russell. If that is true, it is probably justified. Wittgenstein must have felt from the start – just as today's reader feels – that Frege was not giving to the manuscript a deserved attention, focusing in his criticism on fairly general issues driven mostly by pontifical linguistic analysis inappropriate for that occasion. Indeed, Frege might have written the same letters he did if Wittgenstein had sent him only first couple of pages instead of the entire manuscript.<sup>4</sup>

Further on, several Frege's remarks in his three subsequent letters (Frege 2011f, 2011g, 2011h), which followed Wittgenstein's two letters to him, where Wittgenstein evidently addressed Frege's initial remarks, shed *some* light on that matter. For example, from the first of these letters we learn that Wittgenstein concluded it is unlikely that he and Frege will come to a philosophical agreement; that he further explained the purpose of his manuscript; and that he addressed Frege's initial worries about facts, atomic facts, and states of affairs, in such a way that it would "never have occurred to" Frege (2011f, 57). Particular details of his explanation are absent in Frege's letter. But here is what Wittgenstein (2008c, 98) says about the same matter in a letter to Russell, answering Russell's (2008a, 96) question about the difference between facts and atomic facts: "What is the difference between Tatsache [fact] and Sachverhalt [atomic fact]?" Sachverhalt is, what corresponds to an Elementarsatz [elementary proposition] if it is true. Tatsache is, what corresponds to the logical product of elementary prop[osition]s when this product is true."

Is this the explanation that would never have occurred to Frege? It is hard to tell. But one can notice here two important things. Firstly, Wittgenstein's explanation resembles his explanation of atomic facts quoted from his letter in Frege (2011f, 59),

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<sup>3</sup> After receiving Wittgenstein's (2008c) answers to his initial queries, in a subsequent letter Russell (2008b, 101) also remarks "I am very very much impressed by [your book]."

<sup>4</sup> According to Hermine Wittgenstein (1984, 5), Wittgenstein "sent Frege the first part of his book in typescript." In the letter to Russell, Wittgenstein (2008c, 98) indicates no such thing when he reports, "I also sent my M.S. to Frege." (Indeed, since he sent to Russell the entire manuscript, "also" suggest here he did the same in Frege's case.) Also, Frege (2011g, 61) calculated that the "manuscript would fill around 50 pages of the [journal]," which would not be possible if he did not possess the *entire* manuscript. Be it as it may, even the first part of the manuscript – given it does not consist of the preface and the first two pages – considerably exceeds the scope of Frege's remarks in the letters.

namely, “What corresponds to an elementary proposition, if it is true, is the existence of an atomic fact.” Secondly, Wittgenstein’s two explanations differ only regarding the phrase “the existence of an atomic fact,” which occurs in the letter to Frege but not in the letter to Russell. That is interesting because it is precisely this phrase that bothered Frege (2011f, 59) when he objected to Wittgenstein’s explanation quoted in his letter:

With this you explain, not the expression “atomic fact”, but rather the whole expression, “the existence of an atomic fact”. In a definition the expression explained must always be viewed as an inseparable whole. The parts which one can distinguish in it grammatically are not to be conceived as having their own senses. You use the word “existing” in other contexts as well. Thus in your hands the expression “the existence of an atomic fact” appears to have been divided into two parts, and your sentence “What corresponds to an elementary proposition, if it is true, is the existence of an atomic fact” appears not to be an explanation of the expression “the existence of an atomic fact”.

Had Wittgenstein chosen the former formulation sent to Russell, rather than the latter one, omitting thus the “the existence of” part in it, Frege would have no ground to object to it. The formulation found in the manuscript, namely, “If the elementary proposition is true, the atomic fact exists; if it is false the atomic fact does not exist” (Wittgenstein 1999, 4.25), differs from the previous two in being a conditional, rather than an identity statement. In it, accordingly, “exists” occurs, but only as a grammatical predicate (a verb), not in the noun form “existence” as part of the noun phrase “the existence of an atomic fact.” Had Frege’s letter been delivered to Wittgenstein before Wittgenstein wrote the mentioned letter to Russell, one could assume that the formulation in the latter letter was the result of Frege’s criticism. But it is not. Frege’s letter to Wittgenstein is dated September 16, and Wittgenstein’s to Russell August 19. However, what one can conclude from all this is that reference to *existence* in proposed explanations bears not too much weight, certainly not as much as Frege thought it does. It is also worth noting that Russell’s (1999, 12 – 13) reflection on the matter of atomic facts in his introduction to the *Tractatus* nowhere mentions *existence* as well.

### III.

Frege (2011f, 59) quotes and discusses another sentence from Wittgenstein’s reply. In his initial letter, Frege (2011e, 51) remarked:

Right at the beginning I encounter the expressions “to be the case” and “fact” and I conjecture that *to be the case* and *to be a fact* are the same. The world is everything that is the case and the world is the totality of facts. Is not every fact the case, and is not what is the case a fact? Is it not the same when I say, Let A be a fact, as when I say, Let A be the case? What is the point of this double expression?

Now, he quotes Wittgenstein’s reply, namely, “The sense of each of the two sentences is one and the same, but not the ideas which I combined with them when I wrote them.” Frege concludes that here Wittgenstein’s “way of speaking seems to be entirely in agreement with [his]” (Frege 2011f, 59). The agreement Frege has in mind concerns the distinction between the objective *sense* and the subjective *idea* discussed in his newly published essay “Der Gedanke” (but also in his previous writings, most notably, Frege 1984a, 159 – 161, which must have been known to Wittgenstein at the time), and he explicitly directs Wittgenstein to that paper.

Frege’s remark, together with the earlier one in the letter (Frege 2011f, 57), namely,

What you write me about the purpose of your book strikes me as strange. According to you, that purpose can only be achieved if others have already thought the thoughts expressed in it. The pleasure of reading your book can therefore no longer arise through the already known content, but, rather, only through the form, in which is revealed something of the individuality of the author. Thereby the book becomes an artistic rather than a scientific achievement; that which is said therein steps back behind how it is said. I had supposed in my remarks that you wanted to communicate a new content. And then the greatest distinctness would indeed be the greatest beauty. / Am I one of those who will understand your book? Without your assistance, hardly. What you write me about atomic facts, facts, and states of affairs would never have occurred to me, although possibly I come close to your opinion at one place in my essay [“Der Gedanke”].

provoked Wittgenstein to address Frege’s “Der Gedanke” in the subsequent correspondence. So, one learns from Frege’s final letter dated April 3, 1920 (Frege 2011h, 65) that Wittgenstein criticised his treatment of idealism in that paper and

asked Frege “not [to] take offense at [his] frankness,” which suggests that criticism was harsher than it is customary in friendly academic letters.<sup>5</sup>

One also learns that Wittgenstein in his letter – in a clear opposition to Frege’s referred paper – “acknowledge a deep and true core in idealism, an important feeling that is wrongly gratified, hence, a legitimate need” (Frege 2011h, 67). And, prior to the discovery of Frege’s letters in 1988, there was Geach’s report how Wittgenstein told him that he wrote to Frege that “Der Gedanke” “attacked idealism on its weak side, whereas a worthwhile criticism of idealism would attack it just where it was strongest” (Geach 1977, vii). Frege asked Wittgenstein, among other things, to explain “of what sort is this need,” but, as far as we know, Wittgenstein never answered the question.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as far as we know, he never wrote to Frege again, although his communication with Russell and Ramsey concerning the manuscript continued for some time (see letters of the period 1919 – 1923 in McGuinness (ed.) 2008). The way Frege thought about Wittgenstein’s manuscript and his views from the outset, as well as the questions he posed to Wittgenstein from that perspective, were evidently too alien to Wittgenstein and too misdirected for him to handle them in any constructive way. Frege in his letters did not just question particular ideas in the manuscript – as Russell and Ramsey did – but brought in question the manuscript as a whole.<sup>7</sup> And that is something Wittgenstein was not willing to deal with, certainly not in the situation in which he received a positive support from Russell, Ramsey, and others. To simply interrupt the correspondence after the initial attempts to make clarifications demanded by Frege was an understandable thing to do.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV.

Wittgenstein reported to Geach his 1911 anecdote with Frege as an episode of which he undoubtedly had a positive, approving, recollection. When he said that Frege

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<sup>5</sup> Later, Geach (1977, vii) reported that Wittgenstein advised him not to include “Der Gedanke” in the English collection of Frege’s writings since he thought it was “an inferior work” compared with his other writings (see also Floyd 2011).

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of the matter, see Floyd 2011.

<sup>7</sup> At one point, Frege (2011g, 61) even suggested to Wittgenstein to divide his manuscript into several treatises of which each one would consider a particular philosophical problem for which Wittgenstein claims he has solved it, and to publish these treatises successively as separate journal papers.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting though that Frege’s last published paper in his lifetime, in 1923, was “Logische Untersuchungen. Dritter Teil: Gedankengefüge,” addressing the issue evidently related to questions regarding the relation between facts and atomic facts, on the one hand, and elementary and non-elementary propositions, on the other (Frege 1984b), which was to a considerable extent in the focus of his letters to Wittgenstein. As far as we know, Wittgenstein never reflected on that paper, and Geach (1977: vii) even speculates that he “very likely never knew of its existence.”

“absolutely wiped the floor” with him, he acknowledged precisely that – that Frege was right in treating him in the way he did. No such story was ever told by Wittgenstein about their 1919 – 1920 exchange concerning his manuscript. The direction in which Frege was forcing the discussion from the start was – unlike that of Russell – not a direction Wittgenstein hoped for and approved. Thus, the evident dissatisfaction and disappointment with Frege reported in letters to Russell together with the hope that at least Russell will ultimately understand him (Wittgenstein 2008c, 98; 2008d, 103).

The questions Frege posed, together with the accompanying proposals and objections, disappointed Wittgenstein, forcing him to take the path of elucidations and justifications he refused to take. So, he might have written to Frege the same thing he wrote to Russell: “[S]ome of your questions want a very lengthy answer and you know how difficult it is for me to write on logic. That’s also the reason why my book is so short, and consequently so obscure. But that I can’t help. – Now I’m afraid you haven’t really got hold of my main contention [...]” (Wittgenstein 2008c, 98). For that reason, it is more likely that Wittgenstein never provided answers to Frege’s final set of questions, then that their correspondence continued unknown to us. If that is the case, Wittgenstein has done to Frege the same thing Frege did earlier to Russell, at the peak of their debate over the nature of thoughts and propositions in their correspondence.

After several attempts to explain and clarify to Russell his sense (*Sinn*)/meaning (*Bedeutung*) distinction, Frege interrupted further communication in the light of Russell’s evident inability to grasp his conception and to *attack it just where it was strongest*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Russell’s critical examination of Frege’s sense/meaning conception failed to match his criticism of Frege’s other logical doctrines, most notably those concerning his logicist project in the *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, in particular Frege’s basic law V. Thus, Frege certainly lacked substantial stimuli to proceed with the debate when Russell persistently failed to grasp and appreciate his basic ideas. From Frege’s point of view, their exchange must have been frustrating rather than fruitful. After Frege’s several efforts to clarify his conception, Russell’s criticism culminated with the remark that one does “not assert the thought, for this is a private psychological matter” (Russell 1980, 169). That remark I think reveals the extent of Russell’s misunderstanding of Frege.<sup>10</sup> As far as we know, Frege never

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<sup>9</sup> For the details of the Frege–Russell debate concerning the sense/meaning distinction, see their correspondence starting from Frege’s letter of October 20, 1902 in Gabriel et al. (eds.) (1980), 149 – 170.

<sup>10</sup> Russell’s misunderstanding is already evident in his presentation of Frege’s ideas in the appendix of *The Principles of Mathematics* (Russell 1992), and it continues in his cryptic refutation of the meaning/denotation distinction in his “On Denoting” (Russell 1956, 48 – 51).



answered or addressed Russell's final letter of December 12, 1904 (Russell 1980), although his "Der Gedanke" concerns many points touched in their correspondence.

And what about Frege's take on Wittgenstein's manuscript? Frege makes some good points, some similar to Russell's and Ramsey's (1923). They all agree that many of Wittgenstein's terms and sentences demand further (or at least some) explanation and justification in order to be able to adequately grasp and assess them (Frege 2011e, 51; Ramsey 1923, 465; Russell 2008a, 96). Frege (2011e, 51, 53) also rightly notes that, without additional clarifications, Wittgenstein's use of different expressions with the same sense makes it difficult to understand his thoughts. Finally, Frege (2011f, 57) justifiably notes that there is a discrepancy between what Wittgenstein (1999, 27) says at the beginning of the preface to his book, namely, "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it – or similar thoughts," and what one – Frege – feels when reading the book: "What you write me about the purpose of your book strikes me as strange. According to you, that purpose can only be achieved if others have already thought the thoughts expressed in it. [...] / Am I one of those who will understand your book? Without your assistance, hardly." If anyone thought similar thoughts, it was Frege, thus the amazement with Wittgenstein's remark that turned out not to be true for him.

But there is a broader issue concerning Wittgenstein's remark. The remark is not only in discrepancy with how Frege felt when reading the manuscript. It is in discrepancy with what Wittgenstein anticipated when he complained to Russell, way before receiving Frege's letters, that *nobody* will understand the book (Wittgenstein 2008a, 89; 2008b, 93). But if Wittgenstein really thought that *nobody* will understand his book, and if Frege's and Russell's reactions to the manuscript confirmed his fear, why did he leave the opening sentence of the preface intact? Should one, in the end, understand it as a trick playing with the vanity of potential readers who would *think* they have thought similar thoughts and thus might be able to understand his book? For who would ever read, or even publish, an academic book beginning with "This book will be understood by none, period"?

In spite of the good points Frege was making in his letters, it is clear that he was too constrained with the sense/meaning and the sense/idea framework analysis he developed in 1890ties. That certainly prevented him to see Wittgenstein's manuscript in a different light, and to give it the credit Wittgenstein (together with Russell, Ramsey, and others) thought it deserves.

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