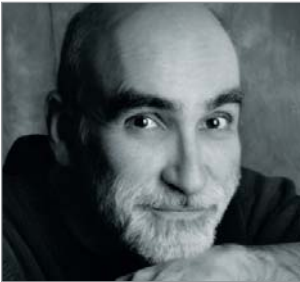


Atomic Facts

A STORY

BY TOM GRIMES



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RUSSELL SAT OUT the war and for a time was imprisoned as a dissenter. Wittgenstein served in the Austrian army, was captured shortly before the war ended, and spent the remainder of the war in a prison camp. In the trenches, he had composed his *Tractatus*.

—It has nothing to do with anything that matters, his companion Klein told him in Tarnev, near the front.

—That's what makes it important.

—Why?

—If it's said, we can get rid of it.

One morning, a bullet passed through Klein's liver. Wittgenstein cradled his companion's head in his arms, said nothing.

WITTGENSTEIN MAY HAVE hoped for a homosexual relationship with Russell, or he may not have, and everything else remains the same.

Russell received a letter from Wittgenstein during the first year of their acquaintance at Cambridge.—Your caring and encouragement I will always cherish when I recall them, but our temperaments and beliefs prevent our ever being friends.

Russell sought out Wittgenstein.—My temperament prevents my beliefs from ever being fixed. Don't destroy

a friendship by taking the appearance of my beliefs as the reality of my beliefs. You, of all people, should understand that.

—What do you believe in?

—What I can figure out and write down. What do you believe in?

—Everything I can't.

—As philosophers, our work is important for what we say, not for what we don't say.

—Then we're either wrong or misunderstood.

AFTER THE WAR, Wittgenstein tried to have the *Tractatus* published.—Set in type, printed, distributed, I'll finally be free of it, he told his sister, Hermine.—I will finally be rid of logic, and then I can either be Ludwig Wittgenstein, or not be Ludwig Wittgenstein, and everything else will remain the same.

—Please make sense, Ludwig. You frighten me.

—I don't like who I am.

—And who is that?

—The one who knows that I don't like who I am.

Wittgenstein told his sister that he had found employment as a gardener's assistant at a monastery.

—You should be doing great things, Ludwig. I worry about you. What troubles you so?

—I can't stop thinking.

—Come home and talk with Daddy. That'll stop you.

Wittgenstein laughed.—Thank you.

—For what?

—A moment's peace.

Wittgenstein met with Russell in Holland, a year after the 1918 Armistice.

—What is happening with your work, Ludwig?

—It's distilling itself.

—Excellent. When can I see some?

—I don't know.

—Why not?

—I haven't written a word of it.

—Ah. But the course of the work is fixed in your mind.

—Some days I think it's finished as is.

—Ludwig.

—The general course is fixed, yes.

—And in what direction is it leading you?

—Toward silence.

—For you, naturally. But how do you intend to get there?

—By outlining the failure of logic.

Russell thought Wittgenstein was merely being ill-mannered and, for some reason, spiteful. Perhaps, Russell thought, because he had sat out the war Wittgenstein had fought in.

—Did you have to kill anyone?

—Yes.

—And what did you think?

—Any one fact can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remains the same.

—Dear.

—Indeed.

Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell, shortly after he had met with Wittgenstein.—I was astonished to find that he had become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard. I think (though he wouldn't agree) that what he likes best in mysticism is its power to make him stop thinking. Do you know what he reads besides his Tolstoy and Dostoevski? Detective novels. Do you know why? They allow him to stop thinking, he told me. Do you know *how* he reads them? Backwards. One goes from knowledge to ignorance that way, he said to me. Don't you believe that's the pattern and the point of our own work? I think our boy needs to get back into the real world.

Russell saw to it that the *Tractatus* was published. Wittgenstein wrote his publisher to mention that what he meant to say in the book's preface he had not said, that is—My work consists of two parts: the part I have written plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.

The irate German publisher, Ficker, wrote back to Wittgenstein,—How would you like it if I only paid you for the second part.

But there was an introduction by Russell, whose name sold philosophy books. The unwritten portion of the *Tractatus* was published as it stood.

Wittgenstein did not like Russell's introduction. He wrote him a final letter.—I told you, we cannot be friends.

WITTGENSTEIN TOOK A JOB teaching schoolchildren in a poor Austrian village. He taught them how to build engines, and asked them to draw pictures of what it was he was trying to teach them. His sister Hermine visited him.—You've taught them to

make useful things, Ludwig, like the sewing machine. Remember? Wittgenstein had once built his sister a sewing machine out of wood. And it worked.—Then I've taught them something in exchange for all they've taught me.

—Which is what?

—That I do not know what I do not know.

—A child said that to you?

—If one had, I would not have listened. I asked them to tell me what God had to say to man. One boy handed in a blank page.

—He may have just been lazy.

—And everything else remains the same.

RUSSELL HAD BEEN moving away from the logic he had produced in the *Principia*. In 1921 he published *Analysis of the Mind*. He postulated a doctrine which he called “neutral monism.” There are not two worlds, he said, one subjective, the other objective. There is only one. It can be viewed alternately, depending on how we construct it. We construct it from “neutral” constituents, and these we find in the data our senses provide for us. He sought out Wittgenstein one last time, for Russell felt that he had always learned more from Wittgenstein than he had taught him.

—Mathematics ceased to interest me when I came to see it as one immense tautology.

—That's God's explanation of his relation to man, Wittgenstein said.—There is your proof of his existence.

—Nonsense.

—If you can't accept that, then it is not that mathematics does not interest you, it is that you do not exist.

—Word games.

—You taught me.

WITTGENSTEIN SPENT TWO YEARS building a house in Vienna for his sister. Then he was recalled to Cambridge in 1929. Before he left, his sister asked him if he felt strong enough to live with his depressions alone.

—Yes. My life has meaning.

—What is it?

—I couldn't say.

—I do not want to see a fourth brother commit suicide, Ludwig. I am speaking to you frankly, and I am telling you that the difference between that being the case, or not, will not leave everything else the same for me.

- I'm fine.
- Truth.
- My hand to God.

WITTGENSTEIN RETURNED TO Cambridge. He refused to wear a tie, sleep on anything but an army cot, or dine with the other dons.

- Why? his colleague, John Wisdom, asked him.
- Their conversation is neither of the heart nor of the head.
- You won't have many friends.
- I had one, once.
- What happened to him?
- A bullet passed through his liver.
- But everything else remains the same.
- Not for me. Or for him.

WITTGENSTEIN WORKED ON his second and final piece of philosophy. He chose to express it in "ordinary" language.—I do not want to fall prey to the bewitchment of my mind by language. Philosophy must leave the world as it is.

In 1940, Wittgenstein's sister gave him a copy of Chandler's *The Big Sleep* for Christmas.—I rank this book with Kierkegaard and Dostoevski, he told her.

- Ludwig, it's a mystery.
- Indeed. I've read it backwards and forwards sixteen times, yet I still can't accept the story on anything but faith. Who did what is never solved. Reading it, one moves from ignorance through knowledge to bafflement.
- It's his first novel.
- To have gotten it right the first time.

WITTGENSTEIN CONTINUED TO write his ellipses around the zone of silence he had left hanging at the end of the *Tractatus*. He continued to read detective novels. He decided to call his work *Philosophical Investigations*. He finished the work in 1945. He did not allow it to pass from his hands until he died in 1951.

- What belief would we give up last if we were compelled to, he asked himself. He decided that, for him, it was that he had no more not to say.
- If I could no longer believe that my work pointed beyond the world, I could no longer live in the world, he said the last time he spoke with his sister.
- Ludwig, why were you always unhappy?
- I have always been happy.

- Then what tormented you so?
- I simply wanted to know why.
- Why what?
- Exactly. Why anything, instead of not anything.
- And in either case, everything else remains the same, no?
- I wonder. **N**

Several statements attributed to Wittgenstein and Russell in “Atomic Facts” are taken from the book The Illusion of Technique by William Barrett. Copyright © 1967, 1975, 1976 by the American Jewish Committee. Published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.