

Russell, Propositional Unity, and the Correspondence Intuition

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Katarina Perovic, in her contribution to the [Fall 2015 issue of the *Bulletin*](#), raises intriguing questions about Russell's multiple-relation theory of judgment (MRTJ).ⁱ In this article, I focus on what she has to say regarding the general character of its precursor, the dual-relation theory of judgment (DRTJ) that is found, for example, in *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903). The matter deserves an extended comment, as it opens up an interesting perspective on Russell's theories of judgment in general. I don't claim to possess a key that opens every interpretative lock, here; but what I have to say might help some fellow-Russellians to orient themselves in a terrain where it's easy to get lost. I shall consider two key elements in Russell's thinking about judgment: (i) the issue of propositional unity, and (ii) the correspondence intuition.

(DRTJ) regards propositions as complex entities composed of things plus their properties and relations. Russell was not at all clear as to *how* a proposition is constituted out of its constituents (I shall discuss the issue below). But, as Perovic emphasizes, it was Russell's view, for example, that the proposition expressed by "Alice is wise" contains Alice herself and one of her properties among its constituents.

What, then, of truth and falsehood? Perovic (p. 11) gives the following account:

The proposition *Alice is wise* is true simply in virtue of the existence of the complex *Alice being wise*. But, given that there is no distinction between a proposition and a corresponding complex, there is really nothing informative that can be said about the truth of the proposition—its existence coincides with its being true. Even more troublingly, on this view, false propositions simply do not exist. Let's say that I falsely judge that Alice is not wise. According to his 1903 view, it would appear that I can judge no such thing since there is no such proposition.

This may in fact be a rather accurate description of the sort of confusion to which Russell apparently fell victim in *The Principles of Mathematics*. The confusion is not an essential element of (DRTJ), however; and Russell himself succeeded in clearing things up in this respect. Moreover, setting straight the confusion will help us thinking through some of the twists and turns in Russell's subsequent reflections on judgment and truth, as in (MRTJ) and the psychological theory of judgment that he settled upon around 1918–19.

What, then, is the confusion? It is to be found in the statement that a proposition's "existence coincides with its being true". Now, this can't be; if you have a need at all for propositions in your philosophy, you will need *both* true *and* false propositions. This applies to Russell as well. We can see this easily if we consider the general character of (DRTJ), according to which a judgment or a belief is a dual (that is, two-place) relation

between a subject and a proposition. Consider Russell's favorite example of a false belief, Othello's belief that Desdemona loves Cassio—this is a piece of fiction, but here it is to be treated as if it were real. Not only is it correct to say that Othello believes something, namely that Desdemona loves Cassio—it's also correct, even if a little clumsy, to say that there is something such that he believes it; that is, that there is an entity such that Othello believes it. If a judgment is a dual relation, the inference is clearly legitimate. Moreover, it holds whether the belief is true or false; this is a fundamental assumption that Russell accepts. You can give it up if you think, with present day 'disjunctivists', that belief is not a 'natural kind', but you won't find that in Russell. (DRTJ) is thus committed to the existence of false propositions, which are entities possessing the same ontological status as the true ones.



Russell
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What does a proposition's existence consist in, then, if it does not consist in its truth? What is essential to existence in general is oneness, or being one. Applied to propositions, this means that they must be *unities*, in that while a proposition has many constituents, it is nevertheless one entity. In §54 of *The Principles of Mathematics*, Russell argues that this is because one of the constituents of a proposition is a relation that occurs in that proposition in a special way, as a "relation actually relating" the other constituents. This is why a proposition is an actual unity and more than just a list of its putative constituents.

This cannot be the full story about the unity of the proposition, however. Keep in mind that on (DRTJ), the proposition *Desdemona loves Cassio* has Desdemona herself, Cassio himself, and the relation of loving itself as its constituents. Now, surely, if the relation of loving *actually* relates Desdemona to Cassio, then *it is the case* that she loves him; as my English dictionary tells me, the adverb 'actually' is 'used to refer to what is true or real'. But if so, Russellian propositions collapse into *facts*. At one point, Russell even argues that what distinguishes a proposition from a list of entities "is not any constituent at all, but simply and solely *the fact of relatedness*".ⁱⁱ

To turn a propositional unity into a fact, truth has to be added to it. Unfortunately, Russell failed to explain how this comes about, and *The Principles* is very confused about the matter.

To disarm the objection, one should argue that it relies on a notion of fact that is illegitimate in the context of (DRTJ). Later, Russell would indeed say that facts are complexes of their constituents: a fact is what results when a relating

relation (or, possibly, a 'predicating predicate') knits together other entities. On (DRTJ), on the other hand, this does not yet suffice for facthood. To turn a propositional unity into a fact, *truth* has to be added to it. Unfortunately, Russell failed to explain how this comes about, and *The Principles* is very confused about the matter. But the basic point is just that a fact is a true proposition, or more perspicuously, propositional unity plus truth.

What the above objection makes absolutely clear is that (DRTJ) must draw a distinction between two kinds of unity: *propositional unity* and *fact unity*. The former is the unity of what is believed, while the latter is the unity of what is the case. Russell may

have been confused about this in *The Principles*, but he was quite clear about it later, as when he argued, against Meinong, that the being of a particularized relation cannot be what is actually asserted in a judgment.ⁱⁱⁱ A particularized relation is a concrete instance of a relation, like Desdemona's love for Cassio, and the point being that if there is such an entity, the judgment asserting that she loved him cannot fail to be true. In the same way, he argued that, given (DRTJ), what is asserted—the 'objective of the judgment', in Meinong's terminology—cannot be an event, and for the same reason:

There was no such event as 'Charles I's death in his bed'. To say that there ever was such a thing as 'Charles's I's death in his bed' is merely another way of saying that Charles I died in his bed. Thus if there is an objective, it must be something other than 'Charles I's death in his bed'. We may take it to be 'that Charles I died in his bed'. We shall then have to say the same about true judgments.^{iv}

Propositions (entities like 'that Charles I died in his bed') are thus the only candidates for entities that are judged or believed. They, unlike particularized relations or events, allow the duality of truth and falsehood: particularized relations and events, if there are such entities, are fact unities, whereas propositions in Russell's sense are propositional unities. The distinction between the two kinds of unity is thus clearly drawn by him. This is the first element that I wanted to introduce.

The second element is the correspondence intuition. It is a sort of gut-feeling that we are supposed to have about truth. As is only appropriate for what we call an 'intuition', it's readily formulated in concrete instances, as when we say that the belief that Charles I died on the scaffold is true because there was such an event as Charles I's death on the scaffold. In our terminology, the event is a fact-unity, and it is both necessary and sufficient for the truth of the belief.

Russell would later accept the gut-feeling, thus becoming one of the chief advocates of the correspondence theory of truth. But it is ruled out by (DRTJ), according to which a judgment has a proposition as its object, and a judgment is true or false in a derivative sense, depending on whether its object is true or false. We could say that a judgment is true if there is a fact 'corresponding to it', but since a fact is just a true proposition, that throws no light on the concept of truth. Given (DRTJ), furthermore, a proposition is an immanent feature of a judgment, rather than something external to it, as it should be on the correspondence conception; a judgment is an act plus proposition, and so a proposition is simply a part of a judgment. Again, we could say that a proposition is external to an act of judging, but a mere act cannot be true or false. So, whichever way we twist (DRTJ), we won't get a (non-trivial) correspondence theory out of it.

Truth by correspondence has to go by the board, then. Nor is there other plausible explanation of truth, such as pragmatism or coherence. (DRTJ) is thus committed to *primitivism about fact unity*. This is the view, as Perovic (p. 11) puts it, that "there is really nothing informative that can be said about the truth of the proposition". Russell himself put the point as follows:

Truth and falsehood, in this view, are ultimate, and no account can be given of what makes a proposition true or false. If we accept the view that there are

objective falsehoods, we shall oppose them to facts, and make truth the quality of facts, falsehood the quality of their opposites, which we may call fictions.^v

The problem here is precisely that it offends against our feeling of truth and falsehood. The distinction is one that we “must merely apprehend”, and hence, Russell argues, it leaves our preference for truth unaccounted in a way that just doesn’t feel right.^{vi}

The early Russell’s truth-primitivism has been widely noticed. What is less frequently observed is that (DRTJ) was committed to primitivism about propositional unity as well. A proposition is a unity, because it combines several entities into one. Russell can prevent it from collapsing into a fact unity only by insisting that there’s a difference here, although it’s one that cannot be analyzed or explained in any way. With (DRTJ), propositional unity must come out as an indefinable feature of propositions, along with their truth or falsehood. For instance, if you say with Russell that what makes for unity is the fact of relatedness, that’s just a way of saying: a proposition is one entity, rather than many entities, and that’s the end of the story!

Russell is helped here a little by the theory of definite descriptions that he formulated in “On Denoting” (1905). It gave him a way of eliminating non-propositional complexity. Semantically speaking, he found a way of eliminating complex referring expressions, as he held now that definite descriptions (phrases like ‘the current Mayor of London’, which on the face of it refers to Mr. Sadiq Khan) have an implicit propositional structure. Given this, he could explain his ontology by saying that there are simple entities and there are complex entities, and the latter have constituents and a truth-value, while refusing any further elucidation of what is involved in this complexity. As far as I know, he didn’t formulate the conclusion in quite so many words. But fits in very well with the substitutional theory of logic that he worked out around 1905–06.^{vii}

Philosophically, however, the theory leaves too much in the dark. It denies all insight into the nature of truth and falsehood, which is bad intuitively (and for other reasons as well, which I won’t address here). And it denies all insight into propositional complexity, which leaves Russell without a reply to idealist philosophers, who put great emphasis on the issue of unity. Bradley confronted Russell directly with the hard question: “Is there anything, I ask, in a unity beside its ‘constituents,’ i.e., the terms and the relation, and, if there is anything more, in what does this “more” consist?”^{viii} Russell’s primitivism leaves him without a reply on this point. Much has been written about why Russell rejected (DRTJ). There were many such reasons, both ‘logical’ and ‘philosophical’. I submit that the explanatory poverty of the theory did play a role here.

Turning now to (MRTJ), it’s easy to see why Russell should have found it attractive. It gets rid of propositions as single entities and, thereby, of propositional unities as mysterious primitives. There are only fact unities, and Russell can now invoke the notion of relating relation with a clear conscience to explain their unity: a ‘complex’ is a unity because there is a relation among its constituents and occurring in a special way, as really relating the other constituents. A complex is thus an actual unity of its constituents. A judgment, too, is a complex and therefore a unity because the relation of judging occurs in it as a relating relation. Finally, truth and falsehood can be explained in a way that respects the correspondence intuition, as depending on whether or not there exists a fact unity corresponding to the judgment.

This is a great improvement on (DRTJ). The *phenomenon* of propositional unity will still be there, however, even if there aren't any propositions as single entities. Russell's strategy was to explain that phenomenon by explaining how an *appearance of propositional unity* is generated from the (i) judging *subject*, (ii) the *objects* that the judgment is concerned with, and (iii) whatever additional explanatory machinery is needed to generate such an appearance from (i) and (ii). That *some* extra machinery is needed here is clear, since otherwise there would not be even an appearance of propositional unity but a mere list of entities. A judgment can now be said to be true if there exists a fact-unity ('complex') in which the objects of the judgment are actually related in the way that the appearance of unity represents them as being related: when Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, there is Othello thinking of (1) Desdemona, (2) the relation of loving, and (3) Cassio, and in such a way as to generate an appearance of unity; and the belief is true if there's a corresponding complex, Desdemona's-loving-Cassio.

This is just schematic, and the hard analytic task consists in explaining *how* the appearance of propositional unity comes to be. Between 1910 and 1913, Russell experimented with several solutions to the problem. The eventual disappearance of (MRTJ) is usually attributed to the criticism that Wittgenstein directed at it in 1913, although there's no consensus on the point of the criticism. I won't consider this issue here. Instead, I shall draw up a sketch of some of the later developments.

Quite apart from the difficulties that Russell had in explaining the appearance of unity, he was forced to give up (MRTJ) when, in the process of becoming a neutral monist, he began to think that the judging subject, too, ought to be 'constructed', rather than 'postulated'. The connection is made explicitly in this passage by Russell himself:

The theory of belief which I formerly advocated, namely, that it consisted in a multiple relation of the subject to the objects constituting the 'objective', i.e. the fact that makes the belief true or false, is rendered impossible by the rejection of the subject. The constituents of the belief cannot, when the subject is rejected, be the same as the constituents of its 'objective'.^{ix}

The point here is that if there's no judging subject, there is nothing to produce an appearance of unity unless it is *representations* that accomplish this. This change of mind brought about a radical shift in Russell's thinking about judgment. He was led to adopt a *psychological* theory of judgment, where representing is not a relationship between a subject and worldly objects—a subject creating an appearance of unity—but is in the final analysis a property of *mental images*:

What I believe when I believe that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is not the actual event, which took place in 49 BC; it is a present occurrence, something that is now in my mind.^x

This promises neat solutions to Russell's old problems:

The advantages [of the psychological theory] are those derived from the rehabilitation of content, making it possible to admit propositions as actual complex

occurrences, and doing away with the difficulty of answering the question: what do we believe when we believe falsely?^{xi}

'Content' is what one believes when one believes that so-and-so—for example that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. If content is in a mind, it won't give rise to the problem of worldly facts. Russell in fact adopted the Wittgensteinian view that contents *are* facts, a feature that he took to be crucial for their ability to represent. But now content is just a fact to the effect that given images stand in determinate relations to each other. A fact of this kind is wholly innocuous, since one can put an image of a cat and an image of a mat together, without as much as touching the cat and the mat.

But if a content is in a mind, isn't that a version of psychologism, a view that is just plainly false? For what I believe when I believe that Caesar crossed the Rubicon has nothing to do with my mind, since neither Caesar nor the pitiable river in northern Italy is a creature of the mind. Contents, therefore, cannot be in the mind.

This is a familiar line of thought. Here, though, the reply is that it confuses two uses of the phrase 'object of thought': the phrase may mean (1) what we think, this being the sense that Russell is concerned with in the quotations above; but it may also mean (2) what we think *about*.^{xii} When I think that Caesar crossed the Rubicon at 49 B.C., what I think is *that Caesar crossed the Rubicon at 49 B.C.*, while what I think about involves both the man and the river and, perhaps, the entire event of *Caesar's crossing the Rubicon in 49 B.C.* Once we draw the distinction, it's no longer clear that Russell was confused in the way the objection suggests. He would agree, of course, that *what we think about* is not in general in our minds; but this doesn't show that the content, in the sense of *what one thinks*, could not be in one's mind.

An important dimension must nevertheless be added to the notion of content, thus understood. A psychological occurrence deserves to be called a 'content' only when it's regarded as a picture or *image of something else*. A content is not just a psychological occurrence, but an occurrence plus the relationship that it bears to something external; this is what turns it into a picture. Russell, of course, was well aware of this, which is why he now argued, in *The Analysis of Mind* (1921) and elsewhere, that a proposition in the fundamental sense is a mental image possessing what he called an *objective reference*.

Having got this far, we have to ask: What are the implications of the new perspective on judgment for propositional unity and the correspondence intuition? Keeping in mind the notion of objective reference, we can see that the old problem of propositional unity has not vanished but has taken on a new form, one that is familiar from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Simply put, the question is this: what is a mental proposition a picture of?

The correspondence intuition aligns truth with being and falsehood with non-being, as in the simple formulation that a belief is true if the entity to which it refers is there, while a belief is false if the entity to which it refers is not there.^{xiii} This raises in an acute form a problem about reference. Russell called it the 'problem of false belief', although it's as much a problem for the analysis of true beliefs. He was emphatic that no reference to *non-existent* or *merely possible* facts or states of affairs will do here, as the postulation of such entities testifies only to a lack of sense of reality.

It may be possible to answer the question regarding propositional unity in a way that incurs no such illicit commitments—this may have been the view of the *Tractatus*. The idea would be that a state of affairs that is merely possible has no other mode of being than that of being represented, and the unity of what is merely possible is the unity of a proposition *qua* fact: a proposition as a mental picture is an arrangement of ‘pictorial elements’ showing how certain entities in the world—entities correlated with the elements of the picture—are arranged in the world if the proposition is true. It’s natural to read this formulation in a way that involves acceptance of the correspondence intuition in more or less its simplest form: a proposition is true if, and only if, there is such an arrangement of entities as the proposition depicts. The picture-theory thus promises to solve the problem of propositional unity in a way that lets you cling to the correspondence intuition.

Russell’s development of the notion of objective reference took a rather different form, however; and most likely because he abhorred all versions of the simple formulation for their apparent commitment to entities that are merely possible or non-existent. He argued, in such works as *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1919) and *The Analysis of Mind*, that every atomic proposition, p , and its contradictory opposite, $\text{not-}p$, has a fact-unity as its objective reference, namely the fact which makes p true and $\text{not-}p$ false, or else makes $\text{not-}p$ true and p false—in this he was making use of ideas communicated by Wittgenstein in his pre-war *Notes on Logic*.^{xiv} The ‘meaning’ of a proposition is determined by *how* the proposition refers to a fact—either ‘towards it’ or ‘away from it’, as Russell put it—and no reference to anything that is merely possible or non-existent is needed—I won’t pause to consider whether this last claim can be made good.

Like all philosophical theories, Russell’s comes at a price. In particular, there’s its commitment to *negative facts*. If p is true, it’s a fact that p , and if p is false, it’s fact that $\text{not-}p$. Hence, there are negative facts. Russell himself was delighted when he found himself defending such a paradoxical-sounding view, but it must be admitted that negative facts are problematic creatures. Here are two difficulties.

First, a fact is supposed to be a unity, but it’s difficult to see how a negative fact could be one. A fact is a way for given entities to be tied together. Now, it’s a fact that Desdemona does not love Cassio. We should say, then, that things’ *not* being tied together is one way for them to *be* tied together. I’m not sure that I can see how this could be.

Secondly, the question arises: What’s the difference between positive and negative facts? Russell is clear that they don’t have different constituents, because a negation is not an entity and cannot therefore be a constituent. Rather, the difference is in their having opposing *qualities*, positive and negative, a difference that is “ultimate and irreducible”.^{xv} One question this raises is: What are we to say of truth and falsehood? And the reply must be: an atomic proposition is true if the fact which is its objective reference has positive quality, and the negation of an atomic proposition is true if the fact which is its objective reference has a negative quality. What a definition of truth accomplishes for atomic propositions is just such a correlation of truth and falsehood with two primitive qualities of facts.

Technically, this doesn’t belong with truth-primitivism. The distinction between truth and falsehood is not just left there to be apprehended, but is grounded in facts and

their opposing qualities. Here, however, one may feel that the ground that Russell has identified is unsatisfactory, and somewhat in the way that truth primitivism was found to be unsatisfactory. At any rate, Russell himself now issued the familiar-sounding complaint that the ‘purely formal definition of truth and falsehood’, which establishes a connection between propositions and facts, is inadequate because it does not throw any light upon our preference for true beliefs rather than false ones”.^{xvi} What is needed, he adds, is a story that takes into account the causal efficacy of our beliefs.

The suggested remedy indicates, it seems to me, that the trouble here is at bottom not with any of the details of the formal truth definition but with the very idea of such an enterprise. With some plausibility, we may attribute to the Russell of the 1920s some such line of thought as the following. The difficulties regarding the unity of negative facts and their capability to act as truth-grounds point in the direction of a ‘deflationary’ account of facts. Once we cease to think of facts as complex entities, we can sidestep these problems and avail ourselves of a smooth-running, ‘formal’ definition of truth. Such a definition decrees, for example, that “Brutus killed Caesar” is true because of the fact that Brutus killed Caesar. And this, Russell now argues, “keeps us in the verbal realm, and does not get us outside it to some realm of non-verbal fact”.^{xvii} You could take issue with that, but here the important point is that, as Russell now sees it, the language-world connection is not to be understood through a formal definition of truth but with the help of what is at bottom a causal theory of meaning.

Endnotes

ⁱ Katarina Perovic, “Russell’s Puzzling Map of the Understanding Complex”, *The Bertrand Russell Society Bulletin*, Fall 2015: 11–13.

ⁱⁱ Bertrand Russell, “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions”, *Mind*, N. S. 13, p. 204–19; 336–54; 509–24. Reprinted in *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 4, Foundations of Logic 1903–05*. Edited by Alasdair Urquhart with the assistance of Albert C. Lewis. London and New York. Routledge. 1994, 431–74; see here p. 437 (p. 210 in the original; italics added).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bertrand Russell, “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions”, p. 453.

^{iv} Bertrand Russell, “On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood”, in B. Russell, *Philosophical Essays*. London: Longmans, Green. Reprinted in *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 6, Logical and Philosophical Papers 1909–13*. Edited by John G. Slater with the assistance of Bernd Frohmann. London and New York. Routledge. 1994: 115–24, see p. 119.

^v For Russell’s own statement of truth-primitivism, see “On the Nature of Truth”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 7, p. 48.

^{vi} Bertrand Russell, “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions”, pp. 473 and 474 (p. 523–4 in the original).

^{vii} Bertrand Russell, “On the Substitutional Theory of Classes and Relations”, in Bertrand Russell, *Essays in Analysis*. Edited by Douglas Lackey. New York: George Braziller. 1973: 165–189; see pp. 174–5.

^{viii} F. H. Bradley, “Reply to Mr. Russell’s Explanations”, *Mind*, Vol. 20, No. 77: 74–6, p. 74.

^{ix} Bertrand Russell, ‘On Propositions: What They are And How They Mean’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 2: 1–43. Reprinted in *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 8: The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays 1914–19*. Edited by John G. Slater. London: George Allen & Unwin; see p. 295.

^x Bertrand Russell: *The Analysis of Mind*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1921, p. 233.

^{xi} Bertrand Russell, “On Propositions”, p. 295–6.

^{xii} Cf. here Arthur Prior, *Objects of Thought*. Edited by P. T. Geach and A.J.P. Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1971, p. 3.

^{xiii} For this simple formulation, see G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1953, chapters XIV and XV.

^{xiv} Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Notes on Logic", in L. Wittgenstein: *Notebooks 1914-16*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1979 (1st edition 1960): 93–107.

^{xv} Bertrand Russell, "On Propositions", p. 280.

^{xvi} Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, p. 278.

^{xvii} Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1927. London: Routledge. 1995, p. 208. If you like, you could see in this a precursor of the sort of criticism of truth as correspondence that Peter Strawson would advance in his debate with J. L. Austin in the 1950s.
