Russell's early theory of propositions and its discontents

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January 23, 2008

1 The analysis of propositions

Russell's aim in this chapter of the *Principles of Mathematics* is the analysis of propositions. This tells us that he thinks that propositions are the sorts of things which can be analyzed — so they must be the sorts of things that, in some sense or other, have parts.

What are the parts of propositions? Russell says

> "... every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning ... The correctness of our philosophical analysis of a proposition may therefore be usefully checked by the exercise of assigning the meaning of each word in the sentence expressing the proposition." (§46)

Like Moore, Russell thinks of propositions as what are expressed by sentences. The parts of propositions are then (to a first approximation) what are expressed by the parts of sentences — words.

Russell introduces a few bits of terminology for talking about the meanings of words. The first is 'term':

> "Whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition ... I call a *term*. This, then, is the widest word in the philosophical vocabulary. I shall use as synonymous with it the words unit, individual, and entity. ... anything ... that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term; and to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false." (§47)

Russell uses 'term' as a word for whatever the meanings of words, and the constituents of propositions, are. Russell thinks that everything which exists can be an object of thought — that there is no difference in kind between the constituents of thoughts and the constituents of reality.

Russell divides the class of terms into two:

> "Among terms, it is possible to distinguish two kinds, which I shall call respectively *things* and *concepts*. The former are the terms indicated by proper names, the latter those indicated by all other words." (§48)

Russell here is talking about the distinction between objects and properties (and relations). Objects are the meanings of proper names, and properties and relations are the meanings of predicates. So, as a start, it seems like we should think of Russellian propositions as things which have objects, properties, and relations as their constituents.

2 Three problems for Russell's early theory

2.1 The problem of the unity of the proposition

This raises the question of how to classify the meanings of words like 'humanity.' It seems that 'humanity' stands for something which a simple proposition can be about, as in

> Humanity is doomed.

So it seems that 'humanity' must stand for a thing (object), rather than a concept (property). But in a sentence like

> Socrates is human.

it seems clear that 'Socrates' stands for an object, and so that 'human' stands for a property. So is the correct view that 'human' and 'humanity' have different meanings?

Russell thinks not, and gives the following argument:

> "For suppose that *one* as adjective differed from 1 as term. In this statement, *one* as adjective has been made into a term; hence either it has become 1, which is self-contradictory; or there is some other difference between *one* and 1 in addition to the fact that the first denotes a concept not a term while the second denotes a concept which is a term. But in this latter hypothesis, there must be propositions concerning *one* as term, and we shall still have to maintain propositions concerning *one* as adjective as opposed to *one* as term; yet all such propositions must be false, since a proposition about *one* as adjective makes *one* the subject, and is therefore really about *one* the term. In

> short, if there were any adjectives which could not be made into substantives [i.e., proper names] without change of meaning, all propositions concerning such adjectives ... would be false, and so would the proposition that all such propositions are false, since this turns the adjectives into substantives. But this state of things is self-contradictory." (§49)

Here Russell is arguing against the view that some adjectives have a meaning which cannot be the meaning of any proper name. The argument seems to run as follows: suppose that there is such an adjective A, and let C be the concept A expresses. Now consider a sentence which expresses some proposition of which C is the subject, like 'C is the concept expressed by A.' This is true. But this contradicts our initial supposition, since in this sentence 'C' is a proper name and yet has the same meaning as the adjective A.

Suppose that Russell's opponent concedes that sentences like 'C is the concept expressed by A' are false. It seems that Russell thinks that this response is self-contradictory. The above quote continues as follows:

> "In short, if there were any adjectives which could not be made into substantives [i.e., proper names] without change of meaning, all propositions concerning such adjectives ... would be false, and so would the proposition that all such propositions are false, since this turns the adjectives into substantives. But this state of things is self-contradictory."

Russell seems to have the following contradiction in mind. First, we suppose that his opponent says that every sentence of the following form is false:

> C_1 is false.
>
> C_2 is false.
>
> ...

He now asks us to consider the following sentence:

> Every proposition which says that something is a concept is false.

It seems that his opponent must regard this sentence as true. But Russell seems to think that his opponent is also committed to regarding this sentence also as false, "since this turns the adjectives into substantives." But it is not obvious why he thinks this. The above claim seems to have the form

> $\forall x$ [(x is a proposition & $\exists y$ (x says that y is a concept)) $\rightarrow$ x is false]

In what sense does this turn an adjective into a substantive?

Even if Russell does not succeed in showing that his opponent is committed to a contradiction, his view does have considerable plausibility. If we take seriously the idea that adjectives stand for something, then it is hard to see how it could be impossible for us to name, or talk about, those things. And there are many claims which his opponent might want to make — for example, claims which quantify over concepts — which make it plausible that concepts can be values of variables which occur in subject position.

His opponent is also committed to the truth of claims like:

> The concept *horse* is not a concept.

which seem, to say the least, odd. (This is Frege's 'paradox of the concept horse'; he discusses this problem in "On concept and object.")

However, Russell's view — that verbs have the same meanings as the corresponding verbal nouns — leads to a notorious problem: the problem of the unity of the proposition:

> "By transforming the verb, as it occurs in a proposition, into a verbal noun, the whole proposition can be turned into a single logical subject, no longer asserted, and no longer containing in itself truth or falsehood." (§52)

Russell discusses the following pair of expressions:

> Caesar died
>
> The death of Caesar

He suggests that these are the same with respect to their meaning, since verbs have the same meaning as the corresponding verbal nouns; and yet the former expresses a proposition, since it can be true or false, whereas the latter does not.

In fact, the situation is even worse; not only can we switch from a sentence which expresses a proposition to a description without change in the meaning of any expression, we can also switch from a sentence to a combination of words which is not even grammatical:

> Caesar dies
>
> Caesar death

On the view being defended, these two combinations of words seem to have the same meaning. But if a proposition just is the meaning of a sentence, how can the first express a proposition, if the second does not?

We can solve the problem by saying that verbs have a kind of meaning which a proper name can never have; but that leads to the problems discussed in the preceding section, and it is clearly not a view that Russell will endorse.

A corresponding problem, as Russell notes in §54, arises when we consider relational propositions, such as the one expressed by

A differs from B.

This appears to have the same meaning as

A difference B.

even though the latter clearly does not express a proposition.

What this seems to show is that propositions must be something more than a list or collection of their constituents, since two strings of words can contribute the same collection of propositional constituents, though one expresses a proposition and the other does not.

In §51-2 and §54, Russell offers two apparently distinct solutions to the problem. In §51, Russell says

> "There appears to be an ultimate notion of assertion, given by the verb, which is lost as soon as we substitute a verbal noun ..."

Russell here seems to be suggesting that verbs contribute two things to sentences: their meaning, which is a concept, and the 'ultimate notion of assertion', whereas the corresponding verbal nouns only contribute the concept. His idea seems to be that the ultimate notion of assertion is required for a form of words to express a proposition.

The 'ultimate notion of assertion' couldn't really have much to do with assertion, since propositions can be true or false without being asserted. So this solution is a nonstarter. Any plausible view of Russellian propositions will have to do better.

2.2 The problem of false propositions

In §54, though, Russell gives a different response to the problem:

> "The twofold nature of the verb, as actual verb and as verbal noun, may be expressed, if all verbs are held to be relations, as the difference between a relation in itself and a relation actually relating. Consider, for example, the proposition 'A differs from B'. The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only A, difference, B. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates A and B ..."

We run into an immediate problem here with false propositions. Suppose that 'A differs from B' is false. Then, we would naturally think, difference does *not* actually relate A and B — otherwise, the proposition would be true. Does this mean that the sentence does not, after all, express a proposition — and, by parallel argument, that no false sentences ever express propositions?

Another way of looking at this problem is that Russell's view of propositions makes propositions so like facts that the existence of false propositions seems to entail the existence of a world of 'false facts':

> "If we allow that all judgements have objectives, we shall have to allow that there are objectives which are false. Thus there will be in the world objective entities, not dependent on the existence of judgments, which can be described as objective falsehoods. This is in itself almost incredible ... it has the further drawback that it leaves the difference between truth and falsehood quite inexplicable. ... it is difficult to abandon the view that, in some way, the truth or falsehood of a judgment depends upon the presence or absence of a 'corresponding' entity of some sort. And if we do abandon this view, and adhere to the opinion that there are both true and false objectives, we shall be compelled to regard it as an ultimate and not further explicable fact that objectives are of two sorts, the true and the false. This view, though not logically impossible, is unsatisfactory ..." (Russell, 'On the nature of truth and falsehood')

This problem led Russell to abandon belief in propositions. Any satisfactory Russellian view of propositions should make acceptable the existence of false propositions.

2.3 The problem of empty names

In this chapter, we can also see the beginnings of a central problem for Russellianism: the problem of names which do not refer to an object. Russell says that "to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false." But then consider a sentence like

> Pegasus does not exist.

which seems true. 'Pegasus' seems to have a meaning, and we know that all meanings are terms, so it seems that this sentence denies that a certain term exists. But can something be a term without existing?

Russell thought at this time that there were many nonexistent terms (§48); these terms have being, but not existence. Philosophers who do not want to accept the distinction between being and existence will have to provide some other treatment of apparent examples of empty names.