

# Russell's second thoughts about propositions

PHIL 43904  
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October 8, 2007

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## 1 The bearers of truth and falsehood

Russell begins his 1910 paper ‘On the nature of truth and falsehood’ by asking what things are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood. We’ve already seen what his answer to this question was in 1905:

“propositions . . . are the entities that I consider true or false. These, I shall argue, having being, but not existence; they are the objects of thoughts, but are in no way dependent on being thought of; they are complex, and their complexity may be apprehended, but cannot be made, by the mind which apprehends them . . .” (Russell, ‘On the nature of truth’)

Remember that propositions are the objects of mental acts and the meanings of sentences; and, as Russell and Moore both emphasized, they are genuinely distinct both from sentences, and acts of judgement and other mental acts. Sentences, and mental acts, are true or false in virtue of the truth or falsehood of the proposition which is their meaning (in the case of sentences) or object (in the case of mental acts).

Now, though, Russell gives a different answer:

“Broadly speaking, the things that are true or false . . . are statements, and beliefs or judgements . . .” (148)

The contrast with Russell's 1905 view is clear: now the truth of a mental state is taken to be fundamental, and not explained in terms of its relation to a proposition. We want to understand two things: Why did Russell change his mind? and What was his new analysis of the truth and falsehood of mental states?

## 2 The problem of false propositions

Russell presents his former theory — that “every judgment, whether true or false, consists in a certain relation . . . to a single object, which is what we judge or believe” (150) — under a new name. Rather than calling the objects of judgement and belief propositions, he calls them ‘objectives.’ Against this view of judgement and belief, Russell raises the following fundamental objection:

“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 . . .”

What is the objection here? Why has Russell's attitude toward correspondence theories changed from his 1905 view? What's wrong with the idea that there are no false propositions, and hence that false beliefs have no object?

We can add this worry about propositions a further problem, which we've already discussed, and to which Russell never gave an adequate answer: the problem of the unity of the proposition. These two metaphysical problems were the main impetus for Russell abandoning his earlier analysis of truth and mental states in terms of propositions.

## 3 The multiple relation theory of judgement

### 3.1 Multiple and dual relations

The view that judgements are relations to propositions is a relational analysis of beliefs, as opposed to a theory like the one Moore ascribed to Bradley, on which mental acts were monadic properties without genuine objects. Russell's new theory is still a kind of relational analysis of judgements, but one which takes judgements to be relations to several things rather than to a single proposition:

“The way out of the difficulty [of false objectives] consists in maintaining that, whether we judge truly or whether we judge falsely, there is no one thing that we are judging. . . . When we judge that Charles I died in his bed, we have before us the objects Charles I, dying, and his bed. These objects [despite the fact that this judgement is false] are not fictions: they are just as good as the objects of the true judgment. We therefore escape the necessity of admitting objective falsehoods . . .” (153)

Later, Russell explains the theory as follows:

“We will give the name ‘*multiple* relations’ to such as require more than two terms. . . . Relations which have only two terms we shall call ‘dual relations.’

The theory of judgment which I am advocating is, that judgment is not a dual relation of the mind to a single objective, but a multiple relation of the mind to the various other terms with which the judgment is concerned. Thus if I judge that A loves B, that is not a relation of me to ‘A’s love for B’, but a relation between me and A and love and B. If it were a relation of me to ‘A’s love for B’, it would be impossible unless there were such a thing as ‘A’s love for B’, i.e. unless A loved B, i.e. unless the judgment were true; but in fact false judgments are possible. When the judgment is taken as a relation between me and A and love and B, the mere fact that judgment occurs does not involve any relation between its objects A and love and B . . .”

### *3.2 Judgement and the problem of unity*

Why one might think that this theory solves not only the problem of objective falsehoods, but also the other main metaphysical problem with Russell’s earlier theory: the problem of the unity of the proposition. In the present theory, the act of judgement looks as though it could perhaps do the needed unifying work.

### *3.3 The definition of truth*

A further strength of the theory, Russell thinks, is that it makes room for a kind of correspondence theory of truth.

“We may now attempt an exact account of the ‘correspondence’ which constitutes truth. Let us take the judgment ‘A loves B.’ This consists of a relation of the person judging to A and love and B, i.e. to the two terms A and B and the relation ‘loves.’ . . . The ‘corresponding’ complex object which is required to make our judgment true consists of A related to B by the relation which was before us in our judgment. . . . The judgment is true when there is such a complex, and false when there is not. . . . This gives the definition of truth and falsehood.” (158)

What are the relata of the correspondence relation in terms of which truth is defined?

What does Russell mean when he says that his theory preserves “the mixture of dependence on mind and independence of mind, which we noticed as a characteristic of truth”?

### 3.4 *The difference between judgement and perception*

Russell suggests as a virtue of his theory that it explains a striking difference between judgment and perception: “perception, as opposed to judgment, is never in error; i.e. that, whenever we perceive anything, what we perceive exists, at least as long as we are perceiving it.” (156) This suggests that there is no analogue of the case of ‘false objectives’ in the analysis of perception, and that therefore there is no bar to treating perceptual experience as a dual rather than a multiple relation. In fact, treating it as dual relation explains this difference from judgments and other multiple relations.

Why does Russell think that whatever we perceive must exist? What sorts of things must perceptions be relations to if this is correct?

### 3.5 *Problems for the multiple relation theory*

The multiple relation theory, like the proposition theory, is not without its problems. These include:

- Making sense of the plausible idea that there are truths which no one has ever thought of. This is easy to handle on the proposition view; but on the multiple relation theory it’s not so straightforward. This is a price of capturing what Russell calls the “dependence on mind” characteristic of truth.
- We seem inclined to say that from a sentence of the form ‘A believes that  $S$ ’ it follows that ‘There is something A believes’, which is most naturally thought of as having the form ‘ $\exists x$  (A believes  $x$ ).’ But what could the value of ‘ $x$ ’ be, on Russell’s view?
- Wittgenstein’s objection that “the correct explanation of the form of the proposition, ‘A makes the judgement  $p$ ’, must show that it is impossible for a judgement to be a piece of nonsense. (Russell’s theory does not satisfy this requirement.) (*Tractatus*, §5.5422)