

# The simple theory of truth

PHIL 43904  
Jeff Speaks

September 13, 2007

## 1 Propositions as bearers of truth

So far, we've seen that both Russell and Moore defended against the idealists the view that in addition to, for example, acts of thinking, there are propositions which are the objects of those acts of thinking. These propositions are also the meanings of sentences; what a sentence says is what proposition it expresses. Russell states their view of the objects of truth as follows:

“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 (1905))

Given these roles for propositions — being the objects of thoughts and the meanings of sentences — then it is natural to think that propositions are the primary, or fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. What is it for a thought to be true? For the proposition which is its object to be true. What is it for a sentence to be true? For the proposition which is its meaning to be true. If this is right — and both Moore and Russell thought that it was — then it seems that the question ‘What is truth?’ reduces to the question ‘What is it for a proposition to be true?’

Propositions can be true or false; so it seems that truth and falsity are properties, or qualities, of propositions. Questions about the nature of truth are then questions about what it is for a proposition to have one of these properties rather than another.

## 2 Correspondence and coherence theories of truth

The natural answer to this question is: what it is for a proposition to be true is for it to correspond to reality. But both Moore and Russell, in different ways, argued against this view.

Moore argued that once we understand the distinction between propositions and sentences, we see that there is not enough of a difference between propositions and the reality to which they are supposed to correspond for the correspondence theory to be correct:

“It is commonly supposed that the truth of a proposition consists in some relation which it bears to reality; and falsehood in the absence of this relation. The relation in question is generally called a ‘correspondence’ or ‘agreement’, and it seems to be generally conceived as one of partial similarity; but it is to be noted that only propositions can be said to be true in virtue of their partial similarity to something else, and hence that it is essential to the theory that a truth should differ in some specific way from the reality, in relation to which its truth is to consist . . . *It is the impossibility of finding any such difference between a truth and the reality to which it is supposed to correspond which refutes the theory . . .*

. . . once it is definitely recognized that the proposition . . . is not a belief or form of words, but an *object* of belief, it seems plain that a truth differs in no respect from the reality to which it was supposed merely to correspond: e.g. the truth that I exist differs in no respect from the corresponding reality — my existence.” (Moore (1901); emphasis added)

Russell makes much the same point about theories which try to explain the truth of propositions in terms of some relation they bear to the facts:

“[the view] may be expressed by saying that true propositions express *fact*, while false ones do not. This at once raises the problem: What is a fact? And the difficulty of the problem is this, that a fact appears to be merely a true proposition, so that what seemed a significant assertion becomes a tautology.” (Russell (1904), quoted in Cartwright (1987))

Remember that both Moore and Russell take propositions to consist of the entities for which words stand. Since it seems that words stand for ordinary objects and properties in the world around us, it seems that propositions consist of ordinary objects and properties in the world around us. But what are propositions supposed to correspond to, if not to combinations of those very objects and properties?

A main traditional competitor to the correspondence theory of truth is the coherence theory; on this view (applied to propositions) a proposition is true if and only if it bears a certain relation of coherence or consistency to some set of propositions. Against this sort of view, Moore objects that

“This view . . . simply neglects the admitted fact that any logical relations which hold between a set of true propositions will also hold between a set of false ones; i.e. that the only kind of system into which a true proposition will fit, and a false one will not, is a system of true propositions.” (Moore (1901))

What is Moore’s objection here? Why is it problematic for the coherence theorist to make use of systems of true rather than false propositions in stating his theory?

### 3 Truth as a simple, unanalyzable property of propositions

So if we cannot say that truth is correspondence, or that truth is coherence, what can we say? Moore (1901) doesn't say very much positive about truth, other than that it is a property of propositions. He is only slight more expansive in 'The Nature of Judgment':

“A proposition is constituted by any number of concepts, together with a specific relation between them ; and according to the nature of this relation the proposition may be either true or false. What kind of relation makes a proposition true, what false, cannot be further defined, but must be immediately recognised.” (Moore (1899), 180)

It seems clear that, even if some properties can be analyzed, not all can be. Moore's claim here is just that truth is in the latter class: it is a property of propositions which cannot be analyzed in terms of any other properties. So if we ask, for example, 'What is it in virtue of which some propositions are true, and others false?', Moore's answer would be that here we are looking for an analysis when there is none to give. True propositions possess the property of being true, false propositions possess the property of being false; but their possession of these properties cannot be explained in terms of their possessing any more fundamental properties.

One side point here is how truth and falsity are related to each other. It would seem that, if both truth and falsity are unanalyzable, they can have no essential relation to each other. But that can't be quite right — since it seems that if there are two simple properties which have no essential relation to each other, one proposition should be able to have both properties. But this is clearly impossible — no proposition can be both true and false. This suggests that we should, perhaps, analyze falsehood as the absence of truth, or something like that. (This leads to a further worry, which is that it seems to leave no room for propositions which are neither true nor false. Moore and Russell explicitly denied that there were such propositions; but vague sentences seem to give us plausible examples.)

This view of truth is sometimes called the 'identity theory of truth' because, on this theory, it looks like true propositions are identical to facts: for a proposition to be true is just for it to be a fact. At first, this looks like an analysis of truth, which seems to contradict the view that truth is a simple, unanalyzable property. But there is a sense in which the identity theory is not really an attempt to define truth of the same kind as the correspondence and coherence theories. It says that the truths and the facts are the same things; but does not explain what it is which differentiates the truths from the falsehoods.

### 4 Defining reality in terms of truth

Moore is, in fact, inclined to go further than the denial that truth can be explained in terms of relations to reality, and to argue that not only can truth not be defined in terms of a relation to reality, but rather than reality can be defined in terms of truth. He says:

“So far, indeed, from truth being defined by reference to reality, reality can only be defined by reference to truth: for truth denotes exactly that property of the complex formed by two entities and their relation, in virtue of which . . . we call the complex real . . .” (Moore (1901))

This brings out an oddity in the view of propositions defended by Moore and Russell. Remember Russell’s statement of what propositions are:

“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 (1905))

Moore’s remark about defining reality in terms of truth brings out the reason for the underlined passage: the claim that propositions have being, but not existence. The idea seems to be this: we have some propositions which are true, and some what are false. For a proposition to be true is for it to ‘be real’ — for it to be a part of reality. But what about false propositions, like the proposition that Socrates can fly? In some sense, there must ‘be’ such propositions — false propositions, after all, are often the objects of belief and the meanings of sentences. But they can’t be part of reality; Socrates’s being able to fly is not a fact, since Socrates is, in fact, not able to fly. So what should we say about the status of false propositions? The suggestion from Russell and Moore at this time seems to be that false propositions have being, but not existence: in addition to reality, there is a shadowy realm of things that ‘have being.’ This is a result of the present kind of view which was, in different forms, to cause both Moore and Russell to doubt their earlier claims about the nature and truth of propositions.

### References

- Richard Cartwright, 1987. *Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- G. E. Moore, 1899. The Nature of Judgment. *Mind* 8:176–193.
- G. E. Moore, 1901. Truth and Falsity. In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by J. Baldwin, 20–22. London: MacMillan.
- Bertrand Russell, 1904. Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions (I & II). *Mind* 13(50, 51):204–219; 336–354.
- Bertrand Russell, 1905. The Nature of Truth. Published in ?, 492–506.