

Russell on Truth

Forthcoming in:

Oxford Handbook on Bertrand Russell

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This question [“What is Truth?”] is perhaps the most important question in the whole of philosophy, because our answer to it is almost sure to affect our answer to every other question in logic and metaphysics. (Russell 1907/2014: 457)

1. Introduction

The birth of analytic philosophy is a story long told. Prominent to the familiar narrative is how Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore rebelled against their neo-Hegelian philosophical upbringing, offering realist tinctures to ward off the poisons of late nineteenth-century British idealism. Vital to the two Cantabrigians’ shift from idealism to realism was an evolving understanding of the nature of truth. “From the moment when I abandoned monism,” Russell writes, “I had no doubt that truth is to be defined by some kind of relation to fact” (1959: 175). What Russell did doubt was precisely how to understand that relation, and what implications truth has regarding the nature of beliefs, facts, and propositions. Russell’s writings on truth from the first decade of the twentieth century—both critical and constructive—offer a fascinating glimpse into the transitional nature of his own thought, and of analytic philosophy in its embryonic state.

On the critical front, Russell “radically dissented” from both coherentist and pragmatist theories of truth (1959: 175). Insightfully, he classes them together as views united by the thought that “truth is dependent upon Mind” (1907/2014: 459), an alliance that would likely embarrass the practitioners of either school, given their deeply opposed metaphysical ideologies (or anti-metaphysical ideology, in the case of pragmatism). On the constructive side, Russell’s views throughout the first decade of the twentieth century were unstable. He starts off skeptical of correspondence theories, later trials the view that truth is a primitive, unanalyzable property, and

eventually lands on his own version of correspondence by decade's end. A commitment to correspondence would remain throughout his lifetime, though he would continue to refine his specific understanding of its nature.

I begin (section 2) with Russell's early (and short-lived) advocacy for the view that truth cannot be analyzed at all, a position equally rejected by correspondence, coherentist, and pragmatic theorists. Then I turn to his (not at all short-lived) objections to the analyses offered by coherence and pragmatic theories (sections 3 and 4, respectively). Next I consider the developments of his correspondence theorizing, addressing both its initial incarnation (section 5) and Russell's later work that returns to truth (section 6). One aspect of Russell's view that is consistent throughout this chronology is his commitment to the idea that one's theory of truth is theoretically intertwined with one's theories of the nature of belief, and the object(s) of those beliefs (be there any). One cannot appreciate Russell's views on truth at any point in time independently of understanding how he was also thinking about beliefs, propositions, and facts. As Russell notes in the epigraph above, one's views on truth are implicated throughout one's other theoretical commitments. Russell's journey with truth, it turns out, is an illuminating window into his broader philosophical stances.

2. Primitivism

Primitivism about the properties of truth and falsehood is the view that they “are ultimate, and no account can be given of what makes a proposition true or false” (1906-1907: 48). The first glimpses of Russell's attachment to this view are found in an 1898 essay—originally published only in French—where he declares truth to be “*ultimes et inanalysables*”: ultimate and unanalyzable (1898/1990: 428). In Russell's logical system articulated in *The Principles of Mathematics*, truth appears as an “indefinable logical constant” (1903: 11). Russell's total remarks on the primitivist view are ultimately quite sparse, but his defense of it, however brief, highlights his desire at the time to articulate a perspective on truth that avoids the problems he detects behind the coherentist and correspondence alternatives.¹

¹ Moore's early trajectory on truth closely mirrors Russell's: a brief articulation and defense of primitivism (entwined with an account of the nature of the objects of belief) accompanied by a rejection (on circularity grounds) of correspondence accounts, followed by an ultimate embrace of a correspondence view. See, in particular, Moore 1899, 1902, and 1953: 252-269. Candlish (1989: 344) claims that Russell learned his primitivism from Moore. For discussion of the early primitivist views of Moore and Russell see Cartwright 1987 and 2003, Dodd 2000, Candlish 2007, and Asay 2013: 51-75.

One of the main sources of Russell's primitivism is his trilogy of articles in *Mind* on Meinong (1904a, 1904b, 1904c), particularly its closing chapter. In that paper, the question of *the objects of judgment* comes to the fore: "It remains to establish, if this be possible, the principle that all... judgments have an object which is not merely immanent; and here, although the favourable arguments appear to me overwhelming, I must admit that the explanation of falsity presents grave difficulties" (1904c: 509). Following the dialectic of this paper poses a number of interpretive challenges to modern readers. Russell defends the view that all judgments (by which he means the mental acts of judging, or believing) have an object, regardless of whether the judgment is true or false, and that those objects in every case are "transcendent", not merely "immanent". Meinong's notion of immanence—which Russell admits he doesn't really grasp—is a "less than" metaphysical status, a kind of "pseudo-existence" (Russell 1904a: 211).² A transcendent object is just an ordinarily existing object. Meinong agrees that all judgments have an object, but argues that they are all immanent. "Common sense", meanwhile, agrees with Russell that the objects of judgment are all transcendent, but contends that only true judgments involve them; false judgments take no object (1904c: 513).

These perspectives are difficult to align with modern positions because the theoretical function of what Russell calls "objects of judgment" elides the roles played by what we now commonly differentiate as facts and propositions. (That Russell continually uses the language of 'facts' and 'propositions' only adds to the confusion.) Nowadays, a familiar view is that sentences, beliefs, judgments, and the like *express* propositions, which, when true, are *made true* by or *correspond* to facts. Propositions account for what we mean, while the facts determine which of those meanings are true. All judgments therefore have an "object" in that they always express a proposition, true or false. But only true judgments have an "object" in that only true judgments correspond to facts. False judgments correspond to no fact, and therefore lack an object in that sense. But this view, however sensible it may seem today, was hardly self-evident to Russell. He does catch a glimpse of it, but notes that in drawing such a separation, "The proposition, it would seem, must be somehow distinguishable from such complexes [i.e., facts]; but it is very difficult to see what the proposition is" (1904c: 521). As we would put it today, when it comes to one's judgment that Venus exists, say, Russell finds it nearly impossible to articulate any distinction

² But note Russell's admission around this time that "there are entities which do not exist; and among these must be placed the entities which are true or false, which are what I call propositions" (1905/1994: 496).

between the proposition that Venus exists (something which would have to exist even if Venus didn't), and the fact of Venus's existence.³

We must confront Russell's primitivism with this commitment about the objects of thought in mind. The choice he faced is effectively this: suppose that there are no propositions as modernly conceived. That is to say, there are no objects whose dominant theoretical function is to serve as the content of judgments. Facts must play that role (alongside their truthmaking role). These facts are existing complexes (typically involving an object and a property, or multiple objects and a relation), and are not mental entities: "the objects which are before the mind are not themselves mental" (1907/2014: 464). We now face the "grave difficulty" of false belief alluded to above. One can argue either that since facts exist only for true judgments, false judgments must take no object (what Russell calls the commonsense view). Alternatively, one can take all judgments to have an object, but then one is saddled with a commitment to things that stand to false judgments as facts stand to true judgments: *fictions* that turn out to be just as real as facts.

Russell's primitivism is the result of his response to this dilemma: he takes the second horn. (His ultimate rejection of primitivism comes about not by switching to the first horn, but by finding a way to subvert the dilemma altogether.) Russell gives a variety of reasons for this decision. He claims that "Direct inspection seems to leave no room whatever for doubt that, in all presentations and judgments, there is necessarily an object" (1904c: 510). Whether our judgment is of something true, or something false, there must nevertheless be *something* we are judging. Moreover, we can make the same judgment as someone else, which is to say that we therefore "believe the *same* thing" (1904c: 510).

Another argument Russell gives involves logically complex judgments (1904c: 511; see also 1906-1907: 47-48). Suppose that the judgments p and q are both true, and thus have objects (as on everyone's view). Russell infers that the further complex judgment ' p implies q ' also takes an object, since the components of this complex judgment themselves all have objects. But ' p implies q ' is equivalent to ' $\text{not-}q$ implies $\text{not-}p$ ', and so the latter must also have an object. And if this second complex has an object, then its components, which *ex hypothesi* are false judgments, must also have objects. In effect, true complex judgments always have an object, and so the components of

³ At this point, other authors might claim that here we see Russell's commitment to the "identity theory of truth", that facts are identical to true propositions (e.g., Dodd 2000 and Küne 2003). But to draw an identification here requires first drawing a theoretical distinction between the roles being identified, which Russell seems not to be doing. Not distinguishing between two theoretical roles is different from saying that the same kind of entity serves both roles. And, if anything, we have here a position on the nature of the *objects of belief*, not a position on *truth*.

complex judgments must themselves each have an object, regardless of whether they themselves are true or false. Thus, all judgments have an object.

We can now fully articulate Russell's view. "What is truth, and what falsehood," he writes, "we must merely apprehend, for both seem incapable of analysis" (1904c: 524). These properties belong to "*propositions*, of which there are two kinds, *facts*, which are true, and *fictions*, which are false" (1906-1907: 49). All facts possess the property of truth, just as all fictions possess the property of falsity. But nothing more need be said about the two properties. Russell is happy to admit that beliefs and judgments can be "true in a derivative sense", when they take a fact as their object (1906/2014: 423).⁴ But truth and falsity, strictly speaking, belong to the objects of judgment themselves, which exist independently of the mind.⁵

Having established the existence of objects of thought for false judgments, Russell concludes "that there is no problem at all in truth and falsehood; that some propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white" (1904c: 523).⁶ But this analogy, Russell immediately recognizes, appears to leave something out: we prefer true beliefs to false, but is this just an "unaccountable prejudice" akin to preferring red roses over white? Russell thus imagines an objector claiming that "true propositions express *fact*, while false ones do not" (1904c: 523). There needs to be a crucial distinction between truth and falsity, but that disappears on the primitivist account—an objection to which Russell was particularly sensitive, as he presses it forcefully against other views.

Russell's response is first to point out that 'true propositions express fact' is a tautology, since true propositions (i.e., the objects of true judgments) just are facts (i.e., the objects of true judgments). So if there is a substantive thought behind the objection, it must be articulated differently. Hence, Russell re-frames the objection as the concern "that it is hard to regard A's non-existence, when true, as a *fact* in quite the same sense in which A's existence would be a fact if it were true" (1904c: 523). For example, consider the non-existent planet Vulcan, once hypothesized to orbit between Mercury and the Sun. Russell's response to his objector, then, is to

⁴ Elsewhere he suggests that 'true' and 'false' be reserved for facts and fictions, while 'correct' and 'erroneous' be used for beliefs (1907/2014: 460).

⁵ Russell's primitivism (and Moore's, for that matter) is thus quite dissimilar from the primitivist perspectives on truth defended by Frege (1918-1919), Davidson (1996), and Asay (2013). These views are best understood as taking the *concept* of truth to be unanalyzable, rather than the property. See chapter 3 of Asay 2013.

⁶ This particular statement of the view elicits a good deal of mockery. William James labels it a "portentous" thesis that is the result of Russell's "diseased abstractionism" (1909: 285-286). Barnett Savery describes the view as a "youthful aberration" and "delightful fancy", one to be disposed "with abruptness" (1955: 515). Peter Hylton declares the view "evidently absurd" (1984: 385). Paul Horwich treats Russell's primitivism as a view of last resort (1990: 10).

acknowledge that it's hard to think of Vulcan's non-existence as a fact in the same sense that we would have regarded Vulcan's existence a fact (had it existed). In other words, it's harder to commit to the factuality of Vulcan's non-existence compared to, say, Venus's existence; but this is because of perception, which only involves "affirmative" propositions (1904c: 524).

This response, it seems to me, misses the mark. Russell's commonsense critic is concerned to capture a sense in which false belief is belief in nothing at all; false belief fails to glom onto the world. The concern involves the objects of false belief, not the objects of logically negative beliefs: when astronomers falsely believed in the existence of Vulcan, what was the object of *their* belief? The object of their belief can't be the non-existence of Vulcan, since that's the object of belief of those who believe Vulcan doesn't exist. So Russell's view requires that there be two things—Vulcan's existence and Vulcan's non-existence—though only one of those things would seem to be real.

Russell foregrounds the concern with fictions in his subsequent treatments of primitivism. In an early 1907 lecture at Oxford, Russell notes that "whether there are objective fictions seems to me doubtful" (1907/2014: 464). In his "On the Nature of Truth", Russell again articulates the primitivist account, noting that alternative accounts that need not posit "objective falsehoods" are "on the face of it, more plausible" (1906-1907: 49). Nevertheless, he still considers his case for primitivism "conclusive", at least given the proviso that "a belief can be validly regarded as a single state of mind" (1906-1907: 46). But that analysis of belief—that belief is always directed at a single object (however complex)—is precisely what Russell is beginning to doubt in this period. By the time he published "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood" in 1910, Russell had resolved his indecision.⁷ The primitivist view "leaves the difference between truth and falsehood" a mystery (1910a: 176). So the problem is not simply that it's ontologically committed to objective fictions, which are suspect entities one might rather avoid if at all possible. In addition, the view has a theoretical defect: it fails to account for the deep difference between truth and falsity. It treats facts and fictions on an ontological par; but of course they are *not* on an ontological par. This is the crucial piece of common sense that the primitivist view cannot accommodate, given its commitment to the objects of belief being singular entities. As a result, Russell adopts his new "multiple relations" theory of judgment, and sets primitivism aside for good.

⁷ The first two sections of "On the Nature of Truth", which criticize the coherence theory, were reprinted together as "The Monistic Theory of Truth" in Russell 1910b. The third section—which articulates Russell's ambivalence regarding the choice between primitivism (and the accompanying view that the objects of judgment are singular) and correspondence (and the accompanying view that the objects of judgment are multiple)—is scrapped. In its place is a new essay, "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood", which presents Russell clearly favoring the new theory.

3. Coherence

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Russell actually devoted more pages to criticizing alternative views than to formulating his own. He was particularly concerned to challenge the coherence theory of truth, especially as it is articulated and defended by Harold Joachim (1906). Russell critiqued Joachim's views in several essays and lectures over the course of the decade, and maintained those objections well into his later career (e.g., 1912: 190-193 and 1959: 175-176). Russell's critique of the coherence theory is part and parcel of his broader objections to metaphysical idealism; as Russell sees it, coherence is the inevitable theory of truth for idealists, and the two doctrines stand or fall together.

The link between the coherence notion of truth and metaphysical idealism is, in Russell's eyes, the "axiom of internal relations", which states that all relations are internal and so denies the existence of external relations. What this amounts to is the position that all relations between objects are essential, a thesis that quickly leads to monism. Russell articulates the idealist perspective efficiently:

Suppose A is the father of B . Then, if you try to think of A without at the same time thinking of B , you are not really thinking about A at all, since paternity to B is part of A 's nature... It follows, since everything is related, more or less, to everything else, that to think quite truly, you must think the whole truth; everything except the whole truth about the whole world omits something essential, and thereby fails to be quite true. (1906/2014: 424)

Russell therefore refers to Joachim's view under two different monikers—as the "coherence" theory and as the "monistic" theory of truth. However it's known, it maintains that "The essence of truth... is systematic coherence in an organic whole" (1906/2014: 424).

Russell's most sustained attack on coherence is found in his 1906-1907 paper "On the Nature of Truth". Here he articulates and critiques the coherence theory of Joachim, and then attacks the axiom of internal relations which he takes to be the fundamental assumption of the coherence theory (and British idealism more broadly). Joachim's theory of truth is presented in terms of its *monistic* consequences:

This doctrine, which is one of the foundation-stones of monistic idealism, has a sweep which might not be obvious at once. It means that nothing is wholly true except the whole

truth, and that what seem to be isolated truths, such as $2+2=4$, are really only true in the sense that they form part of the system which is the whole truth. (1906-1907: 29)

On Joachim's view, there is really only one truth, a "significant whole" that is composed by mutually interlocking parts, none of which is on its own fully true (Joachim 1906: 76). Russell offers four objections to the view.

Russell's first objection concerns the problematic appeal to partial truth: "If no partial truth is quite true, this must apply to the partial truths which embody the monistic philosophy. But if these are not quite true, any deductions we may make from them may depend upon their false aspect rather than their true one, and may therefore be erroneous" (1906-1907: 36). Consider how a non-coherence theorist would approach a possible case of partial truth. Suppose I believe a particular conjunction with one true and one false conjunct. If I make an inference from this "partially true" conjunction, I risk making a mistake when I make a deduction that draws on the false conjunct. But according to coherence theorists, *all* beliefs are at best partially true. My belief that penguins are flightless birds is only partially true, and so may I infer from it that penguins are birds? It seems not: valid inferences are logically secure, and partial truth secures nothing. Logic, understood as the science of valid inference between *truths*, would be rendered completely inert. There is no logic of partial truth.

Notice that Russell highlights the fact that coherence theorists must take *their own theory* to be at best partially true. Elsewhere he points out that "if no single truth is quite true, it cannot be quite true that no truth is quite true" (1906/2014: 425; cf. 1906: 532). At one point Russell takes this as the basis for rejecting coherence as self-contradictory: "Mr. Joachim admits that the general statement that truth consists in self-coherence cannot be quite true" (1905/1994: 499). Other times, though, Russell praises Joachim for being "thoroughly self-consistent" (1906/2014: 426), given that Joachim admits that his own view is not quite true. At the end of the day, then, Russell and Joachim appear to agree that the coherence theory is not a true theory of truth, given its inherent and ironical internal incoherence. Of course, whereas Russell takes this as an invitation to develop a true theory of truth, Joachim accepts it as the inevitable consequence of his radical alethic monism.

Russell's second objection challenges the possibility of the needed whole truth on which monism is based. That whole truth, *W*, would seem to have parts: all the partial truths. My belief that penguins are flightless birds would, presumably, be one of these parts; however, it's not true that this belief is part of *W*. It's *never* true that any belief belongs to *W*, since any such claim is at best only partially true. So we can't infer that this belief, or any other, is part of *W*. The whole

truth, as conceived by coherentists, “is a whole of parts all of which are not quite real. It follows that W is not quite really a whole of parts” (1906-1907: 31). As a result, the coherentist gambit of identifying the one truth as the sum of all partial truth fails: “the diversity which modern monism tries to synthesise with identity vanishes, leaving reality wholly without structure or complexity of any kind” (1906-1907: 31).

The third objection speaks to one of Russell’s longstanding and fundamental concerns in the theory of truth: accounting for error and falsity. As we saw above, Russell’s early primitivism foundered on the problem of falsity: it was forced to place facts and fictions on an ontological par when clearly they are not. Later, Russell articulates that the first requirement of any theory of truth is that it “be such as to admit of its opposite, falsehood” (1912: 188). But the coherentist appeal to partial truth renders that impossible. Save for W, no claim is fully true. Nor is any claim fully false: if p were fully false, then it would be fully true that p were fully false, and nothing—save for W—is fully true. If I believe that Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder, and you believe that he died peacefully in his bed, our beliefs are each partially true and partially false. Thus, coherentists place all of our beliefs on the same alethic level: we cannot distinguish between them with respect to truth value, since all are partially true and all are partially false.

Russell vividly portrays the problem that results from this alethic homogenization:

If a jury, for example, has to decide whether a man has committed a crime, Mr. Joachim’s criterion gives no means of distinguishing between a right and a wrong verdict. If the jury remember the monistic philosophy, either verdict is right; if they forget it, either is wrong.⁸ What I wish to make plain is, that there is a sense in which such a proposition as “A murdered B” is true or false; and that in this sense the proposition in question does not depend for its truth or falsehood, upon whether it is regarded as a partial truth or not. And this sense, it seems to me, is presupposed in constructing the whole of truth; for the whole of truth is composed of propositions which are true in this sense, since it is impossible to believe that the proposition “Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder” is part of the whole of truth. (1906-1907: 32-33)

Here Russell is insisting on the necessity of there being some alethic distinction between the competing beliefs that Bishop Stubbs was and wasn’t hanged for murder. After all, only one of

⁸ Here Russell is referring to Joachim’s account of error (1906: 162) as solely consisting in believing partial truths to be whole truths. That is, to err is to fail to believe in the monistic theory of truth. See Russell 1906/2014: 425 and 1906-1907: 32.

these will end up belonging to the whole truth. Since partial truth can't account for that distinction, something else must, but it's unclear what coherentists can offer to play that role that doesn't involve importing a prior and non-coherentist notion of truth.

Russell's fourth objection arises from how he imagines coherentists responding to the third. What places the proposition that Bishop Stubbs wasn't hanged for murder into the coherent set is that it (but not its negation) meshes "with experience". But what can this mean, Russell wonders, other than the claim that the incoherent proposition (that Stubbs was hanged for murder) is *inconsistent* with something that is *known*? After all, Russell claims, "it may be perfectly possible to construct a coherent whole of *false* propositions in which "Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder" would find a place" (1906-1907: 33). To avoid this possibility of there being multiple coherent systems, the coherence theory must presuppose "a more usual meaning of truth and falsehood", and yet "this more usual meaning, though indispensable to the theory, cannot be explained by means of the theory" (1906-1907: 33).

The charge here is that coherentists are forced to fall back onto a prior notion of truth in order to meet the charge of the possibility of there being multiple coherent systems. Experience does indeed grant us knowledge of the calm setting of Stubbs's death, and that knowledge precludes the presence of "Stubbs was hanged for murder" in the final whole of truth. But knowledge is of the truth, and so if we *do* after all have knowledge of the truth of "Stubbs wasn't hanged for murder", this must be a different kind of truth from what coherentists are proposing, since this claim isn't true according to their view.

The problem of accounting for error, then, is closely connected to the problem of there possibly being multiple coherent systems, a charge that Russell continues to press in *The Problems of Philosophy*: "It may be that, with sufficient imagination, a novelist might invent a past for the world that would perfectly fit on to what we know, and yet be quite different from the real past" (1912: 191). Russell then offers one final objection, this time against the very notion of coherence. Coherence "presupposes the truth of the laws of logic", such as the law of non-contradiction (1912: 192). We need that law to establish that a proposition and its negation can't both belong to a coherent system. If the law were false, and there are true contradictions, then we lose any basis for what constitutes a coherent system. Thus, Russell concludes, "the laws of logic supply the skeleton or framework within which the test of coherence applies, and they themselves cannot be established by this test" (1912: 192). Once again, the coherence theory must presuppose a prior notion of truth.⁹

⁹ See Russell 1907/2014: 459-461 for still further objections to the coherence theory.

At the end of the day, Russell is happy to grant that coherence can serve as a *criterion* or test of truth, but it cannot *constitute* its nature, or give us an account of the meaning of ‘true’ (1905/1994: 504, 1906/2014: 424-425, 1912: 193; see also 1910a: 172-173). There is, in principle, a massive unity of all truths, and any individual truth will cohere with it by being logically consistent with it. But individual truths aren’t true because they cohere with that whole; they cohere with that whole because they are true. And so we still need an independent notion of truth.

4. Pragmatism

Though he never pulled his punches, Russell clearly had deep respect for coherence theorists and their view, and appreciated its connection to the metaphysical idealism in which it is situated (and which Russell himself had quite recently advocated). That respect did not, however, carry over to pragmatists. Russell and Joachim joke with each that, despite all their differences, they can at least both agree that pragmatism is “rubbish”.¹⁰ In a letter to Helen Flexner, Russell admits that he finds pragmatism to be “hopeless stuff” (2014: 465).¹¹ Nevertheless, Russell offers a patient (but unforgiving) presentation and critique of the pragmatists’ theory of truth.

Russell’s pragmatist targets are the British philosopher F.C.S. Schiller (e.g., 1906 and 1907) and the American William James (e.g., 1907a, 1907b, and 1909). Russell’s criticisms of pragmatism (called ‘humanism’ by Schiller) run parallel to his criticisms of coherence. Pragmatism conflates a plausible criterion or test of truth (i.e., utility, or “working”) with the meaning of truth (1907: 44, 1907/2014: 461, 1908/1910: 132, 137-138). Furthermore, it presupposes a prior notion of truth or realm of facts (1907: 45, 1908/2014: 739).

Schiller articulates the pragmatist perspective on truth, and the epistemology accompanying it:

in all actual knowing the question whether an assertion is ‘true’ or ‘false’ is decided uniformly and very simply. It is decided, that is, by its consequences, by its bearing on the interest which prompted to the assertion, by its relation to the purpose which put the question. To add to this that the consequences must be *good* is superfluous. For if and so far as an assertion satisfies or forwards the purpose of the inquiry to which it owes its being, it is so far ‘true’; if and so far as it thwarts or baffles it, it is unworkable, unserviceable, ‘false’... a ‘truth’ is what is useful in building up a science; a ‘falsehood’ what is useless or noxious for the same purpose... To determine therefore whether any answer

¹⁰ See Joachim’s letter, dated 6 May 1906, to Russell, reprinted in Russell 2014: 420.

¹¹ See Russell’s letter of 4 October 1907, reprinted in Russell 2014: 465.

to any question is 'true' or 'false,' we have merely to note its effect upon the inquiry in which we are interested, and in relation to which it has arisen. And if these effects are favourable, the answer is 'true' and 'good' for our purpose... (1907: 154)

James offers his own spin on this pragmatist theme, focusing on the difference that true beliefs make to the believer: "*True ideas are those that we can validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as" (1907b: 142).

One of Russell's central objections to pragmatism is that it must (like coherence theory) presuppose a prior, non-pragmatist notion of truth. This issue arises with Schiller's reference to truths being those that "work" in scientific theorizing. According to Russell,

What science requires of a working hypothesis is that it shall work *theoretically*, i.e. that all its verifiable consequences shall be *true*, and none *false*... This is what we mean when we say that the law 'works'. We do not mean that it gives us emotional satisfaction... Thus the kind of 'working' which science desiderates is a very different thing from the kind which pragmatism considers to be the essence of truth. (1909/1910: 106-107; cf. 1907: 45)

Truth may be what works, but that's only because working, in the relevant sense, is to be understood in terms of truth.

Russell gets at the thought that pragmatism unwittingly presupposes a prior notion of truth not its own by considering a kind of "open question" phenomenon, to evoke Moore's (1903) famous anti-naturalistic metaethical argument:

Suppose I accept the pragmatic criterion, and suppose you persuade me that a certain belief is useful. Suppose I thereupon conclude that the belief is true. Is it not obvious that there is a transition in my mind from seeing that the belief is useful to actually holding that the belief is true? Yet this could not be so if the pragmatic account of truth were valid... This shows that the word "true" represents for us a different idea from that represented by the phrase "useful to believe," and that, therefore, the pragmatic definition of truth ignores, without destroying, the meaning commonly given to the word 'true'... (1908/1910: 136)

Russell speaks of a *transition* between the thought that, say, it's useful to believe that God exists, and the thought that it's true that God exists. Similarly, there is a transition between the thought

that breaking a certain promise will maximize overall happiness, and the thought that it would be good to break a certain promise. This transition is what creates space for the open question: even given that it may be useful to believe in God, it remains an open question whether (it's true that) God actually exists. If true belief were identical to useful belief, then there would be no open question: *of course* useful beliefs are true. According to pragmatists, there is nothing more to our idea of true belief than that of useful belief. Hence the transition in thought between utility and truth indicates that they cannot be the same.

A related problem, which Russell deems the “fundamental objection to humanism” (1907: 45), is that it has a problematic relationship to *facts*. Facts, of course, are the centerpiece of Russell's various theories of truth. Pragmatism needs them, too, though it may try to eschew this commitment: “it inevitably presupposes, unconsciously, the truth of “fact” which it professes to abolish” (*ibid.*). This problematic relationship has at least two dimensions. First, there is the issue that pragmatism divorces truth from the facts. Consider my belief that other people exist. Russell notes that it's entirely possible that this belief could always “work” for me in the pragmatists' sense, even if I was, in reality, the only person that existed. (This would seem to be the content of one interpretation of Descartes' evil genius hypothesis.) For pragmatists, then, “The belief in solipsism might be false even if I were the only person or thing in the universe” (1908/1910: 140).¹²

Russell anoints this consequence “paradoxical”, though I would dub it “contradictory”. To see why, we can take advantage of some axioms more salient to modern eyes.¹³ Pragmatists are committed to

- (1) Necessarily, it is true that other people exist if and only if it's useful to believe that other people exist.

This is due to their claim of sameness of meaning between true and useful belief (whatever that ultimately amounts to). But we're all committed to

- (2) Necessarily, it is true that other people exist if and only if other people exist.

This is just an instance of one of the many truth schemas familiar in the wake of Tarski's work on truth (e.g., Tarski 1933). It follows that

¹² Russell credits Stout (1907) with this argument.

¹³ Button 2017 proceeds similarly, and offers an in-depth examination into the dialectic between Russell and Stout on the one hand and Schiller and James on the other.

- (3) Necessarily, it's useful to believe that other people exist if and only if other people exist.

But for pragmatists,

- (4) Possibly, it's useful to believe that other people exist and other people don't exist.

(4) is due to Russell's idea that the belief in question could satisfy the various pragmatist desiderata for truth, though none of them, logically speaking, require the existence of other people. Since (4) contradicts (3), the pragmatist must deny (2), which constitutes the "divorce" they mandate between truth (the left-hand side) and the facts (the right-hand side). Since (2) is a necessary truth (and (1) obviously false, to my mind), I call the view contradictory rather than paradoxical. Russell, more circumspectly, concludes: "to say that 'A exists' may be true even if A does not exist is to give a meaning to 'truth' which robs it of all interest" (1908/1910: 140).

Pragmatists' first problem with facts is that they divorce the truth of beliefs from the facts which, presumably, are relevant to the content of those beliefs. The second problem is that once pragmatists take facts on board, they still mishandle them. Pragmatists, going back to Peirce (1878) motivate their view by showing how it (supposedly) doesn't require a commitment to a mind-independent realm of facts. But Russell argues that they do, after all, need some set of facts on which to ground truth. What pragmatists lack, however, is a plausible account of those facts.

As (1) makes clear, pragmatists still connect truth with facts. It's just that the facts in question concern not the content of beliefs, but the utility in holding such beliefs. Here, Russell holds that "humanism unconsciously admits the objective sense of truth, the sense which may be called *fact*. For it must be the *fact* that our purposes are furthered by entertaining the belief" (1907/2014: 462). Pragmatists, therefore, don't *avoid* postulating facts to provide the grounds for truth; they instead simply posit *strikingly poor choices of facts* to provide those grounds. What makes it true that there are penguins at the South Pole is not the penguins living at the South Pole (the fact that Russell would identify as being the relevant one here), but rather the utility created by those of us who hold this belief (a different fact that no one, save a pragmatist in the grip of their theory, would ever posit as the relevant fact). Such facts remain mind-independent in the relevant sense: whether beliefs cause useful effects is determined by factors independent of the beliefs themselves.

Pragmatists, in other words, don't dodge correspondence theory: they instantiate the worst version of it. That's a metaphysical point: it connects truth to the *wrong* facts. But it's epistemologically problematic as well. Like coherence theorists, pragmatists sell their theory on its

epistemological dividends: we can't know what the mind-independent facts are (so correspondence leads to skepticism), but at least we can figure out what is usefully believed. But as Russell points out, this often gets matters backwards. He offers a humdrum example: suppose you see an express train rush by as you wait at the train station, and form the belief that the express train has gone by. Russell notes that he is "completely at a loss to decide whether the consequences of the belief that it has gone by are any more beneficial than the consequences of the opposite belief" (1907/2014: 462). Determining such facts "involves a knowledge of causal sequences and of the laws of nature which, I should have thought, would often be extremely difficult to acquire" (*ibid.*). The pragmatists' fact of choice is hopelessly inaccessible. The correspondence theorists', by contrast, is readily at hand: you just witnessed it. As a result, applying the pragmatic theory of truth is often next to impossible, and so Russell announces its ultimate irony: the pragmatist theory of truth "is to be condemned on the ground that it does not "work"" (1908/1910: 149).

This line of argument treats facts about trains and facts about useful belief as being on a metaphysical par. Both, in the relevant sense, are mind-independent (though distinct) facts in the world. But perhaps this is the wrong way to view matters; perhaps it's utility facts "all the way down". The pragmatist, we've seen, is committed to (3). This may initially seem absurd on its face, but it's perfectly acceptable to a view embracing a comprehensive metaphysics of utility. Perhaps *what it is for other people to exist* is for it to be useful to believe as such. With such a view on hand, the pragmatist can reject the possibility expressed by (4), and maintain (2) alongside everyone else. This perspective validates Russell's claim that pragmatism is its own form of idealism: reality itself is ultimately a matter of usefully held beliefs. Set aside whether this metaphysics has anything to recommend it.¹⁴ Plausible or not, it faces a regress problem (1907/2014: 462; 1959: 177). Beliefs are true because they are usefully believed. The belief that other people exist is true because it's useful to believe that other people exist. But then the belief that it's useful to believe that other people exist is true, and that amounts to its being useful to believe that it's useful to believe that other people exist. The truth of that belief then points to nothing but further useful belief. For other people to exist (or anything, for that matter), there must be an unending chain of facts about usefully believing as much, all of which themselves are constituted by unending chains of facts about usefully believing as much. If truth boils down to utility, then everything boils down to utility.¹⁵ Such a view may be logically consistent, but accompanies the absurdity that, to borrow

¹⁴ Would pragmatists themselves recommend it? Perhaps not, but it would at least allow James to vindicate his claim that it's a "slander" to accuse him of denying (2) (1909: 274).

¹⁵ Russell had earlier deployed a similar regress against all definitions of truth (1899/1990: 285, 1905/1994: 493-494) that is highly reminiscent of Frege's (1918-1919). See Asay 2013: 66-68.

Boghossian's assessment of global relativism, "in order for our utterances to have any prospect of being true, what we must mean by them are infinitary propositions that we could neither express nor understand" (2006: 56).

In his lectures on pragmatism, James announces early on that his view, like all new theories, is initially "attacked as absurd" (1907b: 141). And sure enough, he responds to Russell by claiming that "We affirm nothing as silly as Mr. Russell supposes" (1909: 273). Russell in turn judges that James's grounds for his accusation of misrepresentation "was that I supposed he meant what he said" (1959: 180). When James goes on to correct the supposed misrepresentation, the view he articulates strikes Russell as "even sillier than what I had thought he meant" (*ibid.*). At the time, Russell had only defended his early primitivist view in print, and James finds that view no less ludicrous. Unfortunately, James died before he could encounter Russell's first attempt at the correspondence theory.

5. Early correspondence

As I hope to have made clear, Russell's wavering between primitivism and correspondence was the result of a more fundamental concern of coming to terms with the nature of belief. Indeed, much of Russell's highly anthologized introductory remarks on truth (as found in chapter 12 of *The Problems of Philosophy*) is squarely focused on the structure of belief. Faced with the dilemma between false judgments taking no object whatsoever and an ontological commitment to objective fictions, Russell initially opted for the latter. To dodge the dilemma entirely Russell needed to abandon the presupposition that the object of belief, if any, must be a single entity. Hence, his correspondence theory of truth emerged in conjunction with his new view that "judgment is a relation of the mind to several other terms" (1910a: 178).¹⁶

Russell begins his presentation with three desiderata for any adequate theory of truth (1912: 188-190). It must admit of falsehood (a particularly thorny difficulty for coherence theories), take beliefs as the primary bearer of truth and falsity (such that a world with no minds is a world with no truth or falsity), and show how the truth of beliefs depends on something external to beliefs (a problem for both coherentist and pragmatist theories). Understanding truth as a relation of correspondence between a belief and the several objects of that belief satisfies all three of Russell's requirements for a theory of truth.

Russell's new account of truth is built upon his new theory of belief (or 'judgment') and his more general theory of relations. As to the latter, "Wherever there is a relation which relates

¹⁶ For more on Russell's multiple relations theory of judgment see Lebens 2017 and Connelly 2021.

certain terms, there is a complex object formed of the union of those terms” (1912: 199). These complex objects are facts. Importantly, complexes have a built-in “directionality”, as unrequited love painfully demonstrates. Love unites Romeo and Rosaline, but only in one direction. Romeo stands in the loving relation to Rosaline, and that complex constitutes a fact we might call ‘Romeo’s love for Rosaline’. But Rosaline does not stand in the loving relation to Romeo, and so there is no complex constituting a fact we might have called ‘Rosaline’s love for Romeo’. Here we have Russell’s overall metaphysical worldview: a world constituted by facts, i.e., objects standing in various relations to themselves and one another.

Belief is yet another relation, and the complex objects it determines involve a subject and several objects. What it is for Mercutio to believe that Romeo loves Rosaline is for there to be a complex object constituted by the subject, Mercutio, standing in a relation, believing, toward three objects: loving, Romeo, and Rosaline. This complex involves two relations—believing and loving—but only the former is what Russell calls the “cement”, the relation that unifies the complex; loving in this case is merely a “brick” in the complex (though it is the cement in Romeo’s love for Rosaline) (1912: 200).¹⁷

That is what is involved in the belief *existing*. The believing relation provides the glue that melds the believing subject to the objects of its belief. For the belief to be *true*, the objects of the belief must in fact constitute precisely the kind of unity expressed in the structure of the belief. If such a unity exists, the belief is true. If there is no such unity, the belief is false. Here is Russell’s official statement of the view: “Judging or believing is a certain complex unity of which a mind is a constituent; if the remaining constituents, taken in the order which they have in the belief, form a complex unity, then the belief is true; if not, it is false” (1912: 201; cf. 1910: 183-184). If Mercutio believes that Romeo loves Rosalind, his belief is true because this belief corresponds to a fact: in the world there is a complex unity (Romeo’s love for Rosalind) whose constituents are related to each other in exactly the same order that they are related within Mercutio’s belief. If Mercutio were to believe that Rosalind loves Romeo, his belief would be false, since in this case there is no corresponding complex: ‘Rosalind’s love for Romeo’ doesn’t exist.

Russell’s theory satisfies all his desiderata. True and false belief are united in terms of their object: belief always relates a believer to various objects in the world, regardless of whether the belief is true or false. Falsehood is accounted for, as it obtains whenever the objects of our beliefs fail to be organized in the way that our beliefs organize them. Since truth is a property of beliefs,

¹⁷ Russell later admits that it’s “unduly simple” to treat the relation that features in the content of the belief as being just another object of the belief relation (1919a: 61; cf. 1959: 182); that is to say, it’s still important to think of the relation of loving as a relation within the broader structure of the belief.

and beliefs are always constituted in part by minds, it entails that nothing can be true in a world with no mentality. But it also establishes that truth is an “extrinsic property” in that it applies to beliefs only in virtue of things external to the belief (1912: 201). Russell’s commitment to correspondence thus cements his overall metaphysical realism: truth, though in some sense a product of our minds, depends upon the existence of a mind-independent external world. The facts are not of our making, though our beliefs are.

6. Late correspondence

In the years following his initial defense of correspondence, and in light of his new relationship with Ludwig Wittgenstein, Russell developed his thinking about facts. In his lectures on logical atomism (1918, 1919a, 1919b, 1919c) he continues to maintain that a fact is “the kind of thing that makes a proposition true or false” (1918: 500), and that facts are composed by particulars possessing qualities or standing in relations to other particulars.¹⁸ Moreover, false propositions are now also said to correspond to facts, though in a different way than do true propositions (1918: 507). The lectures offer an inventory of the sorts of facts that Russell thinks are needed for an adequate ontology: atomic facts, general facts, existential facts, and, notoriously, negative facts. By contrast, there is no need for disjunctive, conjunctive, or conditional facts, as their corresponding propositions are made true by atomic facts.

Russell’s view on truth reached its final stage in the 1940s. He continues to maintain that beliefs are the primary bearers of truth (1940: 236), and that beliefs are true in virtue of their “verifiers”, the facts that make them true (1940: 227). But as he came to appreciate, the relation between belief and fact “is not always simple, and varies both according to the structure of the sentence concerned and according to the relation of what is asserted to experience” (1959: 189). Much of his discussion of truth and falsehood in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* and *Human Knowledge* involves the investigation of what sorts of beliefs we possess, their relationship to the sentences we use, and the facts that ultimately make them true or false. To properly understand the truth of someone’s utterance of, say, ‘I have a headache’, we have to understand what mental state it is that is being referred to (and that, ultimately, will be the verifier for the belief in question). Despite the “unavoidable complexities” in perspicuously specifying the mental states that constitute our beliefs and the worldly objects that make them true, Russell maintains that his correspondence theory “aims at as close an adherence to common sense as is in any way compatible with the avoidance of demonstrable error” (*ibid*).

¹⁸ Later, Russell allows that “Everything that there is in the world” is a fact (1948: 143).

Russell substantiates his defense of common sense by adding one final dimension to his view. Russell introduces into his discussion of truth a distinction that he sees between two competing versions of correspondence, which he calls the “epistemological” and the “logical” (1940: 290). The distinction involves whether the basic propositions depend for their truth on their relation to experience, or to fact. As we might put the question, are the truthmakers for atomic propositions experiential events (like sensations) or mind-independent facts? How we answer these questions has ramifications for matters such as the tenability of (certain extreme forms of) empiricism, the law of excluded middle, and the status of unobservable (or even unobserved) entities, including other minds. For the epistemological version of correspondence (ultimately, an extreme kind of verificationist theory of truth), not all propositions have a truth value, and so the law of excluded middle does not hold. For the logical version, propositions for which we have no empirical evidence can still be true or false, as their alethic status is owed to the facts, which need not figure into our actual experience.

Russell concedes that each version of correspondence has its virtues and vices. The epistemological theory “limits knowledge to a degree that seems excessive,” while the logical version “involves us in metaphysics, and has difficulties (not insuperable) in defining the correspondence which it requires for the definition of “truth”” (1940: 293). Russell opts for the latter, though he concedes that the former “is not logically refutable, any more than the solipsist hypothesis” (1940: 300). To defend the logical version, Russell first establishes the significance or intelligibility of propositions that reach beyond experience, and their similarity to some that don’t. For example, I believe that there are schoolteachers in Sri Lanka. I hold this belief though I am acquainted with none of its verifiers. Yet lacking that acquaintance is no barrier to understanding. Likewise, when walking on a pebbly beach I may form the belief that there are pebbles on the beach which no one will ever have noticed (1948: 152). Here, too, my belief involves elements all of which I do understand through experience, in spite of the fact that it’s “self-contradictory to suppose such propositions established by giving instances of their truth” (1948: 153). Any unnoticed pebble serves as a verifier for the belief; any noticed pebble (which is all that I can offer as a verifier) fails to qualify.

For similar reasons, a belief that there are facts which one cannot imagine is perfectly intelligible. As previously seen, that one can’t articulate one of its verifiers is no objection. Furthermore, Russell notes, if this belief is not intelligible, neither is its contradictory, that there are no facts which one cannot imagine (*ibid.*). Presumably the epistemological theorist believes precisely that. So it must at least be intelligible that there are facts that fall outside experience. But is it true? Here Russell argues that such facts are presupposed throughout our scientific

understanding of the world. For example, consider an experience of first seeing and then hearing an explosion from some distance. Russell writes:

There is evidently a causal relation between seeing and hearing the explosion; when I am on the spot, they are simultaneous; we therefore assume that, when they are not simultaneous, there has been a series of intermediate occurrences, which, however, were not perceived, and are therefore not in perceptual space. This point of view is reinforced by the discovery that light, as well as sound travels with a finite velocity. (1940: 302-303)

Science (not to mention common sense) is saturated with commitments to unperceived events. We believe in them nonetheless because doing so “leads to a harmonious body of theory... and giving a simpler statement of the laws governing the occurrence” of our and others’ experiences (1940: 304). To reject such unperceived events on the basis of one’s empiricist scruples means rejecting not just much of our best scientific theorizing, but also *all* beliefs based on testimony or others’ experiences, since they too rely on unperceived (to us) events. Hence, “the epistemological theory of truth, if taken seriously, confines “truth” to propositions asserting what I now perceive or remember” (1940: 305). Since “no one” is content with so narrow a worldview, we are left with the logical version of correspondence, according to which “Facts are wider (at least possibly) than experiences” (*ibid.*). As a result, those who follow Russell may abandon pure empiricism, and reclaim the law of excluded middle. The cost is only some metaphysics, and for Russell that is always a price worth paying.

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