Metaphysics Handouts
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Handout 4

On the nature of truth and falsehood: Russell

The question. Russell asks what truth is, rather than how to tell which things are true. He isn't after a 'criterion of truth', some truth-independent mark belonging to all true things. Russell doesn't think truth has any such universal mark. 117
The primary bearers of truth are beliefs (=judgments). The sun isn't true, but the judgment that the sun is shining is, and a statement is true when whoever believes it believes truly.

So, without minds to judge there'd be no truth or falsehood. Yet whether a judgment is true depends not on the judge but on the facts. If I judge that Charles I died in his bed, I'm wrong—because he didn't, not because of anything about me. 117
A theory of truth has to keep both halves. 118

Question 1. Can an account of what truth is stay neutral on how we find out what's true?

One object or several. Believing, doubting, perceiving, imagining: in every such cognitive act the mind stands in a *relation* to objects other than itself. So judging is a relation too, and the question is what it relates the mind to. 118

(4-1) Charles I died on the scaffold.

(4-2) Charles I died in his bed.

Judging (4-1) may be a relation to one thing, the fact or 'that Charles I died on the scaffold', or to three things: Charles I, dying and the scaffold. Call the single objects, following Meinong, 'Objectives'. Then a judgment is true or false because 118
its Objective is. For (4-1) this looks fine, since the Objective can be the event itself. But it fails for (4-2). There was no such event [Charles I's death in his bed], and to say that there was is just to repeat (4-2). So the Objective, if there is one, 119
must be something else, say 'that Charles I died in his bed', and uniformity then gives (4-1) the Objective 'that Charles I died on the scaffold'. 119

The dilemma. Russell has two objections to Objectives. First, 'that so-and-so' doesn't denote an object the way 'Socrates' does. It gets its full meaning only inside 'I believe that so-and-so', 'I hope that so-and-so', and so on. Second, 119
if every judgment has an Objective, some Objectives are false, and the world contains falsehoods that don't depend on anyone's judging. Russell finds this 'almost incredible': without minds to make mistakes there could be no falsehood. Worse, the difference between true and false Objectives becomes an ultimate fact with no further explanation. We feel that a true judgment has something 'corresponding' to it outside the judgment, and a false one doesn't. If true and false Objectives are both simply there, that intuition goes. The view is 'not logically impossible', only unsatisfactory.

Russell addresses two ways round these difficulties. (i) True judgments have Objectives and false ones don't. Well, 120
perhaps a new definition of Objectives might make this workable, but not while judging is admitted to be a relation to an Objective. False judgments certainly exist, and a relation can't be a relation to nothing, so on that view false judgments need Objectives too. (ii) One object for true judgments, several for false ones. Then the difference between truth and falsehood would be intrinsic to the judgment, and we could find out whether a judgment is true just by examining it, 120
which is obviously impossible. Truth would carry a special mark, after all. So the single-object view leaves two options: objective falsehoods, or false judgments in which nothing is judged. Russell's way out is that no judgment, true or false, has a single object. In judging (4-2), I have before me Charles I, dying and his bed, and they're as real as the objects of the true judgment.

Question 2. Is it true that a relation can't relate to nothing? What about seeking, fearing or imagining? And does (ii) show more than that truth can't be read off the judgment by introspection? Compare disjunctivism about perception.

Multiple relations. Relating the mind to several objects isn't bearing one relation to Charles I, the same relation to dying, and again to the scaffold. We are separately 'conscious of' each constituent, but that isn't the judgment. The 120
judgment is one instance of a single relation holding among the mind, Charles I, dying and the scaffold together.

Definition 3. A relation is 'multiple' if the simplest propositions in which it occurs involve more than two terms, not 122
counting the relation. A relation with two terms is 'dual'. 121

Such relations are familiar to mathematicians and common, Russell says, but philosophers have neglected them.

Example 4. Love doesn't hold regardless of date, so '*A* loved *B* in May' relates *A*, *B* and May. The relation doesn't split into relations between *A* and *B*, *A* and May, *B* and May. Or take '*A* is jealous of *B*'s love for *C*'. It's tempting to make *A* one term and *B*'s love for *C* the other. But if *A* is Othello, there's no such thing as Desdemona's love for Cassio. So jealousy relates three persons.

Othello's jealousy has the structure of a false judgment: it holds, and what it seems to be about doesn't exist.

Question 5. What makes the judgment the judgment that Charles I died on the scaffold, rather than a list of three things? That the judgment occurs doesn't require the three to stand in any relation to one another, though if it's true they do. Can the unity come from the mind alone? And would it not also unite the terms as 'the scaffold dies Charles I'?

Truth, first approximation. Judgment is a multiple relation of the mind to the terms the judgment is about, not a dual relation to one Objective. 122

(4-3) *A* loves *B*.

Judging (4-3) isn't a relation between YSB and '*A*'s love for *B*'. That would exist only if *A* loved *B*, and there could be no false judgments. It's a relation between YSB, *A*, love and *B*. That the judgment occurs implies no relation among *A*, love 122
and *B*, so falsehood is allowed for.

Definition 6. A judgment is a relation of a mind to several objects, one of which is a relation. It is true if that relation relates the other objects, and false otherwise.

Russell offers this as a ‘ first approximation ’. Both horns of the dilemma are now avoided. There is no one thing judged, true or false, but a false judgment still has several objects before the mind, all of them real, so we don’t judge falsely with nothing before us. And nothing false exists outside the judgment: falsehood is just the judged relation failing to relate. 120
Note also what the theory isn’t. The judgment has no single object, so truth can’t be a match between that object and a fact. Correspondence holds among the objects themselves: love either relates *A* and *B* or it doesn’t.

Question 7. In the judgment, is love a relation that is actually relating something, or only one term among others? If only a term, how does it differ from *A* and *B*?

Perception. The theory is also meant to explain why perception isn’t liable to error, as judgment is. Russell assumes, 122
without arguing it here, that whatever we perceive exists while we perceive it. In dreams and hallucinations the perception is correct, and the error lies in a judgment based on it. With no false cases, the single-object theory that failed for judgment fits perception.

Example 8. I see a knife to the left of a book. Perception gives me one complex object, ‘ knife-to-left-of-book ’. Analysing 123
it, I judge that the knife is to the left of the book, and now the knife, the book and the relation are before my mind separately. Perception needs its object, so if I perceive the complex, it exists, and the knife is to the left of the book. So any judgment got from perception by mere analysis must be true. But this doesn’t make us certain, in any given case, that a judgment is true, since we may unwittingly have done more than merely analyse what perception gave us.



Where the complex is perceived, it is the Objective of the perception. Where it isn’t, it is still the necessary and sufficient condition of the judgment’s truth. There was such an event as Charles I’s death on the scaffold, so (4-1) is true. There was 123
no death in his bed, so (4-2) is false. If *A* loves *B*, there’s such a complex as *A*’s love for *B*, and conversely. Compare the complexes of Russell’s ‘ Analytic realism ’.

Question 9. The theory of truth is supposed to come before epistemology, and this is the one piece of epistemology Russell allows himself. If perception can err after all, what’s left of the contrast with judgment? 124

Truth redrawn. The first approximation can’t yet tell (4-3) apart from:

(4-4) *B* loves *A*.

Both have the same objects, *A*, love and *B*, yet they’re different judgments. So love can’t be before the mind abstractly. It 123
must be before it as going from *A* to *B* rather than from *B* to *A*. Russell distinguishes two ‘ senses ’ of a relation, one for each direction, and the relation enters the judgment with one of them. The corresponding complex must contain it with 124
the same sense.

Now the final version. Judging that *a* has *R* to *b* is a relation of the mind to *a*, *b*, and *R* with a given sense. The corresponding complex is *a* and *b* related by *R* with that sense. The judgment is true when there is such a complex, and false when there isn’t. The same goes, with changes, for every other judgment. Truth is correspondence, then, but 124
complexes appear only on the side of what makes a judgment true, never as what is judged.

Question 10. If love is only one term among others, how can it carry a direction? Being before the mind ‘ as proceeding from *A* to *B* ’ sounds like relating *A* to *B*, which is just what a false judgment mustn’t need. Should the direction belong to the judging relation instead?

Mind and truth. Now truth and falsehood are properties of judgments, so without minds there’d be neither. But the 124
corresponding complex doesn’t contain the person judging, unless the judgment is about oneself. So whether a judgment is true doesn’t depend on who makes it or when. Russell concludes that the ‘ mixture ’ of dependence on mind and independence of mind is preserved.

Question 11. Is it a mixture, or just realism about what makes judgments true plus a choice of truth-bearers? And what complex makes ‘ Homer did not exist ’ true? Russell himself notes that it isn’t Homer. 119