

Russell's Early Metaphysics of Propositions

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ABSTRACT: In Bertrand Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics* and related works, the notion of a *proposition* plays an important role; it is by analyzing propositions, showing what kinds of constituents they have, that Russell arrives at his core logical concepts. At this time, his conception of proposition contains both a conventional and an unconventional part. The former is the view that propositions are the ultimate truth-bearers; the latter is the view that the constituents of propositions are “worldly” entities. In the latter respect, Russellian propositions are akin to states-of-affairs on some robust understanding of these entities. The idea of Russellian propositions is well known, at least in outline. Not so well known is his treatment of *truth*, which nevertheless grows directly out of this notion of proposition. For the early Russell, the import of truth is primarily *metaphysical*, rather than semantic; reversing the usual direction of explanation, he holds that truth is explanatory of what is the case rather than *vice versa*. That is, what properties a thing has and what relations it bears to other things is determined, metaphysically speaking, by there being a suitable array of true and false propositions. In the present paper, this doctrine is examined for its content and motivation. To show that it plays a genuine role in Russell's early metaphysics and logic, I examine its consequences for (1) the possibility of *truth-definitions* and (2) the problem of the *unity of the proposition*. I shall draw a few somewhat tentative conclusions about where Russell stood vis-à-vis his metaphysics of propositions, suggesting a possible source of dissatisfaction that may have played a role in his eventual rejection of his early notion of proposition.

KEYWORDS: assertion, facts, propositional unity, propositions, truth, truth-definitions, truth-primitivism

I. Introduction

Bertrand Russell made several contributions to philosophy of truth. On the negative side, we find his criticisms of idealist accounts of truth¹ as well as William James's pragmatist conception of truth as "anything which it pays to believe".² On the positive side, he is best remembered for his defence of a version of the correspondence theory of truth. Russell became an advocate of truth as correspondence around 1910, when he definitively ceased to believe in propositions as single entities and began to explain them as "judgmental complexes".³ Less well known is his *earlier treatment of truth*, which goes together with the notion of *proposition* that he held before adopting the multiple-relation theory of judgment, a development that begun sometimes around 1906–07.⁴ On the latter view, a propositional attitude like judging or believing is not a relation between the subject of the attitude and a single entity, a proposition, but one between that subject and several entities; when Othello judges or believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, Othello is related to Desdemona, Cassio and the relation of loving in a way that accounts for his believing *that* Desdemona loves Cassio. In accordance with the correspondence theory of truth, the belief is true if and only if the corresponding fact or "complex whole", namely Desdemona's love for Cassio, is there. On the earlier theory, by contrast, propositions *are* taken as single entities. When Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, Othello, who is the subject, stands in a suitable cognitive relation to a single entity, namely the proposition that Desdemona loves Cassio – the proposition happens to be false, but such is the case with some propositions. Such a construction of "propositional attitudes" is familiar; what distinguishes Russell's early views from more conventional accounts is his insistence that propositional constituents are "ordinary" or "worldly"

¹ Russell (1910: Ch. 6). Russell seems to be inclined to run all idealist accounts of truth together under the rubric of "monistic theory", and the target of his criticisms is the version of coherence theory that Harold Joachim had developed in chapter III of his *The Nature of Truth* (Joachim 1906).

² Russell (1910: Ch. 5).

³ Russell's first, tentative endorsement of truth as correspondence is to be found in section 3 of his (1907), and, then, in a more definitive form, in (1910: Ch. 7), which is a revised version of the older paper. For Russell's understanding of truth in the context of the multiple relation theory of judgment, see his (1912: Ch. 12) and (1913). As is to be expected, Russell held more than one version of the theory; when he gave up on the multiple-relation theory of judgment, in 1919, he did not reject correspondence. A later version is worked out in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*; see Russell (1940: Chs. 16, 17 and 21).

⁴ Thus, when I use the description "the early Russell" and talk about his "early metaphysics of propositions", these phrases refer to the post-idealist Russell who authored such works as *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), *Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions* (1904) and *On Denoting* (1905).

entities. It is this idea of *Russellian proposition* that will be explored in the present paper.⁵ Russell's development of this notion is quite well-known and is often contrasted to Frege's notion of thought; the two are, functionally speaking, similar in some respects, but differ in that Fregean thoughts consists of *senses* of linguistic expressions, rather than their referents.

What is less well known is Russell's treatment of truth, which nevertheless grows directly out of this notion of proposition. As is to be expected, perhaps, Russell's view that the constituents of propositions are worldly entities – Desdemona, Cassio and the relation of loving, rather than the senses of the *expressions* “Desdemona”, “Cassio” and “loves” – makes propositions metaphysically fundamental; they are comparable to *states of affairs* on some robust construal of that notion. Thus, for the early Russell, the notion of truth is not primarily a *semantic* notion; he does not invoke truth to explain how thought or the expression of thought comes into contact with reality. Rather, the import of truth is *metaphysical*: propositions – true as well as false – constitute the ontological ground for things' being thus and so; what properties a thing has and what relations it bears to other things is determined, metaphysically speaking, by there being a suitable array of true and false propositions.

This paper concerns the doctrine of truth that is contained in the early Russell's notion of proposition. I will explain its content and explore its motivation and some of its consequences. I will proceed as follows. Sections II and III are concerned with the general notion of proposition as well as Russell's version of it. In sections IV and V I shall consider the implications that his metaphysics of truth has for the concept of truth itself. The rest of the paper – sections VI to VIII – will be concerned with the details of Russell's theory of propositions. Here the bulk of discussion is devoted to the problem of the unity of the proposition and how the early Russell proposed to solve that problem. I shall draw a few somewhat tentative conclusions about where Russell stood *vis-à-vis* his metaphysics of propositions.

II. Introducing propositions

The notion of a *proposition* plays a prominent role in Russell's philosophy after his rejection of idealism.⁶ Its function is partly negative and

⁵ Of course, the term “Russellian proposition” is nowadays common philosophical currency. A Russellian (or ‘singular’) proposition is one which is about a particular individual – say, Desdemona – in virtue of containing that very individual as a constituent. The point behind Russell's own construal is similar, although it applies more widely.

⁶ This development began sometimes around 1897–1898, and was heavily influenced, first, by G. E. Moore, and then, from 1900 on, by Peano and Cantor. For an excellent account of many of the key issues, see Levine (1998).

partly positive, or constructive. On the negative side, Russell invokes propositions to undermine a number of misconceptions about knowledge, cognition, truth and meaning, misconceptions which he associated with idealism. On the positive side, propositions figure prominently in the new, post-idealist philosophy, which is self-consciously *analytic* in character; for instance, it is by analyzing propositions, showing what kinds of constituents they have, that the logicist Russell arrives at his core logical concepts. And, of course, the negative side is not purely negative, either; Russell not only rejected what he saw as other philosophers' mistakes but suggested new and better theories.

Russell's conception of propositions combines elements that are familiar and quite traditional with others that are quite radically at odds not only with philosophical tradition but also with much that passes muster among more recent philosophers (although at least some of these unconventional ideas, or something close to them, have advocates also among contemporary philosophers). What Russell has to say about propositions thus includes both a conventional and an unconventional part. The conventional part consists of the following two theses:

- (1) Propositions are *what* is believed (said, asserted, etc.); propositions *qua* contents.
- (2) Propositions *qua* contents are the truth-value bearers.

A familiar, *minimal characterization* of propositions would start from (1). Given that our beliefs, assertions, sayings etc. are evaluable for truth, we note – formulating the point in terms of “speakables,” rather than “thinkables” or “assertibles” – that they possess a truth-value not in virtue of the audible shape of an utterance, but in virtue of *meaning*, or more simply, in virtue of *what* is said by means of that utterance. This *what is said* is just the proposition expressed by that utterance on a minimal construal of what propositions are. From this it is then concluded that, on the minimal construal, propositions are not only contents but also entities to which a truth-value can be assigned; this is point (2).

This minimal characterization is usually accompanied by the further view that propositions, so conceived, perform a broadly *semantic* function. This is suggested by the use of the word “content” in the minimal characterization; propositions *qua* contents are regarded as the contents of some propositional *acts*, which may be either linguistic or mental in character. This yields the following further thesis:

- (3) Propositions *qua* contents/truth-value bearers are, or specify, *truth-conditions*.

This, however, is *not* how the early Russell sees the matter. He does subscribe to the minimal characterization of propositions, but when he speaks of propositions in the sense characterized by (1) and (2), he refers to them as *objects* of acts, rather than their *contents*. This terminological choice is conscious, I think, indicating his rejection, at that time, of all varieties of what we may call “representationalism”, or the view that thought is essentially a matter of representation.⁷

Russell did not, at that time, recognize any entities that could have performed the role of representations. He was quite unable to understand talk of ‘content’ in any other way than one that inevitably led to charges of “psychologism”; for him, “contents” were essentially mental items, “states of mind” or “subjective modifications”.⁸ When, for example, he encountered Frege’s notion of thought (*Gedanke*), he mistook it for a mental item, as is shown by the following well-known passage from a letter to Frege:

Concerning *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* I cannot see but difficulties which I cannot overcome. [...] I believe that in spite of all its snowfields Mont Blanc itself is a component part of what is actually asserted in the proposition [*Satz*], ‘Mont Blanc is over 4000 metres high’. We do not assert the thought, for this is a private psychological matter: we assert the object of the thought, and this is, to my mind, a certain complex (an objective proposition [*ein objectiver Satz*], one might say) in which Mont Blanc is itself a component part. If we do not admit this, then we get the conclusion that we know nothing at all about Mont Blanc.⁹

Russell is emphatic that “we do not assert the thought”: after all, a thought is a private psychological matter,¹⁰ and if assertion employed such private entities, the possibility would have to be renounced of our ever really knowing anything. This line of thought is a familiar anti-psychologistic strategy and can be found in such thinkers as, for example, Bradley and Frege himself.

⁷ “Anti-representationalism” was a rather stable element in Russell’s thought; it survived the transition into the multiple-relation theory of judgment and was only given up in 1919, with what Graham Stevens (2005: Ch. 5) has called the ‘re-psychologizing’ of the proposition.

⁸ Cf. Russell (1913: 41–44).

⁹ Russell’s letter to Frege, December 12th, 1904. English translation of the letter is given in Frege (1980: 169).

¹⁰ The spirit of Russell’s remark comes out better, perhaps, in the original German: “Man behauptet nicht den Gedanken, der ja psychologische Privatsache ist: man behauptet das objekt des Gedankens, und dies ist meines Erachtens ein gewisser Complex [...] worin der Mont Blanc selber ein Bestandtheil ist” (Frege (1976: 250–1)). Russell’s claim here, I take it, is intended as a reminder; *of course* we do not assert a thought, for thought is, after all, a mental item and, as such, belongs essentially to its owner.

As Russell saw it, the only way to avoid psychologism was to emphasize the objective and independent character of the objects of thoughts, or propositions. And for Russell, objectivity and independence were straightforwardly metaphysical – rather than, say, epistemic – notions. When one asserts that Mont Blanc is over 4000 meters high, what one asserts does not in any way *represent* a certain mountain as being one way rather than another; what is asserted is a certain *object*, which is a complex containing the mountain itself as a constituent or “component part”. For the early Russell, then, propositions are, indeed, *Russellian propositions* in the broad sense that their constituents are objects and properties, like Desdemona, Cassio and the relation of loving, rather than their representations.

Apart from considerations concerning the nature of representing entities, Russell has another reason for being sceptical about representationalism. Or at any rate – as the considerations that follow may be just the other side of one and the same issue – we may follow up Russell’s reasons and reach his conclusion starting, not from issues relating to how truth gets represented, but from truth itself.

Propositions can be identified with the help of a feature that relates them to cognition; this is exactly what was done above, where it was said that propositions are the objects of thought. From Russell’s point of view, however, this procedure at best succeeds in identifying these entities by means of a feature that belongs to them only accidentally. *Really* to understand what propositions are, one must turn to these entities themselves and consider them apart from their possible relation to cognition. Considered in this abstract way, propositions turn out to be, first and foremost, entities to which *truth and falsity are ascribed*. Accordingly, in the Preface to *Principles*, we find Russell introducing the term “proposition” as the name for “the true or false as such” (Russell 1903: xix). As we shall see, though, this is not the only important “objective” feature that propositions possess. For possession of truth-value presupposes that propositions are *complex entities*,¹¹ and much of Russell’s discussion of propositions revolves around this feature, as it turns out to be the hardest one to explain. Very briefly, the problem is this. Propositions are at once several objects, as they are complexes consisting of their constituents, and yet they are single entities as well, as they must be genuine unities. This *problem of unity* was a constant trouble to Russell and we shall come across it later, in sections VII and VIII.

¹¹ Thus we find Russell arguing in *Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions* that he would be inclined to *define* propositions as entities “having a certain particular kind of complexity” (1905: 494). Since the relevant kind of complexity is such that it underlies truth and falsity, a characterization of propositions in terms of truth-value ascription is not off the mark (and may, in the end, turn out to be essential).

In introducing propositions, then, one may skip the whole issue of “objects of thought” and consider propositions directly as truth-value bearers. To be sure, there is no direct route from the notion of “the true or false as such” to that of a Russellian proposition; as was indicated above, everything here depends upon the “nature of truth”. And here we find the same reasons that were operative in the first case. Truth, Russell holds, is objective in the sense of being *independent* in a number of ways. Most importantly, truth is independent of the knowing subject, or, as he puts it in the Preface to *Principles*, “what is true or false is not in general mental” (1903: xix). Together with a number of further assumptions concerning the nature of independence and the mental, Russell uses this premise to arrive at the notion of propositions as complexes of worldly entities.

Summing up the discussion so far, Russell regards propositions first and foremost as complex entities to which truth and falsity are ascribed; this, indeed, is what propositions really are, from the point of view of logic. On this point his approach is entirely traditional. His anti-representationalism, however, leads him to discard the other part of tradition, to wit, the idea that a proposition owes its truth-value to something that is external to it. Understood in a way that gives it no more content than is licensed by calling it the “correspondence platitude”, this idea is, indeed, a serious candidate for featuring on a list of platitudes about truth. Such is the subtlety of philosophical discussions about truth, though, that it is difficult to find a neutral formulation of the idea that would be immune to more committal readings,¹² but calling it a “platitude” should make it sufficiently clear that what is intended is a principle possessing no more than a minimal, non-controversial content. As Russell’s case shows, however, even the platitudinous reading can be resisted, as it depends on the assumption that truth-value is grounded in some circumstance that is external to the truth-bearer. The anti-representationalist Russell has no room for truth-value dependence in *this* sense; there is no condition in the world whose obtaining would be necessary for the truth of a proposition. Or, at any rate, this condition cannot be seen in any way distinct from the proposition itself. And this means that there is no gap between a proposition’s being true and something’s being the case: facts simply *are* (that is, are identical with) true propositions. In a sense, then, Russell’s conception of proposition combines the two roles of *being a truth-bearer* and *being a truth-conferring condition*; Russellian propositions are similar to propositions as ordinarily understood, as they are the entities that possess a truth-value, *but* they are *also* similar to states-of-affairs or facts, on some

¹² Cf. Dodd (2002).

robust understanding of these terms, as their constituents are ordinary objects, properties and relations. Hence we arrive at the following two theses, which together constitute the gist of the early Russell's conception of proposition:

- (4) Propositions are complex entities that are true or false;
- (5) The constituents of propositions are worldly entities (object, properties relations).

III. The Identity Theory of Truth

The identification of true propositions with facts might be taken to suggest that the early Russell's thinking about truth is best aligned with the so-called *identity theory of truth*. The gist of this theory can be captured by some such formulation as the following:

- (*Id*) A proposition is true if and only if there is a piece of reality with which it is identical.

(This is no more than a first approximation, but it is good enough for our purposes.) If, however, we take (*Id*) to be a reasonable characterization of the identity theory, we cannot really say that the early Russell's views on truth were in line with that theory. For Russell held that *not only true propositions but false as well have their worldly counterparts*. When a belief is true, its object is a true proposition that is "out there", or is a piece of reality; but equally, when a belief is *false*, it has an object, namely a certain false proposition, which is no less out there, no less a piece of reality, than a proposition that is true.¹³ The reason for this is straightforward. We can scarcely hold that when our belief is false, or when we judge what is false, our belief or judgment has no object, i.e., that when a belief or a judgment is false, we have not, in fact, succeeded in thinking anything. When we think, for example, that Charles I died peacefully in his bed, there clearly is something that we think, although that something is not true.

It is quite clear, furthermore, that Russell's analytical ambitions at that time were quite different from those of an identity-theorist.¹⁴ The lat-

¹³ See, for instance, Russell (1905: 503). This is one of the features of his early conception of propositions that Russell later began to have doubts about; for he found it more and more difficult to believe that there could be "objective falsehoods" independently of judgment; see Russell (1910: 119).

¹⁴ Admittedly, this claim is not entirely unproblematic in view of the fact that it is rather difficult to find an convincing example of a philosopher who has actually held the identity theory of truth and whose "analytical ambitions" we could compare with Russell's; such recent examples as Hornsby (1997) and Dodd (2000) can be readily dismissed,

ter professes to give an account of truth, of what truth consists in, and to this end he mobilizes a notion of 'reality' or 'fact' or 'something's being the case', which is available independently of the notion of a true proposition and in terms of which the content of the latter notion is to be captured. The early Russell has none of this; as we shall see in the next section, his explanatory strategy is in fact an exact opposite of what an advocate of the identity theory of truth would hold. It follows, then, that the early Russell was not an identity theorist.

IV. Truth-Primitivism

Rather than an identity theorist, the early Russell was a *primitivist about truth*. That is, he accepted the view that propositions are true or false – from now on I will apply the term “proposition” to the entities to which the primitivist ascribes truth and falsity – but he also thought that this feature is not amenable to any further explanation in any metaphysical or comparable sense, but must be taken as a primitive feature of propositions. This means, in particular, that the truth or falsity of a proposition does not consist of anything. It is an important characteristic of truth-primitivism, as here understood, that this “does not consist of anything” does not lead the primitivist to conclude, as someone advocating a “redundancy theory” might, that the general notion of truth would be, for that reason, devoid of content or interest. On the contrary, a primitivist holds that truth does have an important role to play or that the notion of true proposition can be put to use for some explanatory purpose. What this role is, is a question that may be answered in different ways; for Russell, the role is *metaphysical*, and it is this distinctively metaphysical role that I seek to elucidate in what follows.

because it is evident that they renounce the analytical ambitions of the “genuine” identity theorist. For example, Dodd's identity-theory is no more than the quasi-Fregean claim that facts are true propositions, a claim which he uses to undermine robust conceptions of facts and, with them, correspondence accounts of truth. The most promising candidate for an identity theorist is probably F. H. Bradley (Bradley (1907) is his clearest statement of the identity theory; cf. Candlish (1989)), although even here the applicability of (*Id*) is not without problems. Bradley held the view, germane to his metaphysics, that there really is an unbridgeable gap between thought and reality: the former is necessarily something general, whereas the latter is particular; even judgments that appear at first sight to be singular turn out to be irrevocably general. Hence, thought (that is, judgments) can give at best a one-sided and incomplete picture of reality, one that necessarily falls short of capturing its object. Therefore, thought could be wholly true only if, *per impossibile*, it ceased to be thought and merged into reality thus becoming one with it. No doubt, there is much here that is eccentric. Nevertheless, this “disappearance theory of truth” does seem to provide an account of what truth is in the sense of explaining what it consist in, even though this condition is one that truth-bearers cannot fulfil (or can fulfil only to some extent).

What kind of explanation is Russell after, and what is it that it tries to explain? To begin with, he is committed to the following two theses about truth:

- (6) Facts are true propositions.
- (7) The identification mentioned in (6) is explanatory of what it is to be a *fact*.

Suppose it is a fact that Desdemona loves Othello. In Russell's view, this fact *is* the true proposition that Desdemona loves Othello.¹⁵ More simply, we can omit any mention of facts and say that, in this view, Desdemona's loving Cassio and the proposition that Desdemona loves Othello are *one and the same thing*. This identification, in other words, is meant to be a *serious* one. And to take it seriously is to recognize the *metaphysically constitutive role* that is here assigned to propositions. This role – a special case of it, to be precise – is captured by the following *Principle of Truth*:

- (PT) a thing, *a*, has a property, *F*, if and only if the proposition */a* is *F*/ is true.¹⁶

In general, a thing's having a property or standing in a relation to other things is for a proposition, describable in a particular way, to be true.¹⁷ (PT) or its generalization is meant to be more than just a (necessary) equivalence (necessarily, for every fact there is a corresponding proposition); it is intended to capture the metaphysically fundamental role that this conception assigns to true and false propositions: an entity has a property, *because* there is a proposition, describable in a certain way that is true (and similarly for something's not being the case and false propositions). Accordingly, we might reformulate (PT) in the following way, to highlight its role as an *explanatory* principle (explanatory in the sense – whatever it may be – that is relevant in metaphysics):

- (PT') if a thing, *a*, has a property, *F*, that is *because* there is a proposition, */a* is *F*/, that is true.

More simply, since talk of explanation may introduce unnecessary complications here, we might do best, if we formulate the principle in a straightforwardly metaphysical idiom:

- (PT'') given a thing, *a*, its having a property, *F*, *consists* in there being a proposition, */a* is *F*/, that is true.

¹⁵ This identification is argued at some length for in Russell (1905).

¹⁶ I follow the convention introduced in Griffin (1981: 119), and use slashes, '/', to mention a Russellian proposition or an entity that is one of its constituents.

¹⁷ What this "particular way" is, is an issue which will be addressed below, in section VI.

To the best of my knowledge, the early Russell nowhere gives an explicit formulation of this principle. That he was committed to it, however, is something that may be argued for on the grounds that it helps us make sense of an *argument against truth-definitions* that was an essential ingredient in his thinking about truth.

V. Against Truth Definitions

To be a primitivist about truth means, among other things, that one is committed to rejecting truth-definitions in any sense that involves the “provision of illuminating conceptual equivalences”.¹⁸ The primitivist line of thought that we shall consider below enjoyed some popularity among early analytic philosophers. It is probably best known from Frege’s works, but it is also present in the early Moore and Russell.¹⁹ Here there is no space for a detailed exegesis, but I am inclined to think it really is *one* argument. Before discussing any of the details, it is good to have Russell’s clearest statement of the argument before our eyes.²⁰ It can be found in a paper entitled “The Nature of Truth,” which was read to the Jowett Society, Oxford, in June 1905.²¹

Russell begins his paper by a critical discussion of definitions of truth that make use of some notion of correspondence; this is the sort of definition that, he says, “appeals most to the plain man”.²² Having first discussed and rejected a possible interpretation of ‘correspondence’, he provides an argument that has a more general scope:

But even supposing some other definition of correspondence with reality could be found, a more general argument against definitions of truth would still hold good. An idea is to be true when it corresponds with reality, *i.e.* when it is true that it corresponds with reality, *i.e.* when the idea that it corresponds with reality corresponds with reality, and so on. This will never do.

¹⁸ Wright (1999: 203).

¹⁹ Frege’s version is found in his late essay *Thoughts*, published in 1918 (an English translation can be found in Frege 1984) as well as in some of his unpublished texts; for a discussion of Frege’s views, see Greimann (2003: 195–214). The idea is clearly present in Moore’s well-known essay *The Nature of Judgment* (Moore 1899), though it does not receive an explicit discussion there; Moore also mentions it in his entry on truth in *Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy of Psychology* (Moore 1902).

²⁰ Russell gives an early version of something like this argument in a manuscript entitled “The Fundamental Ideas and Axioms of Mathematics,” which he composed in 1899; see Russell (1899: 285). I cannot discuss this version here, however.

²¹ Russell (1905). This paper, which was published only posthumously, should not be confused with other papers by Russell that bear similar titles: Russell (1906), (1907) and (1910).

²² Russell (1905: 492).

In short, if we don't know the difference between a proposition's being true and not being true, we don't know the difference between a thing's having a property and not having it, and therefore we can't define a thing as true when it has a certain property such as corresponding with reality.²³

On the face of it, this passage comes remarkably close to a much better known one from Frege:

But could we not maintain that there is truth when there is correspondence in a certain respect. But which respect? For in that case what ought we to do so as to decide whether something is true? We should have to inquire whether it is *true* that an idea and a reality, say, correspond in the specified respect. And then we should be confronted by a question of the same kind again, and the same game could begin again. So the attempted explanation of truth as correspondence breaks down. And any other attempt to define truth also breaks down. For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be specified. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were *true* that the characteristics were present. So we should be going round in a circle. So it seems likely that the content of the word 'true' is *sui generis* and indefinable.²⁴

According to Michael Dummett, such arguments give the first impression of sophistry;²⁵ he is of course thinking of Frege's formulation, but the point can certainly be applied to Russell as well. Against Frege we may raise this question: Why should it be that we can determine whether a content, say <snow is white>, corresponds with reality only by determining whether it is *true* that the said content corresponds with reality? Why can we not say that we can determine whether the content is true simply by carrying out appropriate investigations, which, if successful, will put us in a position to assert that snow is, or is not, white? Of course, underlying Frege's argument, there is the further view that in judging we acknowledge a thought to be true,²⁶ and hence his reply to the Dummett-style question would be that when we judge that snow is white, we acknowledge the truth of the thought that snow is white, and that for this reason the suggested dialectical move would be of no help to an advocate of the correspondence theory. But why would that be? Why does truth enter the picture that way? Similarly, what justifies the immediate transition, as in Russell's argument, from 'an idea corresponds with reality' to 'it is true that an idea corresponds with reality'? No doubt, it is possible to find a

²³ Russell (1905: 493–4).

²⁴ Frege (1984: 353).

²⁵ Dummett (1973: 443).

²⁶ This is a recurrent theme in Frege's philosophy. He discusses it, for instance, in Frege (1918); see Frege (1984: 354–6).

sense in which the transition is legitimate, but it is far from clear that this sense would generate a circle or regress that is vicious to the extent of undermining the very idea of truth-definitions.

The most plausible explanation here is that both Russell (at this time) and Frege (most probably throughout his career) rejected the basic picture underlying the correspondence theory. And their general arguments against truth-definitions are profitably seen as spelling out the consequences that this rejection has for the possibility of such definitions. The correspondence theorist thinks that a thought (proposition, truth-bearer) is one entity and the condition that determines it as true or false is another entity. Given this, it follows that even when a proposition is true, it remains distinct from the condition the obtaining of which ensures that the proposition is true. Hence, from the viewpoint of a correspondence theorist, the regress that Russell identifies in the passage, if it is there at all, is entirely harmless. A correspondence theorist would say that the regress is at best a matter of a correlation obtaining between true propositions and facts making them true; since the two are distinct, there is no reason to think that the regress is vicious.²⁷ On the other hand, Frege is, of course, correct in maintaining that there is a relationship between judgments and truth, but an advocate of the correspondence theory is in a position to argue, as against Frege, that a judgment that something is the case is nevertheless distinct from the judgment that it is true that something is the case.

The truth-primitivist's thinking about truth is grounded in presuppositions that are quite different from those that underlie the correspondence theory. The truth-primitivist builds his criticism of truth-definitions on the exceedingly close connection he perceives to be there between truths and facts, between something's being true and something's being the case, between 'a proposition *p* is true' and 'an entity *e* has a property *P*'; truth cannot be explained away, or defined, for once the truth-fact connection is admitted to be there and is understood in the primitivist way, the conclusion lies at hand that *any* attempt to explain or define truth by refer-

²⁷ And it is not clear whether the correspondence theorist is committed to there being any regress in the first place. If truth is taken to be a matter of simple truth-fact correlation – in the manner of J. L. Austin – the regress is there but it is harmless. Corresponding to a true content, <snow is white>, there is the fact that snow is white. And if snow is white, it is true that snow is white, and hence there is also the fact that it is true that snow is white, and so on. But <snow is white> is made true by the fact that snow is white, and <it is true that snow is white> is made true by the fact that it is true that snow is white. All these entities are distinct, and the regress in no way undermines the 'possibility of truth-definitions'. On the other hand, the correlation between a 'truth-bearer' and a 'truth-maker' could be understood in some other way – the currently popular notion of truth-making might be helpful here – and then there might be no regress in the first place for the correspondence theorist to worry about.

ring to some *fact*, the obtaining of which would *constitute* the truth of a proposition, is bound to return the notion of truth, or of true proposition. Therefore, an attempted definition of truth gives rise to a regress, as Russell argues in the passage, or possibly, an explanatory circle, both of which are vicious.

At least in Russell's case, the argument is best construed as a metaphysical regress-argument that is grounded in the fact-truth identity.²⁸ It is therefore a straightforward development of the fundamentals of the primitivist position.²⁹ Nevertheless, two versions of the argument can be distinguished, at least as long as it is considered in abstract. On the first version, the point of the argument is to establish the conclusion that *truth is a primitive property*. The second version of the argument is more radical; it seeks to dispense with the entire schema of predication, the notion of an entity possessing a property, as metaphysically primitive and replace it with the notion of a true proposition, which itself is not a case of property possession.

On the first version, the notion 'a proposition *p* is true' is considered a special case of 'an entity *e* has a property *P*', and the vicious regress/circle argument is taken to show that the fundamental case of predication is that in which truth is predicated of a proposition; a proposition *p* is true, because *p* has some property like that of corresponding with reality. But since 'corresponds with reality' is itself an instance of the predicative schema, it must be grounded in the truth of a suitable proposition, which is then analyzed in accordance with the proposed definition, etc.

²⁸ Perhaps we could combine the regress- and circularity aspects by saying that the argument claims to reveal a metaphysical regress in attempted definitions of truth, which gives rise to an explanatory circle. In this paper I shall say nothing about Frege's version of the argument except for the following two points. Firstly, understanding Frege's position is made difficult by the difficulty of seeing how one is supposed to combine the judgment-truth connection ('in judging we acknowledge the truth of a judgment'), which for Frege generates the regress/circle, and the apparently quite different conception of truth which is also found in Frege and which many have regarded as a precursor to the so-called 'redundancy theory of truth' (see, for example, Frege 1918: 354). This theory says that 'it is true that Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March' says no more and no less than 'Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March', i.e. that a separate truth-predicate is redundant. If this is so, then, how are we to flesh out the notion of 'acknowledging a thought to be true' in a way that would support rather than undermine Frege's truth-primitivism? This suggests the possibility – and this is the second point – that in Frege's case, too, the principle generating the vicious regress/circle is a metaphysical one concerning the identity of facts with true propositions.

²⁹ My reconstruction of Russell's argument is similar to that which is proposed in Ricketts (2001). Ricketts says the passage is "obscure". For my part, I would contend that we can make it tolerably clear, if not transparent, by applying the Principle of Truth to it.

Russell's argument in "On the Nature of Truth" goes further than this. Although he expresses himself in terms of knowing (understanding), the thrust of the argument is really metaphysical. As I read the passage, the argument against truth-definitions relies on the *Principle of Truth*; assuming this, his reasoning becomes tolerably straightforward and transparent. Suppose, again, that our candidate for the explication of truth is "corresponds with reality". We then have:

- (1) a proposition p is true if and only if p corresponds with reality.

"Corresponds with reality" appears to be an ordinary predication: the right-hand side of the biconditional attributes a certain relational property to all true propositions. The definition, then, attempts to capture the nature of truth by identifying the property that truth consists in. The next step is the crux of Russell's argument. Since " p corresponds with reality" is an instance of the general schema "entity e has property X ", the Principle of Truth is brought to bear on it. This yields the following biconditional:

- (2) p corresponds with reality if and only if it is true that p corresponds with reality

Or, using the notation introduced above:

- (3) $/p/$ corresponds with reality if and only if the proposition $/p$ corresponds with reality/ is true.

Again, to eliminate truth from the right-hand side, the correspondence theorist applies his definition (1) to it. But this move reintroduces truth, rather than eliminates it. Hence a putative definition of truth – *any* definition of truth – yields a vicious infinite regress. The conclusion is that the notion of truth, or that of a true proposition, cannot be eliminated in favour of something more fundamental. So far this is not different from the first version. In the passage quoted above, however, Russell seems to give a new twist to the argument, when he argues – or, rather, asserts – that "if we don't know the difference between a proposition's being true and not being true, we don't know the difference between a thing's having a property and not having it and therefore we *can't define a thing as true when it has a certain property* such as corresponding with reality". As I read it, what Russell is saying here is not only that truth is something primitive; his conclusion is that truth is not a property at all. The distinction between truth and falsity, or between true and false propositions, is more fundamental than the distinction between having and not having a property; which means that the former distinction cannot be understood by dint of the latter. And the reason why the thrust of Russell's argument is metaphysical rather than something else is that the principle generating

the regress has to do with the metaphysics of predication; speaking metaphysically, something's having a property consists in the truth of a certain proposition; which is our Principle (*PT'*) above.³⁰

It is not clear how meticulously Russell observed the distinction. When he speaks of truth and falsity, he often expresses himself in a manner that at least suggests that he advocated the primitive property-view, rather than the more radical no property-view. For instance, in a well-known passage at the end of "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions" truth-primitivism is formulated as the view that "there is no problem at all in truth and falsehood; that some propositions are true and others are false, just as some roses are red and some white"³¹ The analogy with red and white roses certainly indicates the primitive property-view; on the other hand, as I have just argued, when the reasons for primitivism are spelled out, this is done in a way that would seem to commit him to the more radical view.

A single passage from an unpublished paper may look like rather inconclusive evidence for attributing a thesis like (*PT'*) to Russell. Further evidence, however, can be gleaned from his treatment of truth and related matters in *Principles*. Above all, there is the notion of *assertion* that Russell uses to distinguish true propositions from the false ones.³² As he uses it, assertion is nothing psychological or linguistic: it is not an act, something that human beings might accomplish; it is strictly a "logical notion". Unfortunately, he fails to attach any very clear sense to this logical notion of assertion (possibly, one suspects, because there is no coherent notion to be explicated here), but the more important point is that assertion – and, hence, truth – is something *sui generis* also as regards

³⁰ Conceivably, one could interpret the italicized phrase – "can't define a thing as true when it has a certain property" – as being concerned with *definition*, and not *truth*, but the reason given for this, namely that understanding the difference between truth and falsity or between the notion of a true proposition and proposition that is not true is somehow presupposed in understanding the difference between having and not having a property – suggests that Russell would hold the impossibility of truth-definitions to depend upon the nature of truth – truth is fact-constituting – rather than anything that has to do with what goes on in definitions. Thus, one *might* suggest that truth cannot be defined because the proposed definition would have to be *true*, and, therefore, that grasping a putative definition of truth would presuppose a prior grasp of the notion that the definition was supposed to render intelligible; there may be something of this in Russell (1899: 285). In *Principles*, section 17, Russell makes a similar point about the notion of implication, arguing that implication cannot be defined, because definitions themselves are bi-conditionals, that is, mutual implications. Hence, this idea was not strange to him. Nevertheless, in this paper I shall continue to construe Russell's argument in the way suggested in the text.

³¹ Russell (1904: 523).

³² See Russell (1903: §52).

its “logical form”,³³ and is therefore not to be assimilated into ordinary predication. It is perhaps natural to say that if truth and falsity are taken as properties of propositions (in general, as properties of truth-bearers), they can be captured by simple predications of the form “it is true that *p*” and “it is false that *p*”. Russell argues, however, that these must not be taken as the fundamental cases. In his own terminology, such simple predications indicate the presence of *external relations*.³⁴ That is, what is asserted in the proposition of the form /it is true that *p*/ is that a certain external relation holds between the proposition *p* and the term /truth/.³⁵ And Russell seems to think that what the Principle of Truth is needed to ground is precisely the holding of such external relations; which, if meant as a general principle, means that truth in the fundamental sense cannot be a matter of external relations and predication, but must be understood with the help of the notion of assertion.

Making full sense of the primitivist position would require us to consider and compare the primitive property and the no property view in the context of the primitivist position. The above remarks on assertion go some way in this direction, but it is clear that more exegetical work is needed here.³⁶ I shall now turn to a different issue, one that receives a good deal more attention from Russell at this time than anything that is directly related to truth and falsity. This is the problem of propositions and their constituents. For Russell at least, the most serious difficulty here is the *problem of the unity of the proposition*. As was pointed out above, the problem stems from the requirement of complexity. Propositions must be complex entities, for otherwise they could not possess a truth-value; at the same time, they must be single entities, that is, genuine unities. To reconcile these two features constitutes the problem of unity. As we shall see, Russell's views on truth have a direct bearing on this problem.

VI. Proposition and Terms

I have argued that propositions have a fundamental metaphysical role to play for the early Russell. A thing's having a property is grounded in there being a true proposition that is somehow concerned with the thing and the

³³ This, incidentally, was also Frege's view; Frege had a special assertion sign among his logical primitives.

³⁴ See Russell (1903: §§ 52 and 478).

³⁵ Or, possibly, between, a “propositional concept” and truth. A propositional concept is, roughly, what is left of a proposition when it is deprived of assertion; cf. *Principles*, §52.

³⁶ Ricketts (2001) contains a useful discussion. A comparison between Frege's and Russell's respective views on truth would be useful, but cannot be undertaken here.

property. What, then, must propositions be like in order that they may do this ontological job? What is the proposition like that makes it the case that Desdemona loves Othello? To explain this, we need to consider what Russell has to say about propositions and their constituents. The key notion here is the notion of *term*. In short, Russell's view is that propositions are *complexes of terms*.

As Russell uses it, "term" indicates nothing linguistic. A term is just an entity, a thing. In section 47 of *Principles* we find the following explanation:

Whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition, or can be counted as one, I call a *term*. This, then, is the widest word in the philosophical vocabulary.

In Russell's ontology around 1903, absolutely everything there is, is a term.³⁷ There are, metaphysically speaking, no (absolute) divisions of entities into different kinds. Thus, Russell accepts the following principle of *categorical uniformity*:

(CAT) Entities do not divide into different categories; everything there is, is a *term*.³⁸

As with propositions, terms can be characterized as *objects of thought* (cf. the previous quotation). This, however, is not essential to them, and does not reflect the intrinsic nature of terms, for a term need not be an object of any thought.³⁹ What is essential to them is that they occur in *propositions in a particular way*:

(Subj-1) Every term occurs in some propositions as a *logical subject*.

Consider again the proposition /Desdemona loves Othello/. Intuitively, this proposition is *about Desdemona*. Russell follows the intuition, laying down the following principle:

³⁷ To say that absolutely everything there is, is a term is not yet to say anything about *what* there is. Much has been written about the early Russell's ontological commitments, but the question is not relevant here.

³⁸ There is one exception to this. As Russell explains in *Principles*, §70, classes as many, even though there are such entities, are not terms, precisely because they cannot be counted as one, unlike classes as one, which are terms.

³⁹ Indeed, it is quite likely that Russell accepted that there were terms that could not be the objects of (human) thought, for instance, infinite classes as one; they can be grasped with the help of *denoting concepts*, but not directly, because of their infinite complexity; cf. Russell (1903: §72).

(*Subj-2*) The logical subject of a proposition is that entity which the proposition is *about*.⁴⁰

The proposition /Desdemona loves Othello/ is not only about Desdemona; it is equally about Othello as well. Othello, then, is a logical subject of the proposition no less than Desdemona. These two logical subjects are not all there is to the proposition; besides Desdemona and Othello, it has a third constituent, the relation /loving/. There is an important difference between this constituent and the logical subjects of the proposition; the proposition is not about the relation in the way it is about its other constituents. Using this intuitive criterion, a proposition's being vs. not being about some entity, Russell would hold that /loving/ does not occur as a logical subject in the said proposition.⁴¹ Of course, there are other propositions in which it does occur as a logical subject. For example, it occurs that way in the proposition /love is the bond that unites Desdemona and Othello/: this proposition is about Desdemona and Othello as well as the relation of loving.

Russell marks this difference between terms like Desdemona and Othello, on the one hand, and the relation /loving/, on the other hand, saying that entities of the former kind are *things*, whereas entities of the latter kind are *concepts*.⁴² A thing is a term that *occurs in propositions only as a logical subject*, whereas a concept is an *entity that occurs in some propositions as a logical subject and other propositions in a certain other way*, where the "other way" is illustrated by how the relation /loving/ occurs in the proposition /Desdemona loves Othello/.

(*Subj-1*) and its elaboration (*Subj-2*) constitute an essential part of Russell's doctrine of terms. Different explanations could be given why

⁴⁰ "I shall speak of the *terms* of a proposition as those terms, however numerous, which occur in a proposition and may be regarded as subjects about which the proposition is" (Russell (1903: §48)). In this quotation, Russell uses "term" in a sense that is different but related to the sense identified in the text: absolute any entity that can be counted as one is a term; every term occurs as a logical subject in some propositions; hence, it is natural to refer to the logical subject or subjects of a proposition as its *terms*.

⁴¹ An anonymous referee raised the following question about the test of aboutness: why can we not say that the proposition /*aRb*/ is as much about R as it is about *a* or *b*? After all, the proposition seems to say about the relation R that it is had by the pair *<a, b>*. It may be that Russell's "test" is not purely intuitive, but is simply a way of expressing the distinction between logical subjects or terms and other constituents of propositions. In which case the reply to the question would be as follows. If the content of "*aRb*" is perspicuously captured by "the relation R holds between *a* and *b*", then we must conclude that the proposition expressed by "*aRb*" does not have three but *four* constituents, which shows that not all constituents of a proposition can be regarded as logical subjects in Russell's sense, or entities that the proposition is about.

⁴² Russell (1903: §48).

Russell was committed to (*Subj-1*), or the view that all terms are capable of occurring as logical subjects. My suggestion is that we should see in it a fairly direct consequence of the Principle of Truth. Given Russell's conception of propositions and using his terminology, the Principle can be rewritten as follows: what a given entity is and is not like – what properties and relations it has and does not have – is determined by the array of true and false propositions *in which that entity occurs as a logical subject*. Hence, it would be a straightforward contradiction to hold that there is an entity that *cannot* occur as a logical subject. For not being able to occur as a logical subject in a proposition would be a fact about that supposed entity, but this fact would be nothing else than a proposition in which the term does occur as a logical subject. Russell argues for this point in *Principles*, section 49:

It might be thought that a distinction ought to be made between a concept as such and a concept used as a term, between, *e.g.*, such pairs as *is* and *being*, *human* and *humanity*, *one* in such a proposition as “this is one” and 1 in “1 is a number.” But inextricable difficulties will envelop us if we allow such a view. There is, of course, a grammatical difference, and this corresponds to a difference as regards relations. In the first case, the concept in question is used as a concept, that is, it is actually predicated of a term or asserted to relate two or more terms; while in the second case, the concept itself is said to have a predicate or a relation. There is, therefore, no difficulty in accounting for the grammatical difference. But what I wish to urge is, that the difference lies solely in external relations, and not in the intrinsic nature of the terms. 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, in which case the supposition 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, 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* as term. In short, if there were any adjectives which could not be made into substantives without a change of meaning, all propositions about such adjectives (since they would necessarily turn them into substantives) would be false, and so would the proposition that all such propositions are false, since this itself turns the adjectives into substantives. But this state of things is self-contradictory.⁴³

⁴³ A note on Russell's terminology. He talks about substantives and adjectives here, but his usage should not be taken as indicating any uncertainty about what kinds of entities the constituents of propositions are. ‘Substantives’, for Russell, are simply logical subjects of propositions, whereas ‘adjectives’ are concepts. Similar terminology is found, for example, in Bradley. I do not know the origin of this potentially confusing usage.

An entity occurring in a proposition as a concept must in fact be capable of being “made” into a logical subject; that is, there must be propositions in which that very same entity which occurs in some propositions as a concept occurs as a logical subject. This means that the distinction between things and concepts is *relative* and not *absolute*: it is not a difference between different kinds of terms, but a difference in the relations that terms bear to other terms. Hence, the principle of categorial uniformity is not undermined by the introduction of the distinction between things and concepts. If, *contra* (*Cat*), the distinction were absolute, there would be terms that occur in propositions only as concepts, i.e. not as logical subjects, but such a view is contradictory, given Russell's premises, i.e., given the Principle of Truth.

VII. The Problem of Unity

The distinction between things and concepts is one between *two ways in which terms can occur as constituents in propositions*. It serves an important function in Russell's metaphysics of propositions. For it is by means of it that Russell tries to make sense of the notion of proposition. To make sense of that notion means, above all, to explain the sense in which propositions are *complex* entities, and making sense of this involves, in turn, making sense of the problem of *propositional unity*. Propositions are complexes whose constituents are terms, and terms are, metaphysically speaking, all of them alike. When a proposition is analysed into its constituents, however, the entities thus revealed do not reconstitute the proposition. /*Desdemona loves Othello*/ is a proposition, an entity that “says something of something” and is therefore capable of being true or false. However, these features, predication and truth-aptness, will inevitably be lost when the proposition is analyzed into its constituent terms, as when the proposition /*Desdemona loves Othello*/ is broken down into its components, namely *Desdemona* + *loving* + *Othello*. Considered in this way, the constituents of a proposition form no more than a list, and a list is not something that can be evaluated as true or false. What characterizes a proposition is a particular kind of *unity* that cannot survive analysis, i.e. an identification of its constituents. This is how Russell himself puts the point:

Consider, for example, the proposition “A differs from B.” The constituents of this proposition, if we analyzed 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, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Russell (1903: §54).

It is for this reason, to make sense of unity as the precondition of predication and of truth-aptness, that Russell introduces the notion of *concept* or the notion of an entity occurring in a proposition otherwise than as a logical subject:

(*Con*) A concept is a term that occurs in a proposition in a way that makes the proposition a complex, that is, a *genuine unity* (something that is capable of being true or false).

Using Russell's own terminology, we may say that in the proposition /Desdemona loves Othello/ the relation of the proposition occurs "as a verb",⁴⁵ or as a "relating relation".⁴⁶ This proposition – like any other proposition – is a unity, because the relation makes it so. In order to do that, the relation must occur in the proposition in a way that is different from how Desdemona and Othello occur in that proposition. Both Desdemona and Othello are logical subjects in this proposition, a point that can be established by the test involving the notion of aboutness. The proposition is about Desdemona and Othello, as it can be conceived of as asserting about Desdemona that she has the property of loving Othello, or as asserting about Othello that he has the property of being loved by Desdemona, or finally, as asserting about Desdemona and Othello that the former loves the latter. By a similar test, it can be established that the proposition is not about the relation of loving.⁴⁷ Rather, the function of the relation is to tie the other constituents of the proposition together.

VIII. Solutions to the Problem of Unity

The problem Russell is trying to solve with the notion of a concept (relating relation, verb used as a verb) is the well-known regress problem about complexes and unities that Bradley had discussed in his "Appearance and Reality".⁴⁸ There are several important things that need to be said about it, both systematically and historically. Here I shall confine myself to only a few remarks, to show what potential bearing the Principle of Truth has on Russell's solution to the problem.

We should note, to begin with, that unlike some Bradley-commentators, the early Russell took the problem very seriously. A useful illustration of this dismissive attitude is provided by the following quotation from Blanshard (1984). Having introduced Bradley's main argument against the reality of relations, he delivers the following general verdict:

⁴⁵ Russell (1903: §54).

⁴⁶ Russell (1903: §99).

⁴⁷ See, though, footnote 43.

⁴⁸ Bradley (1893: Ch. III).

Is this argument valid? I think not. Bradley has been misled by a metaphor. He is thinking of a relation as if it were another term, as if $A-R-B$ were three beads on a string, and then the relation of R to A and B will present the same problem as that of A to B . But R is not the same sort of being as its terms. It is neither a thing nor a quality. It is a relation, and the business of a relation is to relate.⁴⁹

Not everything in this passage is at odds with what the Russell of *Principles* thought about the problem. Both Russell and Blanshard argue that to resolve the problem of unity we have to realize that the entities that make up genuine unities are of different kinds; we have seen that in Russell's case this statement calls for some modification in view of the Principle of Categorical Uniformity, but this modification does not compromise the basic idea. However, the young Russell is more sensitive to the dialectic of the situation than his later colleague. Russell would have agreed that relations are there to relate – indeed, it is hard to disagree with Blanshard on this point – but he might well have added the point that if Bradley had been misled by a metaphor, then, equally, Blanshard himself is a victim, if not of a metaphor, then at least of a suggestive picture. Even admitting that it is *a* business of relations to relate, we should not conclude from this that this would be their *only* business. And Russell insists that it is not; for no matter how much relations are, so to speak, *relation-like*, they are also, and with equal strength, *term-like*. After all, relations *must* be capable of occurring as terms in propositions; and when they feature in that capacity, they do not relate. And surely Russell is correct on this point, and Blanshard wrong. There are, indeed, propositions that are about relations; they are common and not hard to come by. Blanshard, we might say, is so busy dispensing with the mystery of relations that he dispenses with one half of the phenomenon as well. And that part is precisely the hard part.

We could agree with Blanshard's conclusion, if there were plausible arguments to the effect that, given a relational fact, aRb , the whole being of R is exhausted by its relating the two entities, a and b . If that were so, we could say that the relational fact is "given" as soon as the relation is "given". However, we have just seen one reason why such a view would be quite implausible. The point can be argued different ways, but Russell's is a particularly straightforward and compelling one, even if one does not buy the underlying picture suggested by his metaphysics of propositions. To repeat, there surely are propositions (or facts, if you like) about relations, and hence the being of a relation is not exhausted by its role as a "relating relation".

To be sure, the early Russell's solution to the problem of propositional unity is not without its problem. The solution given in *Principles*,

⁴⁹ Blanshard (1984: 215). For a similar dismissal, see Broad (1933: 84–5).

we might say, is *entity-based*. That is, he thinks that there is an entity, a *unifier*, which brings about the unity of a proposition and is itself a constituent of the proposition. That is, propositional unity is due to an entity that is a propositional constituent. The unifier, however, cannot be a term in Russell's sense. For if it were, it could not be mobilized to account for the difference between an *actual unity* and a mere list of terms; this is the point that Russell argues for in §54 of *Principles*, from which I have already quoted. His point there was that it does not matter how many layers of constituents one adds to a proposition; as long as they remain term-like, there is no *actual unity*. The passage continues:

It may be said that we ought, in the analysis, to mention the relations which difference has to A and B, relations which are expressed by *is* and *from* when we say "A is different from B." These relations consist in the fact that A is referent and B relatum with respect to difference. But "A, referent, difference, relatum, B" is still merely a list of terms, not a proposition. A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as a verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as a term, though I do not know how to give a clear account of the precise nature of the distinction.

A proposition is more than a collection of terms, for constituents considered merely as a collection do not reconstitute the proposition. The point is solid and applies to Russell's pluralism, a lesson that he derived from Bradley. But Bradley's argument does leave open, it seems, the possibility that unity is grounded in an entity that is *not* a term in Russell's sense – or at least an entity that "is not considered" as a term in Russell's sense. Thus Russell argues that what effects propositional unity is a "relating relation" or a "verb used as a verb". In sections 55 and 99 of *Principles* he argues that these entities still give rise to a regress but that this regress is entirely harmless. Accordingly, he distinguishes between two types of regress:

- a) regress of *meaning*
- b) regress of *implication*

Of these, only a regress of meaning is vicious. It arises in an attempt to identify the constituents of a proposition.⁵⁰ Thus, a regress is vicious if

⁵⁰ Why Russell should call it a regress of *meaning* is not clear. Russellian propositions are complexes of worldly entities and do not have meanings. Plausibly, he speaks of "meaning", because a regress of meaning arises in an attempt to identify the actual constituents of a proposition, and hence in an attempt to explain what the proposition says. Possibly, also, we could explain his terminology by the fact that he thinks of propositions as sentential meanings, and hence a regress of meaning would be one that arises in an attempt to identify the meaning of a sentence.

it leads to an infinity of propositional constituents. A regress is non-vicious, if it arises only by way of implication; a proposition implies another proposition, or propositions, which imply other propositions, etc. Russell explains that when a relating relation relates terms, there are further relations holding between the terms and the relating relation, between these and the further relations, etc. However, these further relations are *merely implied* by the original proposition and do not show up in its analysis. Relations that are merely implied therefore do not contribute to the unity of the proposition and are, for this reason, not objectionable.

We should note that a similar diagnostic can be applied to the case of truth, which was considered above, in section V. From the correspondence theorist's point of view, the correlation of truths with facts gives rise to a harmless "regress of implication". By contrast, Russell's view of truth amounts to holding that the regress is one of meaning; an attempt to analyze truth is an attempt to identify the *proposition that truth consists in*. A proposed identification could only be correct, if the proposition itself – the ontological ground of truth – is correct (true), and hence any proposed analysis of truth turns out to be gratuitous.

It is evident that Russell's solution to the problem depends for its viability on the tenability of the distinction between relating relation and relation in itself, or relation-considered-as-actually-relating and relation-considered-as-term. Here commentators have been quite harsh on Russell, arguing, for instance, that he was "defeated" by the problem of unity,⁵¹ or that the problem is "in principle unsolvable within the metaphysical framework that he establishes."⁵²

The most serious difficulty, no doubt, is the problem that arises from the recognition that a relating relation which unifies a proposition does not unify every proposition in which it occurs. The relation of loving is what makes the proposition /Desdemona loves Othello/ a unity; however, in the proposition which says about the relation of loving that it is responsible for the unity of the proposition, the *relation no longer occurs as actually relating but as a term*. The question is: can sense be made of Russell's distinction? Above all, can Russell avoid the disastrous conclusion that there are, after all, entities that cannot occur as logical subjects in propositions?⁵³

This certainly looks like the conclusion to which the dialectic of the situation is leading. Take the relating relation of some proposition and assert something about it. If you do this, you seem to lose the relating

⁵¹ Linsky (1992: 250).

⁵² Hylton (1984: 381).

⁵³ Cf. Russell (1903: §52).

relation and get something else instead, namely a term (a logical subject). The moment we try to *mention* a concept, there happens a transformation, as it were, of that concept into a thing; it was precisely this reasoning that Russell makes use of in section 49 of *Principles*, quoted above, where he argued that an “adjective” cannot differ from a “substantive” as one entity differs from another entity. The conclusion would seem to follow, then, that we cannot talk about relating relations.⁵⁴ More to the point, as his problem is metaphysical rather than linguistic, Russell must hold, on pain of contradiction, that there *are* propositions about relating relations; however, relating relations cannot occur in propositions any other way than as relating relations. The conclusion lies at hand, then, that the Principle of Truth effectively undermines Russell’s solution to the problem of unity.

It is useful to compare the early Russell’s solution to the problem of unity to what Frege had to say about the topic. What distinguishes the two is that it is precisely because of the Principle of Truth that Frege’s way out of the problem was not available to Russell. Frege had argued in his *On Concept and Object* that the constituents of a unity – in this case a Fregean thought – cannot all be of the same kind:

[N]ot all the parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be ‘unsaturated’ or ‘predicative’; otherwise they would not hold together.⁵⁵

It is natural to interpret Frege’s point about not “holding together” in a way that makes his worry analogous to Russell’s; if all constituents of thoughts were complete – in Frege’s terminology, if all of them were “objects” – putting them together would not yield a unity but something else. Since a thought is a unity, some among its constituents, namely the senses of predicative expressions, must be considered incomplete or “unsaturated”. To this extent his solution to the problem of unities is analogous to Russell; both men think that the unity of a given complex entity (thought or proposition) is due to a constituent of that complex the job of which is to tie the other constituents of the complex into a unity. There is, however, a crucial difference between them. Frege argues not only that certain entities are incomplete but that they are *essentially* incomplete or predicative. Furthermore, he argues explicitly that a doctrine similar to what Russell was to advocate some ten years later would not solve the problem.⁵⁶ No matter what entity is introduced to fulfil the role of a unifier, the problem of unity will arise unless we admit that the entity is essentially predicative, i.e., that whenever it occurs in a complex, its role is to hold the constituents of the unity together.

⁵⁴ Cf. here Griffin (1993: 166–7).

⁵⁵ Frege (1892: 193).

⁵⁶ Frege (1892: 193).

Frege's solution to the problem comes at a price. Taking seriously the notion of being essentially predicative, one should conclude – and Frege does conclude – that concepts cannot be mentioned or talked about.⁵⁷ More precisely, Frege concludes that when we try to say something about a concept (and in logical discussion this need arises habitually), we use an expression like “the concept...”, which refers to an object and not a concept. Hence, in trying to say something about concepts we at best succeed in talking about certain objects that are associated with concepts. Here there is a sharp contrast between Frege and Russell. The latter argued, assuming the validity of the Principle of Truth, that concepts-qua-unifiers cannot be essentially predicative; like any other entities, they must be capable of occurring as logical subjects as well. Since Frege denies this, he must hold that there cannot really be statements about those entities. He tries to resolve the difficulty by blaming it on an inadequacy of language:

By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way – who does not begrudge a pinch of salt.⁵⁸

There are reasons to be critical of Frege's way out. What are these associated objects, which go proxy for concepts? They cannot be concepts in the Fregean sense, as their linguistic expressions are complete rather than unsaturated, and nevertheless they are referred to as concepts. More importantly in the present context, since concepts are essentially predicative, there cannot be genuine assertions about them, a claim that is highly counterintuitive, to say the least.⁵⁹ Be these issues as they may, Frege's way out was not available to Russell, for whom the role of being a logical subject – occurring as a term in a proposition – is *metaphysical*: there must be true propositions about concepts; if there are not any, the idea that there are such entities must be written off as incoherent. The Fregean charge against Russell and his position would be that there are no entities that can

⁵⁷ Frege (1892: 186).

⁵⁸ Frege (1892: 193).

⁵⁹ There is the further problem, or at least a complication in Frege's position, that concepts – functions, in general – are divided into “levels”. A first-level concept is one that takes objects arguments, but it is also characteristic of concepts of first level that they are possible arguments to concepts or functions of second-level. For instance, the universal quantifier is a second-level concept, ascribing to a first-level concept the property that every object falls under it. Here the first-level concept does not seem to occur predicatively; rather, it is that of which a certain concept is predicated. Hence, one might argue, Frege's conception that concepts constitute a hierarchy undermines his view that concepts are essentially predicative. Whether this criticism is justified or not is a question that cannot be explored here.

fulfil the conditions that Russell imposes on concepts. On the one hand, they must be predicative so as to act as unifiers; on the other hand, they are not predicative in their capacity as logical subjects. Evidently, Russell's position is coherent only if this dual role is a coherent one. Above we considered an argument suggesting that this is not the case: the idea was simply that since there cannot be propositions about concepts ("relating relations"), there cannot be such entities, either.

It is not absolutely clear, however, that the notion of relating relation is undermined in this way, that is, by the Principle of Truth. We should note, to begin with, that "occurring as a term" and "occurring as a concept" are relations, and hence that "being a logical subject and "being a concept" are relational properties, of which the latter is such that some terms possess it and others do not. Taking this into account, we may argue that the threat of there being entities that cannot occur as logical subjects can be thwarted, after all.

Consider, for instance, a pair, R and R' , whose first member is a term and the second the corresponding relating relation. The two must differ from one another, not in the way two distinct entities differ from one another – as we have seen, Russell has an argument to show that R and R' cannot be distinct entities – but nevertheless in a way that accounts for the difference between unities and mere aggregates. Hence, there ought to be a true proposition to the effect that the two differ from one another. A natural candidate would be the proposition $/R$ differs from $R'/$. In this proposition, however, both $/R/$ and $/R'/$ occur as logical subjects. Hence, they do not seem to be different, after all; at least, they do not differ in the way things are supposed to differ from concepts, according to Russell's theory.

This was the charge. Against it we may retort, however, that the argument in fact trades on a confusion between terms and *positions* that terms have in propositions: a logical subject is a term that is a logical subject of some proposition, that is, an entity that occupies a certain position in a proposition. The putative counterexample involving the proposition $/R$ differs from $R'/$ ignores the fact that to characterise an entity as a relation-as-term or as relating-relation is to describe the position the entity occupies in some proposition. Hence, R and R' , as they occur in $/R$ differs from $R'/$ are in fact one and the same term and are not different. The proposition is therefore simply *false*; there is but one entity, although it may occupy different *positions* in different propositions. But does it not matter that "there can be no propositions about relating relations?" The answer seems to be that there *are* propositions about relating relations. For example, we can say of some relation, R , that it is the relating relation of some relational proposition, $/aRb/$. Hence, there are propositions like $//R/$ is the relating

relation of $/aRb/$. That $/R/$ in *this* proposition does not occur as a relating relation does not matter; it is the same entity in both cases.

If this line of thought is viable, it suggests that Russell's account of unity in *Principles* is not quite the impasse it is often made out to be. There is a lingering doubt, however, that his position may not be so radically improved, even when we recognize and draw the appropriate conclusions from the relational character of "thing" and "concept". A relating relation is what it is, because it occupies a certain position in a proposition. The question is: how can the position that an entity occupies in a proposition be responsible for the unity of that proposition?

There might well be an explanatory circle threatening here. Russell's aim was to explain propositional unity, and he did this by drawing on the distinction between relations-as-terms and relating-relations. But now it seems that this distinction cannot really be understood except by referring back to some notion of proposition

Better yet, we seem to be close to the conclusion that propositional unity is in fact a matter of *relations*. The notion of a position can hardly be rendered intelligible in any other way than explaining it in terms of the relations that the occupants of propositional positions bear to one another. If a proposition is nothing but a complex of its constituents, how could the position that a constituent occupies in a proposition consist of anything else than its relations to other constituents? But does it not follow from this that Russell's solution to the problem of unity is, after all, threatened by a "regress of meaning"?

I don't think that this charge can be sustained in the end – at least not quite in the form it was stated above. It does, however, help us see something important about the early Russell's solution to the problem of unity. As against the charge, we may insist that a regress of meaning would threaten Russell only if he had no alternative to holding that occupying a position in a proposition was a property that had to be grounded in *further* propositions. And I do not see that there is anything in Russell's position that would force this conclusion upon him.

No doubt, the Principle of truth dictates, and apparently quite generally, that a relation holds between entities only if there is a suitable true proposition backing this up. But what is there to prevent Russell from saying that when the entities in question are such that they constitute a proposition, it is the proposition itself that provides the necessary ontological ground? Hence, no positional relations need to be included among the constituents of the original proposition. Given a proposition $/aRb/$, there are no further relations among the constituents of the proposition, for R 's holding between a and b is nothing over and above the truth of the original proposition, $/aRb/$.

The dialectic by which we have arrived at the current position may look complicated, but the bottom line is really quite simple. In the early Russell's metaphysics of propositions, true proposition play an important metaphysical role; they provide the ontological ground for property possession. If this is so, it is not to be expected that this ontological ground itself can be explained in terms of something even more fundamental. And among the properties that qualify propositions for this role, there are two that stand out, namely, truth-value possession and unity. Above we saw that truth in the fundamental sense of "assertion" does not permit an elucidation, according to the early Russell; a similar conclusion may now be drawn for unity. The unity of the proposition is something that must be accepted as a primitive feature, and any proposed explanation of unity is likely to return, sooner or later, the notion of proposition. For instance, Russell's official explanation of propositional unity uses the distinction between "relating relations" and "relations as terms". At the end of the day, however, Russell has no more to say about the distinction than this:

[A] relating relation is distinguished from a relation in itself by the indefinable element of assertion which distinguished a proposition from a concept.⁶⁰

Assertion, a notion that Russell mobilizes to explain the distinction, brings us back to propositions, to a distinction between something that is a proposition and something that is not. The conclusion is of course that in the early Russell's pluralism of terms and relations, if there are to be genuine unities, they have to be introduced as *sui generis* entities.

Given the metaphysics of propositions, there is, indeed, a very simple argument that the early Russell could have used to reach this conclusion. I call this *the straightforward argument*. It is straightforward, because it is a simple, though negative application of the Principle of Truth. Suppose, then, that the unity of a proposition is grounded in some *entity*, a unifier; as we have seen, this was Russell's official view in *Principles*. Given the Principle, the unifier can do what it is supposed to do *only if there is a proposition that provides a metaphysical ground for the unification*. But if there is a general problem of the unity of the proposition, it will concern the grounding proposition as well. Hence, the problem of unity will not be resolved but only shifted by the introduction of a specific unifier.

It is clear enough that the regress the Principle generates is vicious, i.e., that it is a regress of meaning in Russell's sense. What Russell is looking for is a metaphysical ground for the unity of propositions. By his lights,

⁶⁰ Russell (1903: §99).

that is, by the Principle of Truth, the ground can only be a proposition. Either the ground is provided by the original proposition, or else by another proposition. The second option is at once seen to be futile, as it leads to a regress of meaning; hence, the ontological grounding can only be found in the original proposition; which means that the notion of a proposition – and with it, the notion of unity – must be accepted as a primitive.

We can see, then, either by using the Straightforward Argument or else by following out the dialectic laid out above, that the early Russell was not only an “indefinabilist” about truth; he was – or, rather, should have been – an indefinabilist also about propositional unity. And this is precisely the direction in which his thought was moving after *Principles*. For instance, in “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions,” a paper that he published in 1904, but which was written already during the first half of 1903, we find the following comment on Meinong and the problem of unity:

[T]he unity of a complex raises a logical problem, of which Meinong seems to be not fully aware. What is added [to a complex], we are told, is the relation, rightly related; but when we consider the relation as well as the terms, we do not obtain the complex. And if we add the relations of the relation to the terms, and all the relations generated in the resulting endless process, we still do not obtain again our original unity, but only an aggregate. Thus *what distinguishes our complex is not any constituent at all, but simply and solely the fact of relatedness in a certain way*. Out of given constituents, even when account is taken of all the infinitude of relating relations, different complexes can be constructed: thus, *e.g.*, “*a* is greater than *b*” and “*b* is greater than *a*” differ in no respect which analysis can preserve. It is this special and apparently undefinable kind of unity which I should propose to employ in characterizing the notion of a complex. The kind of unity in question belongs, as is evident, to all propositions; and the inadequacy of analysis appears, in this case, in the fact that propositions are true or false, while their constituents, in general, are neither.⁶¹

“What distinguishes our complex is not any constituent at all, but simply and solely the fact of relatedness in a certain way”. We should be clear as to what, precisely, is and is not involved in this view. It would have been in a way attractive for the early Russell if he could have held the view that the “fact of relatedness” is just the truth of the original proposition. This, however, cannot be correct. For if it were, it would lead to the conclusion that all propositions are *true*, which is of course not the case. Hence the fact of relatedness must be something that is there independently of whether the proposition is true or false.

⁶¹ Russell (1904: 437).

Now, there certainly are reasons to think that this conclusion is something of an embarrassment for Russell. Officially, his metaphysics of propositions includes the view that facts are nothing over and above true propositions. But here we have found a case in which this cannot be so, for facts of relatedness cannot be identified with true propositions. Above we suggested that the ground of unity can only be the original proposition, the unity of which we are trying to give an account. But this formulation is really no more than a cumbrous way of saying that no account can be given of the problem of the unity of the proposition. The only sort of metaphysical ground that is recognized by the early Russell is a true proposition. But it is not the truth of the original proposition that supplies the ground for its unity, for that would preclude the possibility of false propositions. Hence, we must conclude that Russell's metaphysics of propositions must recognize facts not only in the sense of true propositions but also in some other sense; and for this sense there is apparently no explanation. Perhaps we can here see one of the reasons that led Russell to renounce the metaphysics of propositions a few years later.⁶²

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⁶² Earlier versions of this paper were read at the conference "Perspectives on Russell" in Zagreb, Croatia, and at the University of Turku, Finland. I'm grateful to participants in these occasions for discussions and comments. I owe special thanks to Andy Rebera for discussions and criticisms as well as to two anonymous referees of *Prolegomena* for detailed comments.

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