

# The Correspondence Theory of Truth and Ontology

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## *Introduction*

My aim is to make some comments on the ontology of the correspondence theory of truth. First I shall give reasons for rejecting a Platonic view of propositions. This motivates locating propositions in the world. I then present a version of Russell's theory of truth, which if it locates propositions anywhere locates them in the world. I consider some of the advantages of this theory, not least among being that it does not need facts as entities.

## *Platonic Propositions*

Theories of propositions that should be taken seriously ontologically speaking are: (1) propositions as abstract objects or Platonic entities, (2) propositions as states of affairs (but the best interpretation of states of affairs is that they are Platonic entities), (3) propositions as mental sentences, and (4) propositions as entities in the world, an Aristotelian view of propositions. — Almost a straight fight between Platonic propositions and Aristotelian propositions.

A number of reasons have been put forward to support the view that propositions have eternal existence independent of thinkers who could think them, which is usually taken to imply that they are Platonic entities. One reason is that because truth and falsehood are independent of human belief, truth bearers should exist independently of human thought. Russell's answer to this was that truths and falsehoods are mind

dependent, since without minds to perform acts of believing there would be no truths and falsehoods. It is the human mind that makes mistakes, so that there can be no falsehood without minds to make mistakes, but truths and falsehoods must have the same status, so both must be mind dependent. On the other hand, truth and falsehood are mind independent in the sense that whether a belief is true or false depends only on the state of the world.

There are three obvious ways for a proposition to be a Platonic entity. (1) It could be a *sui generis* Platonic entity that has components that are *sui generis* Platonic entities. (2) It could be a Platonic entity without components, a sort of point in the Platonic heaven. (3) It could be a set of possible worlds — if possible worlds are Platonic entities and sets are too, then a proposition is a Platonic entity with components that are Platonic entities.

It is easy enough to hypothesize the existence of entities of any or of all of the three types and to claim that they are in one-to-one correspondence with propositions, where propositions are introduced as what persons believe, know etc. But one-to-one correspondence is not identity. The difficulty is that it is not at all clear that they are the sort of things that human beings could believe, know, etc. It is true that human beings can think of entities of all three types, even though they have to think of them in somewhat general terms. But if any of these entities are propositions, then believing one of them will be a different intentional relation than thinking about it. Believing a Platonic proposition appears to be a two-place relation. I think that this in itself is problematic.

It is plausible to suggest that propositions have components, since we use sentences to express propositions, and it is reasonable to suppose that the complexity of

sentences points to the complexity of propositions and to the way in which they are complex. Moreover, we do analyse propositions, usually by analysing sentences that express them, and we tend to assume that the individuation of propositions has something to do with the components and structure of the sentences that express them. This makes the first of the three types of Platonic proposition the most plausible as something that can be expressed by a sentence and something that can be believed. And if propositions are Platonic entities with components, then they will have structure; and so an account is required of the structure.<sup>1</sup>

When a person thinks that the cat sat on the mat, his thought is about the cat and the mat. Let suppose that the associated Platonic proposition has components and let us call the components concepts, so that there is a concept of the cat, a concept of the mat, and a concept of sitting upon. What role does the Platonic proposition and its components play in making the person's thought to be about the cat and the mat?

Let us suppose that there is a proposition-yielding relation, which, taking the concepts into account, results in the assigning of the relation (sitting upon) to the particulars (the cat and the mat). This proposition-yielding relation could be (1) a relation proper that combines the concepts to form a proposition, or it could be (2) a function that maps the concepts into a proposition.

Suppose first that there is a relation between the concepts in virtue of which they form an entity that is a Platonic proposition. The order of concepts under that relation

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts of the components could be understood as Fregean senses, when they would be things that are known. They do play a role in thinking of the particulars and the relation but they are also consistent with Russellian propositions. Moreover there is no need for the Fregean senses to be related to each, and it is the relation that is ascribed to the particulars. But they are entities that ordinarily we are unacquainted with and it is difficult to give a philosophical account of them, though if Platonism about properties is true then we are acquainted with at least one type of component. The concept of a particular is an haecceity, which is itself problematic.

will be significant in the case of the cat sat on the mat. Then it is difficult to see how that entity thus formed is any thing other than a Platonic sentence. The way in which it differs from a written sentence is that the ordered relation between components is not a spatial relation. A written sentence has components corresponding to what the proposition is about ordered by a spatial relation, and a verbal sentence has components corresponding to what the proposition is about ordered by a temporal relation. Similarly, a Platonic sentence has components corresponding to what the sentence is about ordered by a Platonic relation. A Platonic entity of this sort can play the role of a sentence and express a proposition. But a sentence is not a proposition; a sentence expresses a proposition.<sup>2</sup> And it is difficult to see how something which is in every way a sentence and therefore expresses a proposition could also be a proposition.

Suppose next (following Strawson and Bradley and Schwarz) that there is a function that maps the concepts into a Platonic proposition. But it does not follow that the concepts will be the components of the image, the Platonic proposition. So given that there is such a function it sheds no light on the nature of propositions, or the nature of their components, or their structure. The function hypothesis is consistent with (1) Platonic propositions with components, known or unknown, (2) Platonic propositions with no components, just Platonic points, and with (3) Aristotelian propositions. And if the concepts are mapped into a Platonic proposition with Platonic components, then a Platonic proposition will be a Platonic sentence with the difficulties that were explained before.

But it seems that when human beings believe that the cat is sitting on the mat,

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<sup>2</sup> A Platonic proposition does not ascribe a concept of a property to a concept of a particular, though there must be some way in which a Platonic proposition ascribes a property to a particular and the components must play some role in it.

they are aware of the cat and the mat and the relation of sitting upon, but they are not aware of a Platonic proposition or the Platonic entities that are components of the proposition. It seems strange that they should play a role in “thinking that”, yet we are not aware of them. Perhaps this difficulty afflicts many theories of propositions, but at least in the case of Russellian propositions (an Aristotelian view of propositions) the components are the cat and the mat and sitting upon, and we are familiar with these.

*Informal Motivation for a Russellian Theory of Truth*

For Aristotle, part of the definition of truth was “to say of what is that it is, is true”. In a theory that focuses on believing, that would become “to believe of what is that it is, is true”. “What is” is not “which things exist”; it is more like “how things are” or “the way things are”. So Aristotle’s admirably compressed language can be expanded as follows: “to believe concerning how things are that they are that way, is true” or “to believe concerning the way things are that they are that way, is true”.

Russell’s theory was intended to give an account of what it is for a person to believe that things are a certain way. But what is it for things to be a certain way? When a person believes that things are a certain way, what is the belief is about? Common sense leads us to believe that predicative beliefs are about particulars (typically) and the way they are related, as opposed, for example, to being about facts as individual entities or about related Platonic entities. But predicative beliefs are about particulars in a way that they are not about the relations that are believed to relate them. In the case of a number of particulars arranged in a certain way, the way things are is primarily the way the particulars are arranged, so that the “how” in “how things are” and therefore in “how

things are believed to be” has to do with what is believed of the particulars. We can, therefore, say that a person believes of certain particulars that they are arranged in a certain way — this is idiomatic English, even though in the customary philosophical idiom the “that” introduces the proposition as a whole. Changing the order, it becomes “a subject believes arranged in a certain way concerning certain particulars”, which, though not entirely idiomatic, makes sense. There is an asymmetry in the act of believing, which represents the fact that when there is a predicative belief, attention is directed primarily towards the particulars, since the belief is about the particulars first, and not in the same way about the relation that is thought of them. This represents the fact that the thought of the subject is directed primarily towards the particulars and the relation is part of how the person thinks of the particulars. Note that you cannot form a sentence just by stringing proper names together.

The alternative view is that when a person believes that things are a certain way, the belief is not about the particulars but is instead about the particulars and the relation. The “how” in “how things are believed to be” would then have to do with the way the particulars and the relation are related to each other to form a fact. If Austin’s theory of truth were a theory of belief, rather than a theory of truth makers, which is what I take it to be, it would be a theory of this type. On this view, the particulars and the relation would be on much the same footing, while how the particulars and the relation are related to each other would be on a different footing. The mode of combination of the fact would be something that the subject believes of the particulars and the relation.

There is clearly a possibility of a regress here, as Russell was aware.<sup>3</sup> In general,

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<sup>3</sup> In his discussion of the 1913 version of his theory of belief. The next level of the regress would be

it appears that in predicative belief something has to play the role of being believed of, or thought of, some other things. Quite apart from the convenience of stopping a regress at the first level, the way that we think and speak indicates that the relation itself should play the role of being thought of the particulars, rather than the mode of combination being thought of the particulars and the relation.

It is also preferable ontologically speaking. There is a difficulty with the second level in that the mode of combination of the fact is itself a combination of first the logical form as a structure and secondly of how the particulars are arranged within that structure. These two aspects are not a unified thing. It is difficult to know what it would be to think such a mode of combination of certain particulars and a relation.<sup>4</sup> It follows that there are no reasons from considerations of this sort to posit the existence of facts as entities, since there are no advantages and some disadvantages in thinking of the logical form as the structure of a fact.

#### *A Formal Presentation of a Russellian Theory of Belief*

The relation, such as “sitting upon”, should play a role in an act of believing that is different from the role played by the particulars, “the cat” and “the mat”. Presumably, the different roles played by the relation and the particulars are related to the fact that they are different types of thing, though it is less clear whether one could infer from the basic characterizations of universal and particular how they differ in the role they play in

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believing that they-were-related-to-each-other-in-a-certain-way of the particulars, the relation, and the mode of combination.

<sup>4</sup> These considerations explain some of the difficulties Russell was having with his 1913 version of his theory.

belief.<sup>5</sup>

To account for the different roles of the particular and the universal, let us make a formal hypothesis about how the subject, believing, and the components  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $R$  are bound together. This formal suggestion is motivated by the previous informal discussion of predicative belief. A. N. Prior suggested as a modification of Russell's theory of truth that the four-place multiple relation  $B(, , , )$  should be replaced by the three-place relation  $( )\text{Believesthat}R( )( )$ , which takes only particulars as its terms.<sup>6</sup> In his unsympathetic criticism of Russell's theory, Mark Sainsbury actually presented the theory in a similar modified form. He assumed that a sentence about predicative belief involved the sentence form: ' $S$  believes, concerning . . . , that they are ', a form that is implicit in the suggestion that in predicative belief a person believes of certain particulars that they are related in a certain way. Both these analyses ascribe different roles to proper names and to predicates, while Prior's sentence form has the additional advantage that it does not involve the pronoun 'they', which in Sainsbury's sentence form could be thought to represent a variable.

The formal hypothesis then is that  $\text{Believes}(S, a, b, R)$  should be analysed as  $(S)\text{Believes}R(a)(b)$ , where the universal  $R$  bonds first with the propositional attitude "Believes" to give a three-place relation, namely,  $( )\text{Believes}R( )( )$ , which is then capable of bonding with three particulars, one of which is the subject. This hypothesis does not

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<sup>5</sup> In Russell's original theory of belief the subject had a relation of acquaintance with each of the three components, and these subsidiary acquaintance relations were necessary conditions for belief. A revised version of Russell's theory that was looking for general acceptance would have to replace the acquaintance relations with "thinking of" relations; otherwise, the class of predicative judgements that could be dealt with would be too small, quite apart from obvious objections to the principle of acquaintance. Despite being necessary conditions, these two-place relations play no further role in the theory. It is the particulars and relation themselves that are bound together in some way with the subject in an act of believing, not the two-place relations between subject and components.

<sup>6</sup> In his encyclopaedia article on the correspondence theory.

imply that the relation  $R$  is instantiated by the particulars  $a$  and  $b$ ; what is instantiated is the complex relation  $(\ )\text{Believes}R(\ )(\ )$ , which is instantiated by the three particulars  $S$ ,  $a$ , and  $b$ . It introduces an explicit asymmetry into the analysis of belief in that the subordinate relation  $R$  plays a role different from that played by the particulars. It could be said that the subject believes the relation of the particulars.

There is a sort of complex chemistry of bonds going on here, similar to, but going further than, Frege's chemistry of saturated and unsaturated entities. A propositional attitude is neither a particular nor a relation. When a person believes a relation of certain particulars, the propositional attitude "believes" needs to combine with a relation, the subordinate relation, in order to form another relation, an intentional relation, that can take particulars as its terms. A propositional attitude, such as "believes", is unsaturated in two different ways: at the front end it is unsaturated in the usual way with an empty place that requires a particular to fill it; at the other end it is unsaturated in a different way, with an empty place that requires a universal to fill it. The result is something that is multiply unsaturated in the usual way, with a number of empty places that require particulars to fill them. This is why propositional attitude sentences always contain at least two verbs. The combination " $(\ )\text{Believes}thatR(\ )(\ )$ " takes as many particulars as arguments as the universal's valence plus one for the person who does the believing.

### *A Russellian Account of Propositions*

If  $(S)\text{Believes}R(a)(b)$ , then it is clear many other subjects could be in the same intentional state. The symbol ' $(\ )\text{Believes}R(a)(b)$ ' refers to an intentional state. There is also something included here that a subject could have a number of propositional attitudes

towards. That something can be referred to by the symbol ‘( )— $R(a)(b)$ ’, which can be understood as referring to a Russellian proposition. It requires a subject and a propositional attitude in order to be “instantiated” and it can, of course, be instantiated many times. It should be thought of as something that can be instantiated. If what is referred to by ‘( )Believes $R(a)(b)$ ’ is an intentional state, then what is referred to by ‘( )— $R(a)(b)$ ’ is something abstracted from a number of different intentional states. It could be said to carry around with it an intentional shell, so that a Russellian proposition is clearly something that can be thought, as well as being something that can be thought of. A Russellian proposition has components but they are not actually assembled out there in the world. A Russellian view of propositions is existentialist because a proposition only exists if its components exist.

### *Two Russellian Versions of the Correspondence Theory*

The following versions of the correspondence theory of truth for predicative beliefs are descended from Russell’s 1912 version, via the formal hypothesis influenced by Prior, together with some interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In terms of facts, which Russell called “complexes”, the correspondence conditions for true belief can be given as follows.

A subject’s predicative belief is true if and only if:

1. The particulars that the subject is thinking about and the relation that the subject thinks of them actually form a fact.
2. In the case of an asymmetric relation, the order of the particulars that the subject

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Problems of Philosophy* of 1912, Russell gave the conditions for true belief as follows : “Thus a belief is true when it corresponds to a certain associated complex, and false when it does not.” In other words, the *belief complex* “Believes( $S, R, a, b$ )”, which is presumably the truth bearer, must correspond with the associated *object complex* “ $Rab$ ”, the truth maker.

is thinking about in the belief fact reflects the order of the same particulars in the object fact.

3. A predicative belief is not true (that is, false) by default if either of these conditions does not hold.

The belief fact is formed from the combination of “Believes” with the relation  $R$ , and then from the combination of the relation “( )Believes $R$ ( ) ( )” with the particulars  $S$ ,  $a$ , and  $b$ . In the object fact, the relation occurs instantiated by the particulars  $a$  and  $b$ , while in the belief fact, the relation is not instantiated; rather, it is thought of in a certain way, as explained earlier.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that the symbols ‘ $Rab$ ’ are found in the expression ‘ $S$ Believes $Rab$ ’, the object fact is not a component of the belief fact on account of the way the belief fact is constructed.<sup>9</sup>

Avoiding facts as entities and fact locutions, the correspondence conditions for true belief can be given as follows.

A subject’s predicative belief is true if and only if:

1. The particulars that the subject is thinking about actually instantiate the relation  $R$  that the subject thinks of them
2. In the case of an asymmetric relation, the order of the particulars (that the subject

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<sup>8</sup> A three-place “betweenness” relation is not symmetric, since one particular is picked out to be between the other two; but there is no reason why in a three-place relation there should not also be an order distinction between the other two particulars. In this sentence I have used the symbols for the corresponding sentences, because I have not developed a distinct symbolism for facts

<sup>9</sup> Prior gave the conditions for truth in terms of a conjunction: “‘ $X$  says (believes) truly that  $p$ ’ means ‘ $X$  says (believes) that  $p$ , and  $p$ ’; ‘ $X$  says (believes) falsely that  $p$ ’ means ‘ $X$  says (believes) that  $p$ , and not  $p$ .’” (“The Correspondence Theory of Truth”, p. 229) Prior gives this a redundancy interpretation taken from Ramsey. The ascription of truth, and talk about facts, have to be understood as essentially adverbial in nature; and attaching phrases like “it is true that” or “it is a fact that” produces a sentence that says no more than the original sentence. In his discussions of Russell’s 1913 version of his theory, Griffin suggests there needs to be “some convention determining the order in which the object terms are to be substituted for the variables in the form. Such a convention might be built into the judgment relation itself (as suggested by Wisdom . . .)” (“Russell’s Multiple Relation Theory of Belief”, p. 222). See Wisdom, *Problems of Mind and Matter*, p. 203.

is thinking about) under the intentional relation  $S$  Believes  $R$  ( ) ( ) reflects the order of the particulars under the relation  $R$

A predicative belief is not true (that is, false) by default if either of these conditions does not hold.

In this version there is a lack of an entity for a proposition to correspond to. The way I prefer to look at this is to suggest that the correspondence is between a proposition, “how things are thought to be”, and “how things are”, where the correspondence conditions give the relevant sense of correspondence. And there is no truth maker, if by ‘truth maker’ you mean an individual entity. But a proposition is made true by the world, and by things in the world, and by the way things are in the world.

On the other hand, if it were insisted that correspondence requires two entities, another option would be to abandon the term ‘correspondence’, since nothing in the conditions for true belief depends on the use of the term ‘correspondence’. It would then become a type of realist theory of truth for predicative beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

For truth bearers, entities of some sort are required. A proposition is true when anyone who believes it is related to the world in such a way that the correspondence conditions are satisfied. On this view, a proposition is a unit that has a criterion of identity, but which needs a person to be instantiated. Since a proposition is a unit distinct from any entities found in the world — it is a different type of thing from a fact, for example — it makes sense to say that it can correspond to the world.

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<sup>10</sup> A third option would be to reintroduce facts as things or units without reality, which would then either be units that were objective but not real, in some neo-Fregean sense, or fictional or arbitrary units, in Russell’s sense. All that would be required of such facts is a criterion of identity.

*Difficulties and Comments*

Candlish criticizes Russell's original correspondence theory on the grounds that it makes believing a unique kind of relation, one which alone has the power to combine its terms into a belief, rather than just a collection of terms. This is supposed to credit the mind that believes with a mysterious power: "In other words, it is not a theory of judgement at all; it merely imposes a new jargon on the expression of what we knew already." But this is the sort of criticism that could be levelled at a large number of philosophical theories, because it is frequently possible to claim that a philosophical theory has not explained enough and has left some things mysterious. It is true a Russellian theory does not explain everything that we should like a theory of belief to explain. But even Russell's 1910 version of his theory could be defended by claiming that it is a theory that is on the right lines ontologically speaking, and which can answer certain objections, in contrast to theories where belief is a two-place relation between a subject and a Platonic proposition or theories that involve mental or neural representations, which are not on the right lines ontologically speaking.

The direction problem is how does a Russellian theory distinguish between the cat sat on the mat and the mat sat on the cat. The empty places in  $S\text{Believes}R(\ )(\ )$  must be filled by the particulars  $a$  and  $b$  in the right order, just as the empty places in the relation  $R(\ )(\ )$  need to be filled by the particulars  $a$  and  $b$  in the right order to make the belief true. The order of particulars in one reflects the order of particulars in the other, in the same way that the order of names in a sentence, according to some conventions, reflects the order of particulars under the relation. A subject's believing that  $Rab$  differs from a subject's believing that  $Rba$ , since  $(S)\text{Believes}R(a)(b)$  differs from  $(S)\text{Believes}R(b)(a)$ .

The relation  $(\ )\text{Believes}R(\ )(\ )$  is itself not always symmetric with respect to the last two empty places, and the ordering of the terms  $a$  and  $b$  in that relation is equivalent to the mind believing that  $a$  and  $b$  are related by  $R$  in a certain order. Being ordered by the “believes” relation is equivalent to the particulars being ordered in thought under the subordinate relation  $R$ , or being believed to be ordered by the subordinate relation  $R$ . Facts as entities are not needed to solve the direction problem.

A difficulty for our formal hypothesis that the subordinate relation  $R$ , such as “sat upon”, plays different roles in the act of believing and in what the belief is about. In what the belief is about the subordinate relation play a role like that of a universal, as a predicative entity. It is instantiated and appears to be what Russell calls a “relating relation”. But in the act of believing it appears to play a role like that of a particular, as a non-predicative entity. It is not instantiated and appears to be what Russell calls an “abstract relation”.

The way Russell himself puts it is that “believes” is the uniting relation in the belief fact, that is, the cement for the belief fact, while the subordinate relation is one of the terms of the believing relation, a brick rather than cement. In the belief fact, the subject and the components of the belief are arranged in a certain order by the sense of the believing relation. In the associated object fact,  $R$  is the uniting relation; it is now cement rather than a brick, and the particulars are arranged in a certain order in the object fact by the sense of the relation  $R$ .

One response to this problem is to suggest that since there is a systematic correlation between an abstract relation and a relating relation, there is, indeed, a correspondence between the two facts, merely a more complex type of correspondence.

It is correspondence that is being claimed, not identity. On the other hand, if there is no ontological distinction between an abstract relation and a relating relation, but merely a single relation, which is a universal playing different roles in language and thought, then this difficulty does not arise. A relation as a universal is the same type of thing ontologically, whatever role it plays. A universal can be thought of in two different ways: it can be thought of predicatively, when it is thought of a particular, as in belief or judgement, and it can also be thought of as a subject of predication, when something is thought of it. The way a universal is thought of, whether predicatively or as a subject of predication, is quite independent of any instantiations of the universal, or whether it is instantiated at all. Our formal hypothesis introduces a role distinction based on the type distinction between relations and properties, on the one hand, and particulars, on the other. Since only a relation or property can combine directly with a propositional attitude, the relation or property plays a role in an act of believing that a particular cannot play.<sup>11</sup> This difficulty too can be met without the bringing in facts as entities.

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<sup>11</sup> And, consequently, the formal hypothesis avoids what Griffin calls the wide direction problem.