

Early Russell on Philosophical Grammar

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Philosophical Grammar

- “The study of grammar, in my opinion, is capable of throwing far more light on philosophical questions than is commonly supposed by philosophers.” (*Principles of Mathematics*, Section 46).
- Russell’s ultimate goal was the analysis of propositions.
- The basis of analysis is the understanding of the logical function of the components of sentences that express propositions.
- There are three parts of speech “specially important” to analysis.
 - Substantives
 - Adjectives
 - Verbs
- Any theory of substantive and adjective (and cognate pairs) has crucial consequences for metaphysics.

Logical vs. Grammatical Classification

- “What we wish to obtain is a classification, not of words, but ideas.”
- The goal is to discover logical categories expressed in different ways by grammatical forms.
- Some words which are grammatically substantives are derived from adjectives.
 - *Humanity* is derived from *human*.
- All such words will be treated as logical adjectives, because their *denotation* is the same.
- The key logical distinction is between the objects indicated by *proper* names and the objects indicated by *general* names.

Propositions and their Components

- All propositions may be analyzed into an assertion and something about which the assertion is made (the subject).
- A proper name occurring in a proposition plays only the role of the subject of that proposition (or a subordinate proposition).
 - Caesar died.
 - Caesar died but Brutus lived.
- Adjectives and verbs are not subjects of propositions but occur only as parts of assertions.

Terms

- A “term” is whatever may:
 - Be an object of thought,
 - Occur in any true or false proposition,
 - Be counted as one (hence, “unit,” “individual”).
- Every term has being (hence, “entity”).
- A term possesses all the properties that are commonly assigned to substances or substantives.
 - Logical subject,
 - Immutable,
 - Indestructible.
- Terms are also numerically identical with themselves and numerically distinct from other things.
- If there is more than one term, then monism (Bradley’s metaphysical position) is false.

Kinds of Terms

- There are two kinds of terms:
 - Things, indicated by proper names,
 - Concepts, indicated by all other words.
- The notions of thing and proper name are to be understood very broadly.
- Things include anything we can think of, including what does not exist.
- There are two kinds of concepts:

- Predicates or class-concepts, indicated by adjectives,
- Relations, indicated by verbs.
- Because *humanity* can (in the form *human*) can be used to make an assertion about a thing, it is a concept and not a thing.

Kinds of Propositions

- With some propositions, the assertion can only be said to be made about one thing.
 - These are subject-predicate propositions.
- With some propositions, the assertion can be made in many ways.
- For example, *A* is greater than *B*.
 - *A* is the subject and “is greater than *B*” is the assertion.
 - *B* is the subject and “*A* is greater than” is the assertion.
- Propositions are distinguished from one another according to their subject and what is asserted.
- Two distinct propositions may be equivalent.
 - Socrates is human.
 - Humanity belongs to Socrates.

Bradley’s Theory of Judgments

- On Bradley’s view of judgments, the subject is an immediate *this* and the predicate is a general concept that describes the *this*.
- The judgment is taken to be a mental act of assertion about the *this*.
- “Judgment proper is the act which refers an ideal content (recognized as such) to a reality beyond the act” (*The Principles of Logic*, Book I, Chapter I, Section 10).
- “The affirmation, or judgment, consists in saying, This idea is no mere idea, but is a quality of the real” (*ibid*).

Russell's Theory of Propositions

- Assertion is not a mental act, but rather a feature of the proposition itself.
- Assertion is not about the real as a whole, but about a thing, which is the subject of the proposition.
- The thing is a component of the proposition, so that Caesar himself is a component of the proposition that Caesar died.
- The asserted component is a concept, which is not a mental entity.
- The proposition is not about the concept itself (*a man*), but by what is denoted by the concept ("some actual biped").

The Verb in the Proposition

- The logical function of the verb is to unify the terms into a proposition.
 - Socrates is human.
 - Socrates is.
- "A proposition . . . 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" (Section 54).
- In a subject-predicate proposition (Socrates is human), there is not a relation proper, between two things.
- There is, however, an implied relation between Socrates and humanity.
- It may be a peculiar relation which can only hold between a thing and a concept.
- The same holds for the existential judgment (Socrates is), where Socrates is implicitly related to Being.

The Verbal Noun

- Like adjectives, verbs may be transformed into nouns.
 - Caesar died.
 - The death of Caesar.
- The function of asserting is lost when the transformation occurs.
- The verb no longer relates, but "is the bare relation considered independently of the terms which it relates" (Section 55).
- The account given of the verb raises logical puzzles which Russell hands over to the logicians to solve.

Relations

- Russell analyzes the propositional form: “*A* differs from *B*.”
- He raises the question as to whether the relation *differs* here is general (applying to all differing things) or specific (applying to *A* and *B* only).
- He decides that the best approach is to regard the *differs* relation as being general.
- Then he generalizes this conclusion to all relations: “relations do not have instances, but are strictly the same in all propositions in which they occur” (Section 55).

Endless Processes

- There are two distinct kinds of endless or infinite processes:
 - A process of implications,
 - A process of analysis.
- Suppose O_1 is the difference between *A* and *B* and O_2 is the difference between *C* and *D*.
- If O_1 is different from O_2 , then there is a difference O_3 between them, and so on *ad infinitum*.
- An infinite hierarchy of differences implied by the difference between O_1 and O_2 is mathematically possible.
- But if we attempt to analyze “*A* differs from *B*” by interposing relations between *A*, *differs* and *B* to account for the unity of the proposition, the regress is inadmissible.