Truth and Logical Structure in Strawson's Early Work

STEVE TENSMEYER

I n his reply to Strawson's "On Referring," Bertrand Russell claims that he is responding to Strawson's argument because of pressure from others; if it were up to him, he would not even dignify it with a response (261). He seems to think that Strawson's thesis rests not on any significant disagreement, but rather on what Russell considers matters of mere linguistic convenience. The most important of these issues is the definition of the word "false." While Strawson held that certain sentences were rightly called "neither true nor false," Russell maintained a notion of falsity that rendered every meaningful sentence either true or false. But, Russell claimed, "this is purely a verbal question"; that is, using the word "false" as he does helps to clarify his theory, but it is by no means essential to it (263). This may be true; in fact, I intend to argue that it is. But it's not particularly helpful. Surely there is some substantive disagreement between the two—Strawson does not seem to be shadow boxing, and truth and falsity don't seem to be concepts that could be entirely dependent on convention. But this difference is difficult to pin down; Strawson doesn't quite capture it, and Russell doesn't seem to really care what it is. I will argue that a closer look into this disagreement reveals that though they differ on one important point, the two are perhaps not as different as is commonly thought. By considering both philosophers' theories of reference in terms of Russell's overall project and Wittgenstein's writings about truth and logical structure, it becomes plausible to interpret both Russell and Strawson as accepting many of the basic tenets of logical atomism.

Steve Tensmeyer is a senior majoring in philosophy and international relations. His philosophical interests include epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science. He will attend law school after graduation. This paper placed third in the 2012 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

I. Russell's Logical Atomism

Before we get to the specific differences and similarities between Russell's and Strawson's theories of denoting, it will first be useful to briefly describe the basic principles of logical atomism in relation to Russell's theory of denotation, and particularly what constitutes truth in such a system. Logical atomism is the theory that metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics can all be reduced to facts about the structure of independently existing entities in the world and that a method of analysis is necessary to discover these facts. It is a very wide-ranging, perhaps even comprehensive, philosophical theory, and its influence has colored all analytic philosophy since the turn of the 20th century.

The theory initially arose as a reaction to the Hegelian idealism that at that time dominated British philosophy, particularly through the works of F. H. Bradley and J. M. E. McTaggart. To Russell, this Hegelianism seemed like unscientific, metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, and his project slowly grew to a desire to overthrow this system using an often radical form of empiricism. He was joined in this task by G. E. Moore, who shared his basic opposition to idealism. In contrast to Bradley, who argued that concepts and relations were only ideas, Moore and Russell proposed a "new philosophy" that had as one of its central tenets the "reality of relations." In other words, they believed that relations between objects and properties are real features of the world, and not simply mental constructs. This pointed Moore and Russell toward logical atomism, because "in trying to establish the 'reality' of relations, they typically seek to demonstrate that relations are objective and irreducible" (Cartwright 121). This search for irreducibility, combined with a doctrinaire empiricism, led naturally to the proposal of logical atoms—that is, independent entities possessing properties. According to their theory, atomic facts about such states of affairs can then be built up with increasing complexity, eventually culminating in the rich conceptual and relational world of everyday life.

From this basis, Moore and Russell each developed theories of how these facts about the world are communicated. Moore initially theorized that propositions were meaningful statements about the world that are exactly alike in kind to these facts. That is, when I say, "Mont Blanc is tall," the proposition corresponding to this statement contains the actual object Mont Blanc, "with all its snow and ice" (Dummett 197). Russell, however, devised a different theory to explain how our meaningful statements relate to the facts they are about. This theory was honed and built upon by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and its logical underpinnings are probably best understood in terms of Wittgenstein's argument. The theory of meaning developed in the *Tractatus* came to be known as the

picture theory of meaning, and though Russell certainly did not agree with all the particulars of this theory, it is Russellian in spirit and provides a lucid description of how all three components of logical atomism, metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics, relate to each other.

In using concepts, Wittgenstein claims, "We make to ourselves pictures of facts. The picture presents the facts in logical space, the existence and non-existence of atomic facts" (2.1–2.11). But what are these pictures like, and what is their relationship to the facts they represent? Wittgenstein identifies this problem by pointing out that "in the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all" (2.161). In Moore's early theory (which was shared by Frege, among others), no such "identical thing" was necessary. The proposition was simply the fact; it was not a representation of reality, it simply was reality. But the difficulties posed by definite descriptions pushed Russell and Wittgenstein to show how propositions could represent facts without being identical in kind to them. Wittgenstein explains the connection between pictures and facts by saying, "The picture can represent every reality whose form it has. What every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all—rightly or falsely—is the logical form, that is, the form of reality." A painting of a mountain must take the form a mountain to be considered a representation of it. But, as Wittgenstein points out here, beyond the particular form of individual things (a mountain of such and such a composition) there is a form basic to all facts, and this is logical form. Logical structure is found both in facts in the world and in our linguistic or mental representations of them, and it is therefore what ties the disparate strands of logical atomism—metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics, together.

II. Russell and Wittgenstein on the Logical Structure of Language

Using this conclusion, that logical structure is what ties propositions to the world, we can now understand the motivations behind Russell's theory of descriptions. In the early stages of his career, Russell had considerable faith in the ability of a natural language's grammar to reflect logical structure. However, a series of paradoxes about definite descriptions pushed him to a different analysis of statements. The most famous of these puzzles is the sentence, "the king of France is bald." We could say that this is a picture representing facts in the world[1]. In a literal sense, we can imagine a painting of a bald king preening himself in the Hall of Mirrors. But in a logical sense, this is not a complete picture. Such a picture must be reducible to statements about independent entities with certain properties,

and since the king of France does not exist, he obviously cannot be said to have properties. Instead, Russell's insight was to treat being the king of France as a property. So when we say that the king of France is bald, we mean that there is something that has the property of being the king of France and the property of being bald. The discussion of how logical structure connects representations with facts about the world shows why this move is important. Russell maintains, as a key part of logical atomism, that the world is composed most basically of entities with properties. And from Wittgenstein we know that our representations of the world must follow the world's logical structure. So our representations must follow this same form of entities with properties—we must say there is an entity X and this entity has properties A and B. In other words, all meaningful statements whose subjects are not proper names must therefore include an existential or universal quantifier.

In such a system, which relies on logical structure to connect our representations to facts, what is truth? Here again, the *Tractatus*, as well as Russell's own writings, is informative. In the *Tractatus*, as we have seen earlier, Wittgenstein says that regardless of whether a picture of the world is true or false, it must have a logical structure if it is to be considered a representation at all, that is, if it is to be meaningful. Continuing with this line of thought, he says,

> The picture contains the possibility of the state of affairs which it represents. The picture agrees with reality or not; it is right or wrong, true or false. The picture represents what it represents, independently of its truth or falsehood, through the form of representation. (2.203–2.22)

This implies a simple correspondence theory of truth. If the state of affairs obtaining in the world corresponds to the proposition's logically proper representation, then the proposition is true. If the proposition misrepresents, or does not correspond to, reality, then it is false. And if the proposition does not have the correct logical structure, it does not say anything at all; it is not a real proposition. Russell echoes a similar sentiment when he says, "When I speak of a fact . . . I mean the kind of thing that makes a proposition true or false" (Russell 101). Since the world and the representation have the same basic structure, they can be easily compared, and determining truth is easy.

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[1]As mentioned, Russell did not accept many of the details of Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning, but that should not be a point of contention here. I am using the word 'picture' in a broad sense. Though it certainly has its basis in Wittgenstein's theory, "picture" here is meant only to refer to a representation of the world that shares the world's logical structure.

I take this correspondence theory of truth to be the reason that Russell thinks of falsity as a matter of convenience, and why, in regards to whether certain types of propositions should be considered false, he says, "We shall prefer the one convention or the other according to the purpose we have in view" (Strawson 264). Russell's focus is on whether a certain proposition corresponds to the facts of the world. If a proposition does not correspond, that is really the only important thing to know. At that point, whether it is called "false," "neither true nor false," or even "veridically challenged" doesn't matter. Russell is arguing (correctly) that if Strawson wants to show that he really differs from him on this point, he should show that there is some difference in the two's views about whether a certain type of proposition corresponds to facts. But Strawson's claim that he simply doesn't think the word "false" is appropriate here is not a significant disagreement.

III. *Philosophical Investigations* **and Ordinary Language Philosophy**

Strawson does have a significant disagreement with Russell, but it seems that both he and Russell misdiagnosed their debate as hinging on whether sentences with non-existing subjects should be considered false. In fact, Strawson's definitions of truth and falsity are actually quite similar to Russell's, and either philosopher's theory could be reconstructed using the other's definitions. The real difference is about what should be considered the proper logical structure of a meaningful sentence. This point, of course, is not novel; Strawson explicitly stated in later writings that this difference is important, even if this is unclear in "On Referring." But the implications of this difference are not well understood. Strawson is often seen as a follower of the late Wittgenstein, and indeed, he often associated himself with the Ordinary Language School. However, I will argue that, at least in terms of the central claims of "On Referring" go, he may actually be closer to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* than to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and insights gained from his understanding of truth and falsehood help to show that this is the case.

Less than a decade after the *Tractatus* was published, Wittgenstein was beginning to see cracks in the foundations of logical atomism. Slowly he abandoned more and more of its foundational principles, eventually resulting in the *Philosophical Investigations*, a repudiation of most of his earlier work and an important turning point in analytic philosophy. In his work on Wittgenstein, Severin Schroeder identifies many of the important themes in the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein sought to shed in the

Philosophical Investigations. Among these, the two that are most important to our discussion are determinacy of sense and logical analysis (Schroeder 128). Determinacy of sense refers to each meaningful proposition's having a precise logic; in other words, it is the thesis described above that our propositions have a logical structure that precisely reflects the structure of states of affairs in the world. Logical analysis is the philosopher's primary task—breaking down sentences into these logically correct propositions in order to discover their precise meanings.

Wittgenstein calls into question the whole project of identifying precise, logically exact speech by shifting the focus from what we mean when we say something to what we can do with language. In discussing whether logical exactness should be the goal of philosophy, he says,

> 'Inexact' is really a reproach, and 'exact' is praise. And that is to say that what is inexact attains its goal less perfectly than what is more exact. Thus the point here is what we call 'the goal'. (*Investigations* 88)

He concludes that our ordinary language is more than adequate for the kind of exactness needed in most cases. Certainly, we may sometimes need to learn to speak and analyze precisely—if we're reading the instructions to the Large Hadron Collider, for instance. But for most of what we're doing, ordinary speech is adequate, and forcing a precise meaning onto every sentence belies a misunderstanding of why we have language in the first place. Not only is identifying a precise meaning for each of our statements unnecessary, it is impossible. What constitutes "exactness" is not immediately obvious; boundaries can always be made sharper. Wittgenstein emphasizes that in the *Philosophical Investigations*,

> no single idea of exactness has been laid down; we do not know what we are supposed to imagine under this head—unless you yourself lay down what is to be so called. But you will find it difficult to hit upon such a convention; at least any that satisfies you. (88) In other words, exactness itself is inexact, and so any logical structure in language is bound to be similarly inexact.

Even before *Philosophical Investigations* was published in 1953, Wittgenstein's ideas had formed the basis of a new philosophical school centered at Oxford University. This Ordinary Language School was led by such notable philosophers as G. E. M. Anscombe, J. L. Austin, H. P. Grice, Gilbert Ryle, and of course, P. F. Strawson. Each had widely varying views even when the movement began, and these views only diverged further as time went on. Many, in fact, ended up rejecting most of the important ideas found in

the *Investigations*. However, despite their individual variance, each saw the movement as carrying on the fight against Russell's atomism and its more extreme successor, Logical Positivism, in favor of a method that eliminated philosophical problems by looking at the ordinary use of words and showing that many of the thorniest issues came about because words were imbued with overly exact meanings, not because people were speaking imprecisely. This project had mixed success; the Ordinary Language School is now commonly seen as a good idea taken too far, and much of its foundational principles are now dismissed as behaviorist and unsystematic (Schroeder 238). However, I intend to argue that for Strawson in his early years, the opposite was in fact the case. Rather than taking the later Wittgenstein's use-based philosophy too far, his theory in fact does not preclude, and may in some cases rely on, much of Russell's and the earlier Wittgenstein's atomism.

IV. Strawson as a Logical Atomist

Strawson certainly has some affinity for the project of the *Philosophical Investigations*; after all, his career-long motto was the concluding line of "On Referring"—"ordinary language has no precise logic" (260). But a look at Strawson and his theories of truth and reference will show us that, unlike the later Witgenstein, he allowed for the possibility of logical analysis, whether he intended to do so or not. Strawson's theory of truth, at least in his early years, was a redundancy theory based off of the ideas of Frank P. Ramsey (Snowdon 338). A redundancy theory of truth states that there is no difference between saying "P is true" and simply saying "P." This theory, moreover, turns out to be very close indeed to Russell's. Strawson states that "there is no nuance, except of style, between 'that's true' and 'that's a fact' " ("Truth" 196). In other words, Strawson's redundancy theory relies on a correspondence theory between our propositions and facts about the world. The correspondence part of the theory means that something is true if it is an accurate representation of facts, and the redundancy part of the theory means that to state that a proposition is true, or that it is a fact, is simply to state the proposition.

Strawson's theory of reference and description must be interpreted in light of this theory of truth. Because true statements are those that correspond to reality, Strawson must show us how this is possible. And indeed, he seems to think that showing this possibility is the foundation of any theory of descriptions. As he said of Russell and his theory,

> The way in which he arrived at the analysis was clearly by asking himself what would the circumstances in which we would say that anyone who uttered the sentence S had made a true assertion. ("On Referring" 248)

Strawson agrees with this method, but believes that Russell is analyzing the wrong thing. He agrees with Russell "that anyone now uttering the sentence 'the king of France is wise' would be making a true assertion only if there in fact at present existed one and only one king of France, and if he were wise" (251). He thinks that Russell goes wrong, however, to claim that for anyone uttering the sentence, "part of what he would be asserting would be that there at present existed one and only one king of France" (252). What Strawson is implying is that the logical structure of our representations of the world is important, but that this logical structure is not to be found in the analysis of the sentence alone.

Since Strawson rejects the possibility of the sentence itself containing all logically necessary components, it is not immediately clear how propositions relate to facts in his theory; that is, how they mean something. The traditional account of Strawson's theory, which puts him firmly in the camp of the later Wittgenstein, holds that he considers meaning to be determined by its use in a language. But though there are certain similarities between his theory and that of the *Investigations*, the differences are perhaps more profound, and certainly more often overlooked. Wittgenstein says that "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (*Investigations* 43). Strawson, on the other hand, states that "to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is . . . (to talk) about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer or to assent" ("On Referring" 250).

These passages reveal two important differences. First, Wittgenstein believes that meaning does not necessarily depend on a sentence's use in a language, whereas Strawson seems to imply that this is always the case. Second, and more importantly, Wittgenstein states that in these cases, meaning is given by the use of a sentence, whereas Strawson states that meaning is given by the *rules* for its use. This is not as superficial of a difference as it may seem. It is in this difference, in fact, that we can reconcile Strawson's correspondence–redundancy theory of truth with his contention that speech has no precise logic. For rules and conventions, though they may be arbitrary when first laid down, give logical structure, and it is logical structure that connects propositions to reality[2]. This is contrary to Wittgenstein's goal of getting rid of all semblance of sense

determinacy; Strawson has resurrected the possibility of exactness that Wittgenstein vehemently maintained was an illusory goal.

So the rules for the use of a sentence give us its meaning and show us how it connects to reality—how our language can be a *representation* of reality at all. This is supported by Strawson's claim that truth and falsity "are characteristics of a *use* of a sentence," rather than of a sentence itself (250)[3]. In essence, Strawson has retained much of Russell's theory—facts about entities and their properties as basic, truth as a correspondence between representation and fact, logical structure as the link between them—but has changed the unit of analysis. Rather than looking at the sentence and dividing it into constituent parts, Strawson proposes a theory in which we look at the *use* and *context* of a sentence; the time it was said, who said it, what was said before it, and so forth, to find its logical structure and the facts it connects to. And we determine this structure by considering the use in terms of its *rules*. So, contra later Wittgenstein, sense determinacy is maintained; our language can still be said to have a precise meaning. The only difference is that now we must consult the context of a sentence, as well as the sentence itself, to find out what this determinate sense is.

The theories of Russell and Strawson can therefore be seen to share significant similarities. Both accept much of what Wittgenstein sought to disprove in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Though Strawson claims that ordinary language has no precise logic, his theory implies that ordinary language *combined with the context of our statements* can yield very precise propositions. Whether he intended to or not, Strawson has retained many of the important assumptions of logical atomism.

V. Conclusion

Russell was right: whether "the king of France is bald" is false or neither true nor false is largely a matter of convenience. But now we can see more clearly where this debate came from. Conventions, arbitrary though

[2]For more on how Wittgenstein avoids this commitment and explains the relationship between meaning and rule-following, (see *Philosophical Investigations* 97 – 109). One may object that Strawson does not intend for rules to give logical structure. Rather, like Wittgenstein, he thinks that rules cannot cover all cases, and when following a rule, our "reasons soon give out" (*Investigations* 211). However, Strawson's comparisons between the contents of propositions in Russell's analysis and the contents of presuppositions and context in his own weaken this objection. It is of course plausible that Strawson intended to hew very closely to Wittgenstein's conception of rule-following. My contention is simply that, however much he may have done so, his theory can also be plausibly interpreted from a logical atomist point of view.

[3]Strawson makes a similar claim when he says, "We cannot talk of the sentence being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion or (if this is preferred) to express a true or false proposition" ("On Referring" 249).

they may be, usually have good reasons behind them. In this case, these linguistic conveniences arise from a mutual desire to accurately reflect the relationship between representations and facts. For both philosophers, "false" describes a proposition that misrepresents reality.

Considering this goal, it is obvious why Strawson thinks that some sentences may be neither true nor false: for him, some sentences are not able to provide representations of the world at all, and so cannot be said to misrepresent it. Often, we need to consider the context, presuppositions, and use of a sentence in order to have all the logically necessary parts to make something that can be considered a representation. Therefore, it is natural to say that, rather than sentences themselves, it is the uses of sentences, or sentences with certain presuppositions and contexts, that are true or false. In some cases, the truth or falsity of our assertions does not arise. But our presuppositions and background beliefs combined with the sentence will always have a truth-value. Similarly, for Russell, since the sentence itself is what connects to reality (via logical structure), it is equally natural that he would want to be able to call all sentences either true or false. Their definitions of "false," conventional though they may be, arise from a significant disagreement about what unit of language corresponds to reality.

Just as Russell's method of logical analysis took us from the natural language grammar of a sentence to logically proper statements about entities and their properties, so Strawson offers us a way to go from a rule-following use of a sentence and the presuppositions of the person uttering it to a similarly proper statement giving a complete representation of facts. For Russell, this required adding an existential quantifier to the meaning of a sentence. Strawson rejects this method, but retains the idea that an existential quantifier is necessary for a proposition to have the correct logical structure. So instead of considering these quantifiers part of the meaning of the sentence itself, he considers them presuppositions of the speaker (*Introduction* 176). For example, consider the sentence "the king of France is bald." Both Russell and Strawson consider the existential proposition "there is a king of France" to be necessary to decide whether "the king of France is bald" is true; i.e., whether it accurately represents a state of affairs in the world. But while Russell considers this part of the meaning of the sentence, Strawson considers it a presupposition—a necessary background belief or condition. And this is not just a difference in convention—what is the proper unit of logical analysis of language has important ramifications[4]. But as we have seen, it reflects a significant agreement on the nature of

representations and the way they connect to facts about the world.

Strawson may object to this characterization; he and others may consider him much closer to the later Wittgenstein than to Russell's atomism and the *Tractatus*. And in many ways, he certainly is. Like the rest of the Ordinary Language School of philosophy, he rejected the possibility of an ideal language, the need for improvements on ordinary language, and the practicality of many types of linguistic analysis. My contention has been simply that, important as many of Strawson's disagreements with Russell are, they are more usefully interpreted as differences of degree rather than differences in kind. Though Russell and Strawson have often been seen as representing two opposing extremes in 20th century analytic philosophy, this interpretation shows they have striking similarities that are seldom appreciated.

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[4]Ramifications about the practicality of analysis, the relationship between linguistic and social practice, the role of philosophy, etc.

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