

Beliefs about Beliefs: Quine vs. Russell

NICK ZUKIN

IN HIS PAPER "On What There Is," Willard Van Orman Quine refers to Bertrand Russell as a logicist—what Quine calls a contemporary form of realist or Platonist. He describes realism as condoning "the use of bound variables to refer to abstract entities known and unknown, specifiable and unspecifiable, indiscriminately" (*From a Logical Point of View* 14).¹ Quine's famous statement of ontological commitment in the same paper says that "to be . . . is . . . to be reckoned the value of a variable." In other words, Quine is merely stating that logicism admits abstract entities—universals, mental ideas, and the like—into its ontology, into its list of things that can possibly be referenced (*FLV* 13).

Unlike Russell, Quine sympathizes with formalism, a contemporary form of nominalism (*FLV* 18). He admits no abstract entities into his ontology and is sparing with his reckoning of values of variables (a devout follower of Ockham's Maxim). Quine enthusiastically uses Russell's theory of descriptions, showing that, in addition to definite descriptions, any name can be translated so as not to commit one to an alleged object's existence when one discusses it. Not only does Quine reaffirm Russell's contention that descriptions are logical fictions—myths—but he shows that universals can be analyzed similarly so that statements such as "Some

Nick Zukin is a senior majoring in political science and minoring in philosophy at Brigham Young University. This essay was awarded third place in the 1997 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Competition.

¹*From a Logical Point of View* will be referred to hereafter as *FLV*, *The Problems of Philosophy* will be referred to as *PP*, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* will be referred to as *WP*, and *Theories and Things* will be referred to as *TT*.

dogs are white' . . . must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness" (FLV 13). Universals become myths as well.

One extension of Quine's extreme adherence to Ockham's Razor is his behaviorism and physicalism. In addition to being unwilling to accept universals as more than myths, he is unwilling to posit mental states, ideas, or entities. To say that someone has a mental state is to say that person exhibits the empirically observable behavior associated with that supposed state. Without empirical evidence, no state can meaningfully be said to exist. For example, to say that A loves B is not to say that A has an idea of love associated with B, but that A acts lovingly towards B.

Russell, on the other hand, is perfectly willing to say that there is a mental state that causes such actions and that such a state can exist meaningfully without external evidence of it. This view of universals, relations, attitudes, or mental states is expounded in two chapters of *The Problems of Philosophy*, where he explicitly gives Plato credit.

One mental state about which Quine and Russell disagree is belief. While Russell does move away from a purely Platonic notion that belief is a "special mental attitude directed towards a proposition," he nevertheless maintains that when one has a belief "one's mind stands in a multiple relation to the various terms with which one's [belief] is concerned" (Ayer 37).

This essay will contrast a behaviorist/Quinean understanding of belief with Russell's, showing each philosopher's strengths and weaknesses. The goal is to evaluate each thinker's position and his implicit or explicit critique of the other.

What Is a Belief?

Most naturally, one would like to think of a belief as merely the believer's relation to the proposition believed. For example, if we were to say "Othello believes Desdemona loves Cassio," Othello would merely believe the statement 'Desdemona loves Cassio' as a whole and the relations within the statement would be unimportant, referentially opaque.²

²'Referential opacity' is a term coined by Russell and popularized by Quine. Concisely, "a context is referentially opaque if it can render a referential occurrence non-referential." Quotation, according to Quine, is the "referentially

However, in *The Problems of Philosophy* and elsewhere, Russell attacks this understanding, an understanding he previously held. He writes:

The necessity of allowing for falsehood makes it impossible to regard belief as a relation of the mind to a single object, which could be said to be what is believed. If belief were so regarded, we should find that . . . it would not admit of the opposition of truth and falsehood, but would have to always be true. (124)

Beliefs must be able to be true or false just as a statement such as "The Earth is flat" must be able to be true or false. However, if a belief is true regardless of the statement believed, then a person can rightly believe in any statement. All that is necessary in this understanding of belief is that the believer truly believe, but not that the proposition being believed have any truth. A belief in a false proposition can be considered no differently from a belief in a true one. Russell continues:

This may be clear by some examples. Othello believes falsely that Desdemona loves Cassio. We cannot say that this belief consists in a relation to a single object, 'Desdemona's love for Cassio', for if there were such an object, the belief would be true. There is in fact no such object, and therefore Othello cannot have any relation to such an object. Hence his belief cannot possibly consist in a relation to this object. (PP 124)

We seem to be in a conundrum since we want to be able to say that someone truly believes a proposition, yet that their belief is false, or that they believe in an untruth. "Hence," explains Russell, "it will be better to seek for a theory of belief which does not make it consist in a relation of the mind to a single object" (PP 124).

Instead, Russell defines a belief as a relation between the terms of the predicate, including the verb. Thus, in the example 'Othello believes Desdemona loves Cassio', the relation of belief is not just between Othello and the proposition 'Desdemona loves Cassio', but

opaque context par excellence" (WP 161). For a more in-depth discussion, see Quine's "Three Grades of Modal Involvement" in *Ways of Paradox* 160–64.

rather between Othello, Desdemona, loving, and Cassio. This is not to say, as Russell points out, that "when we say that it is a relation of four terms, we do not mean that Othello has a certain relation to Desdemona, and has the same relation to loving and also to Cassio" (PP 125). This would be absurd. It would stray too far from the idea that believing is a relation between the believer and the proposition believed.

Russell corrects this absurdity when he writes that "believing, plainly, is not a relation which Othello has to each of the three terms concerned, but to all of them together" (PP 125–26). But this contention is different from saying that believing is a relation between the believer and the constituents of the belief individually. It is also different from saying that believing is a relation between the believer and the proposition. The first ignores the fact that the terms actually constitute a proposition and thus have a specified relation to each other. The second forgets that the constituents of the proposition play an important role in the belief. As Russell says, "there is only one example of the relation of believing involved, but this one example knits together four terms" (PP 126). Therefore, "an act of belief or of judgment is the occurrence between certain terms at some particular time, of the relation of believing or judging" (PP 126).

"We are now," as Russell writes after establishing this theory concerning belief, "in a position to understand what it is that distinguishes a true judgment from a false one" (PP 126). A belief is "true when it corresponds to a certain associated complex, and false when it does not" (PP 128). In other words, when the terms of a propositional object in a statement of belief are correctly unified, or correctly related to one another, then the belief is true. If they are not correctly related, then the belief is false. Thus the truth of the belief, according to Russell, has little to do with a mental state. It has more to do with the "fact of the matter." For if the belief as a mental state corresponds to the fact, possibly represented by the propositional object, then the belief is true. So Russell's theory includes an element for both mental and empirical accountability. "We account simultaneously," says Russell, "for the two facts that beliefs (a) depend on minds for their existence, and (b) do not depend on minds for their truth" (PP 129).

However, this conception of belief creates some problems. First, Russell acknowledges a problem in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*: that the occurrence of a belief as a mental state is a fact in itself (81). I stated

the general problem earlier in noting that it seems contradictory for someone to truly believe in an untrue proposition. In Russell's theory, one is left only with the issue of whether a belief corresponds to a fact, and if it does then it is true, but if it doesn't then it is false. No truth value can be assigned to the existence of a belief. This seems to be taking a position too different from Russell's original position that a belief's truth relies on whether one truly believes in a proposition or not.

It seems there are two concepts at issue here: (1) whether one truly believes or truly has a belief, and (2) whether one's belief is correct. Russell may not be haphazardly ignoring this issue, or he may not be truly ignoring it at all. Instead, it may be his disposition to accept mental entities that keeps him from evaluating whether one truly has a belief or not. The issue of whether one has a mental idea or attitude seems to be mostly a private one. Certainly, we cannot see into the mind of another to judge whether she does indeed have an idea. To an extent, we must take her word for it. Yet lying does exist, and sometimes people may even lie to themselves. For example, a person could say that she believes that not wearing a seat belt is dangerous and foolish and yet never wear a seat belt. The question arises whether the act of saying that one has a belief is the same as the corresponding mental entity being present in the speaker's mind. And if not, then how can we say that (a) one has a belief, and (b) that a belief is true if we do not know even if there is a belief?

A second problem that arises from Russell's account of belief is generated from the supposed identity of indiscernibles.³ We could just as easily call this the problem of the substitution of identicals. For if two words truly refer to the same object, then they should be interchangeable without affecting the truth value of the sentence. However, this clearly does not work with belief statements if you treat them as Russell has. For example, the statement "The Pharisees believed that Christ was not Jehovah" cannot be replaced with "The Pharisees believed Jehovah was not Jehovah." Yet, following Russell's examination of beliefs we would have to say that one can replace the other since any word x that refers

³Essentially, if there exists an object x with all of the characteristics and only the characteristics of object y , object y is identical to object x . Or we could put it this way: $(G)(Gx \leftrightarrow Gy) \rightarrow x=y$.

to the same object as another word y should be able to replace y without affecting the truth value of the original sentence. But as the example shows, this interchange leads to obviously absurd sentences. Hence, there must be at least some referential opacity in the statement that constitutes a belief.

However, as Russell has demonstrated, treating the specific belief as one unanalyzable whole may compromise bivalence. And we do not, it seems, want to deal with the individual terms in the belief as if we must ignore their meanings. For example, we do not want to say that a statement such as "The Pharisees believed that Christ was not Jehovah" should be rewritten "The Pharisees believed 'Christ' was not 'Jehovah'." If we required such a restatement, we would have no way of distinguishing between 'Christ' the term and Christ the person; likewise with Jehovah. But this is necessary since when a person believes a statement he believes it of an object or the meaning of the words used, not just the words. We cannot have statements referring to the same thing when it is said that "Bob believes 'Christ' is the Savior" and "Bob believes 'Christ' has six letters." Obviously, Bob's beliefs are about two entirely different things, 'Christ' the word and Christ the person. Analysis must make this distinction clear. But analysis must also steer clear of absurd statements that could result because of substitution.⁴

So the problems thus far are (1) belief as a fact in itself, (2) belief as a mental entity, and (3) substitution of objects in belief statements. Quine attempts to solve each of these problems.

The first and the second problems can be solved through the same type of analysis: behaviorism. If Quine were to say that belief is a fact in itself, he would mean that people truly do act in a way reflective of a statement of belief. On his view, there is no belief which is a mental state or idea; rather a person acts in a way such that a statement can be made to explain that action. For example, take the statement 'Othello believes Desdemona loves Cassio'. In this case, all that is posited by the statement is Othello's professed jealousy and exhibited rage toward Desdemona. A statement of belief is, in this instance, an expression of something physical. Or similarly, and possibly more accurately, one could

⁴This criticism was developed using ideas presented in Quine's "Three Grades of Modal Involvement" in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*.

say that belief is "the betting odds the subject will accept, allowance being made for the positive or negative value for him of risk as such" (TT 122). Thus, belief is open to testing.

Belief, then, can be accounted for as something physical or behavioral, rather than mental. This also bypasses the problem of needing to take one's word for the existence of a belief. Quine acknowledges that belief cannot be a mere matter of assent or dissent. "Belief is not to be recognized simply by assent," he explains, "for this leaves no place for insincerity or sanctimonious self-deception" (TT 122). Thus in one swoop, Quine has provided a behavioral/physical way of accounting for beliefs, and a way of accounting for whether one has a belief or not. Belief is the way one would or does act under certain conditions, and the way one would or does act under certain conditions constitutes one's beliefs.

However, we run into an enormous problem when we stipulate that a statement can be only true or false, even under behaviorism. Take, again, the example "Othello believes Desdemona loves Cassio." If this statement is true, then Othello will act as if Desdemona loves Cassio. He will become angry, show signs of jealousy, and so on. But notice that while this behaviorist approach eliminates mental entities and treating belief as a fact, it still falls under the criticisms Russell made about Othello believing Desdemona loves Cassio. Now, according to Quine, a belief does not take into account the truth or falsity of what is believed. It allows for bivalence, because one need not take the subject's word for the existence of a mental state. Also, one need not consider the proposition 'Desdemona loves Cassio' as an object with which the subject is related.⁵ But we are still stuck with the problem that statements of belief have two components: (1) whether one believes, and (2) the truth of what is believed. Through Quine, and in opposition to Russell, we have given up the latter for the former.

⁵If there is no object, Russell's argument falls apart. His argument depends upon his ontology. Quine's ontology, as shown in the introduction, does not require that an object, abstract or concrete, exist for a word to be meaningful and for a statement to have truth. Thus, that 'Desdemona's love for Cassio' does not refer does not matter. Russell assumes it does, and his argument rests on this assumption.

But Quine's account does allow for the third problem to disappear. What is believed plays a role in the truth or falsity of a belief-statement only to the extent that it accurately (or should we say plausibly or beyond reasonable doubt?) provides an explanation of the subject's behavior. This also implies that purely hypothetical statements about belief are baseless. If belief is an explanation of behavior, then there must be some evidence, some behavior, to explain. Purely hypothetical statements of belief are only tenable if one accepts mental entities.

Conclusion

Thus, Quine's analysis of belief-statements resolves the three problems raised in regard to Russell's analysis. And it does so while still meeting Russell's main objections to his own original analysis. With Quine's help, we have accounted for beliefs as facts in themselves as opposed to the truth of what is believed. We have disposed of mental entities in the process and have eliminated the many problems that come with them, most importantly the problem of lying. Furthermore, we have resolved the problem of substitution of identicals since what is believed has no relation to the truth of the statement.

But at what cost?

The last problem—the problem of identicals—we have discarded quite cavalierly, as if it does not matter. And yet it reinvigorates a conundrum that has underscored this entire essay: we want to be able to say that someone truly believes a proposition, yet that their belief is false, or that they believe an untruth. Again, there are two things that must be accounted for: (1) whether one believes, and (2) the truth of what is believed. It seems that the primary issue, besides the question of realism versus formalism, is which one to embrace and which one to ignore. Quine seems to privilege the former, and Russell the latter.

So can something be done?

I don't think it can. It may just be preference for regarding the statements the way that best fits into one's ontology. They both exclude a very valid and, it seems, useful way of looking at a belief-statement. This essay may also be taken as implicitly denying the ubiquity of bivalence; some statements may be something other than just true or false. They may have an aspect which is true and an aspect which is false, and as a whole have no definite truth value whatsoever. Or, it may be a matter

of simply using the analysis that works under the circumstances or that best fit a context. If this is the case, then this essay may support another view of Quine's—holism—and oppose another view of Russell's—logical atomism. Ultimately, this essay suggests that problems like this one with belief-statements result because of an unwillingness to grant that statements have only a definite meaning within the context of other statements, or even a worldview. This essay is, then, an attack on logical atomism, which aims to break down language into its smallest conceptual parts to get at the heart of meaning.

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