

## Seminar handout: Russell and Ramsey on Truth

### Background

- Expected remit of paper: Russell-Ramsey interaction in the 1920's.
- Qn: *Was* there one?

(a) On second edition of *Principia* (work done by Russell in the summer months of 1923 & 1924, published 1925), yes. But:

- much less than some have portrayed, and hardly a meeting of minds;
- issues anyway too complicated for a 'handbook' paper.

(b) Otherwise? Not that much.

(i) Personal:

- it's easy to imagine that they must have been close:
  - both Trinity mathematicians, both Bloomsbury-ites, both Apostles, lots of mutual friends, same interests, 'collaborators' on PM2, etc.
- but in fact their personal interaction was very limited:
  - 1920-23, when Ramsey's ideas were mostly set: probably (?) just one meeting in, March 1922
  - 1924-5, PM2, discussions over a weekend in Feb 1924; thereafter a few letters, Ramsey making 'corrections'
  - 1926, Russell lectures at Trinity on Fridays in MT – some meetings
  - 1927 onwards, nothing (?) - apart from admin of Wittgenstein's PhD

(ii) Intellectual:

- pervasive, but, it is really *cross-temporal* - an interaction between Ramsey in the 1920's and the Russell of 10-15 years earlier.

### Main business: On Truth

Themes:

- Ramsey's conception of the structure of the problem, the sub-issues into which theorizing about truth has to divide
- How that structural conception determines Ramsey's assessment of (two of) Russell's theories of judgement and truth

Main historical claims:

- Ramsey's conception is *remarkably* stable
  - already set in 1921 (age 18, *before* seeing TLP)
  - essentially the same in *On Truth* (mss from 1927-29)

Main philosophical claim:

- One of Ramsey's memorable dicta ('mathematicians likely to be right') applies to him, unfortunately not to Russell

## 1. Standard summary of Russell's 'early' (1903/4) and middle (1910/13) 'theories'

Early:

- Judgement
  - a relation of the mind to a mind-independent pp
  - pps complex entities, containing the objects they are 'about'
  - Schema of judgement:  $J(s, \langle aLb \rangle)$
- Truth
  - a simple, undefinable property of pps
  - judging truly = being related by judgement to a true pp

Middle:

- Judgement
  - a multiple relation of the mind to the objects judged about
  - no such entities as pps, only facts
  - schema of judgement:  $J(s, a, L, b)$

a judgement is not a dual relation of the mind to a single Objective, but a multiple relation of the mind to the various other terms with which the judgement is concerned. Thus if I judge that A loves B, that is not a relation of me to 'A's love for B', but a relation between me and A and love and B. (1910: 122)

- Truth
  - = correspondence of judgement and fact: the objects the judgement is 'about' are themselves combined to constitute a fact

when we judge truly some entity 'corresponding' in some way to our judgement is to be found outside our judgement, while when we judge falsely there is no such 'corresponding' entity. (1910: 119)

If A loves B there is such a complex object as 'A's love for B', and vice versa; thus the existence of this complex object gives the condition for the truth of the judgement 'A loves B'. (1910:123)

## 2. Superficial summary of Ramsey's stance on these theories

Against the early theory:

- repudiates pps
  - they are 'mysterious entities', 'so unlike anything else in the world'
- denies that truth is undefinable: it is definable 'in natural terms'

With the middle theory:

- endorses a multiple-relation view of judgement: 'a judgement has none one object but many, to which the mental factor is multiply related'

- advances an account of truth that view 'will probably be called at Correspondence Theory' (OT 11), and accepts that it would do 'very little harm' to admit the label (OT 90)

*But:*

- for Ramsey the most crucial issue is a structural one:
  - 'the problem falls ... into two parts'; 'it is essential to distinguish' them; the central error in theorizing about truth is not being clear 'which part of the problem is at any point being tackled'
- on this issue:
  - the early theory gets things right; the middle theory is a non-starter

The two questions, as formulated in OT:

**Question I: 'What, given propositional reference, constitutes truth?'**

**Question II: 'What constitutes propositional reference?'**

### 3. Differences with the early theory are superficial

(A) On judgement, or Question II

- Ramsey rejects Russell's 'heavyweight' pps as 'mysterious'
- He does *not* reject what they were introduced to explain:

In asserting of a belief that it is a belief that  $p$ , where  $p$  is a sentence, we are asserting of it some character and such characters I call references. It is therefore indubitable that there are references. (1921: 111)

- Such a 'reference', or 'referential character' (1921) or 'propositional reference' (1929) is a belief's characteristic of being *that so-and-so*
  - it might as well be called a 'pp' (lightweight): indeed Ramsey does so (in 1921).
  - Russell's pps, being 'heavyweight', posed as an *explanans*; 'lightweight' pps are clearly an *explanandum*
  - Even so, Russell was addressing a good question: *Question II*

(B) On truth, or Question I

- Russell said: a [1] simple, [2] indefinable, [3] property of pps
  - [2] and [3] are wrong; but [3] is right; and [3] is the important point
- Ramsey's answer
  - (ET) 'A belief that  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$ ' (OT 14).
- This is simple: 'quite obvious', a 'truism' or 'platitude'

- And it was recognized by Ramsey as a point of agreement with the early theory:

...I should [if I admitted pps] define truth as that property  $\phi$  such that to say that  $p$  has  $\phi$  is equivalent...to asserting  $p$ . I should suppose  $\phi$  to be a simple quality; if asked why I should suppose there to be such a property I should say there were the same reasons as for any complex property. It is *Principia* 9.15...: If for some  $a$  there is a proposition  $\phi a$  then there is a function  $\phi \hat{x}$  and vice versa. In this case  $\phi \hat{x}$  is  $\hat{x}$ . (1922: 385)

(i.e. If there were propositions, and truth were a property of them, represented by a propositional function, then it would be the simplest such function: identity.)

#### 4. Differences with the middle theory run deep

- In 'Facts and Propositions' Ramsey begins by endorsing the multiple-relation view that 'a judgement has none one object but many, to which the mental factor is multiply related'. But he continues:

...but to leave it at that, as he [Russell] did, cannot be regarded as satisfactory. There is no reason to suppose the multiple relation simple...and it is desirable that we should try to find out more about it and how it varies when the form of proposition believed varies. Similarly, a theory of descriptions which contented itself with observing that 'The king of France is wise' could be regarded as asserting a possibly complex multiple relation between kingship, France, and wisdom, would be miserably inferior to Mr Russell's theory, which explains exactly what relation it is. (FP 142)

- Russell's MRTJ is that 'miserably inferior' theory: it doesn't even *pretend* to answer Question II.

(I.e. compare two theories of definite descriptions.

(1) runs: The K of F is W =<sub>def</sub>  $\exists x \forall y ((Kyf \leftrightarrow x=y) \wedge Wx)$ .

(2) runs: 'The K of F is W' says something or other about K and F and W.

Russell's MRTJ is like (2), not like (1).)

- Work that should have been done to address Question II is transferred over to Question I, as the correspondence theory of truth

- Not only does it then over-complicate what ought to be simple, it seriously misleads us about the *nature* of the work that ought to be done:

- Question II demands a naturalistic answer, but what we are offered is instead a gratuitous piece of misplaced metaphysics.

#### 5. The role of (ET) in this diagnosis

- (ET) 'is really so obvious that one is ashamed to insist on it' (OT 13). But 'it provides a slight check on any deeper investigations'.

- But if (ET) is to serve as a check, it must be *possible* to invoke it.

- It *can* be invoked only when a belief is intentionally identified. (Contrast, e.g., 'The view Smith voiced at yesterday's meeting is very plausible'. (ET) cannot either approve or reject any suggestion as to what the truth of Smith's view requires.)

-So (ET) is a 'check' in two ways:

(1) It rules out theories that fail the test (coherentism, pragmatism)

The most certain thing about truth is that 'p is true' and 'p', if not identical, are equivalent. This enables us to rule out at once some theories of truth such as that 'to be true' means 'to work' or 'to cohere' since clearly 'p works' and 'p coheres' are not equivalent to 'p'. (1921: 118; cf. OT 17)

(2) It also rules out theories that don't even allow the test to be conducted. It thus rules out Russell's middle theory. That theory purports to tell us what a belief *is*, but not in a way that provides for the intentional identification of it.

#### 6. Illustration: much- (or over-) discussed 'problems' for the MRTJ

(A) The 'narrow direction problem':

'How is it that Othello's judgement, represented ' $J(o, d, L, c)$ ', requires for its truth that Desdemona should love Cassio, and not that Cassio love Desdemona?'

(B) The 'wide direction problem':

'How is it that, if ' $J(o, d, L, c)$ ' ascribes to Othello a judgement he actually made, ' $J(o, d, i, c)$ ' – using '*i*' for Iago – does not even attribute a judgement he might have made?'

- These 'problems' have *easy* answers.

- E.g., 'problem' (A) easily answered:

The definition of *any* relational expression must specify how it serves, in connection with expressions designating arguments of the relation, to express a thought. E.g., if we intend '*K*' to mean *kicked*, but have not settled whether ' $Kab$ ' means that *a* kicked *b* or that *b* kicked *a*, then we have not defined '*K*' at all. Exactly the same holds for '*J*'.

- These easy answers to the 'problems' reduce to:

- In the 'formal mode': If '*J*' has not been defined so as to settle them, then it has not been defined to mean *judges*.

- In the 'material mode': That's just what *judging* is.

7. Russell does not give these easy answers. Why not?

(A) Ramsey's answer, as it relates specifically to 'problem' (A):

- the parallel between '*J*' and an ordinary relational expression '*K*' directly yields:
  - (1) If it has not been settled that '*J*(*o, d, L, c*)' says that Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, and not *vice versa*, then '*J*' has not been defined at all.
- the easy answer *takes* it to yield:
  - (2) If it has not been settled that '*J*(*o, d, L, c*)' ascribes to Othello a judgement that is true iff Desdemona loves Cassio, and not *vice versa*, then '*J*' has not been defined at all.
- the transition from (1) to (2) is mediated by (ET), and this might be questioned:  
'It is one thing so to define '*J*' that it identifies Othello's judgement, another to explain what it is for the judgement thus identified to be true.'
- if it *is* questioned, these two become genuinely distinct tasks;
- but we then have *no idea* what it would be to complete just the first of them.

(B) Ramsey's diagnosis generically put:

- Russell divides up the problem wrongly:
  - first, develop a theory of what kind of fact the making of a judgement is
  - only *after* that, raise the question, by virtue of what kind of relations ('correspondence') to other things/facts does a judgement have a certain truth-condition (or 'content' or 'propositional reference')
- Ramsey had this diagnosis in his earliest, undergraduate papers:  
'I am inclined to think any such attempt misguided; for it rests on the assumption either that there are one or many indefinable belief relations, or that if they are definable *it is possible to settle their logical form first, and define them afterwards*' (1922: 384, emphasis added).
- He was, I think, the first to have it, but not the last:  
And it is, indeed, very strange that people have so often proceeded by saying 'Well, we're pretty clear what a statement is, aren't we? Now let us settle *the further question*, viz. What it is for a statement to be true'. (Strawson 1950: 200).