Wittgenstein on Believing that p

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1. Introduction

The outlines of Wittgenstein's conception of propositions can be sketched by means of the following four or five points. First, in 1913 Wittgenstein focuses on whatever it is that judgments have in common that allows them to depict a sense and express a thought. In so doing Wittgenstein is pressing to find a sense or proposition – what is believed *in* -- of concern to logic and independent of psychological conditions like judging, asserting, and negating. In his 1913 "Notes on Logic" Wittgenstein says (von Wright 1979, 96):

> Judgment, question, and command are all on the same level. What interests logic in them is only the unasserted proposition.

He writes, also:

> There are only unasserted propositions. Assertion is merely psychological. In *not-p*, *p* has exactly the same sense as if it stands alone; this point is absolutely fundamental. (von Wright 1979, 95)

Second, to contend that assertion (etc.) is merely psychological and of no concern to the logician means that a proposition seeming to occur in assertion as though in another proposition does not, in fact, do so. That is, only truth-functional contexts provide a means for a proposition to genuinely occur in another proposition. Wittgenstein alludes to this contention when he writes that "at first sight it appears as if there were also a different way in which one proposition could occur in another" (von Wright 1979, 143.)

Third, it is essential to logic that when we concern ourselves with propositions we take into consideration not merely the truth value that they have (true, false), but the truth value (true or false) they may possibly have. That is, logic highlights propositional bivalence. We can represent the false value by "~" or some other way, but what matters is not that we say "p is false" by (e.g.) ~p, but that we grasp that what matters to logic is both truth values. In English (once we settle that ~ p means "p is false") we express that a proposition has two truth values by saying (or writing on a truth table) *both p and ~ p*. As our language indicates, propositions are intrinsically linked to logical connectives, for as just noted, *both/and*, and *not* come into view simply by understanding the nature of propositions in terms of possible truth-values. About this bipolar view of the proposition Wittgenstein writes (Ogden 1922, 95):

> In 'a judges *p*' *p* cannot be replaced by a proper name. This appears if we substitute "a judges that p is true and not-p is false." The proposition "a judges p" consists of the proper name *a*, the proposition *p* with its two poles, and *a* being related to both of these poles in a certain way. This is obviously not a relation in the ordinary sense.

Wittgenstein is aware that language misleads us in our analyses of belief. The appearance noted above of our possessing more than one way of forming larger propositions out of smaller ones is one case; another is our tendency to mistake "A judges p" as a relation between an experiencing subject and the proposition (Ogden 1922, 119).

Fourth, Wittgenstein views the meaning of a proposition as a fact – its "objective" in Russell's later language – that is, what makes it true. In particular, he insists that a true negative proposition (e.g. "Socrates is not a handsome man") must be true because of some fact as to fail to do so would leave our use of true negative propositions without meaning:

> However, for instance, "not-p" may be explained, the question of what is negated must have a meaning (von Wright 1979, 94).

These items are surely not exhaustive of Wittgenstein's conception of propositions and belief, but they will help us see more clearly into the development of Wittgenstein's ideas to have them before us.

2. A problem and a turning point

Recall Wittgenstein's point cited above:

> However, for instance, "not-p" may be explained, the question of what is negated must have a meaning. (von Wright 1979, 94)

We can see some of the motivation behind this remark if we turn to an often ignored source, Russell's chapter in *Theory of Knowledge* on the dual forms of belief and disbelief. Russell's multiple relation analysis, given in his chapter on understanding, has captured the attention many interpreters and tended to eclipse this chapter which is my concern, though it is here, I think, that we gain entry into Wittgenstein's views (as well as their affect on Russell). The relevant doctrine can be explained quite briefly. In the *Theory of Knowledge* Russell reduces belief that not-aRb to the form, *dis*belief that aRb (Eames 1984, 142). On this view (new to the text) what verifies (belief in) the negative proposition ~aRb is the truth of (a belief in) the positive proposition aRb. The purpose behind Russell's introducing disbelief as a new form is to be able to assert that in belief and disbelief the same content, the same proposition, occurs.

In taking this position on disbelief and belief, he may therefore be attempting, unsuccessfully, to address Wittgenstein's demand for something common to various cognitive forms. But my present point is that Wittgenstein's demand that there must be some fact of the matter is not satisfied by this reduction of negation to disbelief. In the *Theory of Knowledge* chapter under discussion Russell seems uncertain of the doctrine, and I think we can discern why, and what Wittgenstein may have said, from Russell's own comments in 1918. In 1918, in the context of rejecting Demos' alternative to his own doctrine of negative facts, Russell agrees with Demos that the reduction of ~aRb to disbelief in aRb is unacceptable (Slater 1986, 187). A negative proposition, Russell says, must be defined in such a way that its truth depends on something "in the real world" and not on the subjective event of experiencing disbelief; this is why, he suggests, there must be negative facts.

The fact that mere weeks after composing the 1913 dualist doctrine Russell replaces its account of true

negative beliefs with a theory of bipolar judgments and negative facts supports my contention that we witness in this transition a decisive stage in Wittgenstein's expression of the theory, which appears first, muffled and alien looking, in Russell's own writings. That is, I suspect that Russell's excessively psychological approach, his inability to handle the connection between propositions and possible truth values, and to supply a fact when a negative proposition is true, together lead Wittgenstein to demand bipolarity and Russell to adopt it. For clearly Wittgenstein sways Russell, in 1913, further away from a psychological account of propositions, towards a logical, bi-polar conception--that is, one which sees propositions in terms of their possible truth-values – and towards admission of some fact as the meaning of true negative propositions.

3. A rough solution and a new view

Turning to the notes, we see Wittgenstein's hand first in Russell's attempt to address the notion of possibility. Russell opens the notes asserting that what is the case may be either positive or negative; that "[t]hree objects x, R, y form one or other of two complexes xRy or ~xRy" (Eames 1984, 195). These negative and positive facts, as he thereafter calls them, are said to "contain nothing but x and R and y"; that is, despite the suggestion of the symbol "~xRy", a negative fact contains no object corresponding to the tilde. Yet they do contain a non-negative, non-positive neutral fact as a constituent. He explains:

It *looks* as if there actually were always a relation of x and R and y whenever they form *either* of the two complexes, and as if this were perceived in understanding. If there is such a neutral [neither positive nor negative] fact, it ought to be a *constituent* of the positive or negative fact. It will provide a meaning for *possibility* (Eames 1984, 195).

A neutral fact is intended to do the work of propositional content, of what is common to the two poles of belief. Thus Russell situates the neutral fact in a polarized role in judging, introducing a radically new theory of judging which overturns that presented in the *Theory of Knowledge*. (Russell is explicit that the neutral fact replaces the notion of form treated as an element of belief on the earlier 1913 theory.) We read:

Judgment involves the *neutral* fact, not the positive or negative fact. The neutral fact has a relation to a positive fact, or to a negative fact. Judgment asserts *one* of these. It [judgment] will still [when it asserts a neutral fact in one of these ways] be a neutral relation, but its terms will not be the same as in my old theory. The neutral fact replaces the *form*. Call [a] neutral fact "positively directed" when it corresponds to a positive fact", "negatively directed" when it corresponds to a negative fact (Eames 1984, 187).

In the passage just cited, Russell distinguishes between what a judgment *involves* and what it *asserts*. (These ideas develop eventually into his distinction in late 1918 between what a propositional symbol *expresses*--a thought, its meaning--and what it asserts or denies: a fact, its objective.) Wittgenstein's insistence that belief be construed neither as a relation to a fact (as it would be true) nor to a proposition (as there are none), and that a proposition must be true because of some fact, expresses itself here, I claim, in Russell's conceding a duality in facts (not in belief/disbelief pairs), as well as duality or polarity in the way that a proposition (a neutral fact) means.

That is, we should gather from the 1913 notes how decisively Wittgenstein insists on the need for a fact, not a subjective mental state, as the correlate of a proposition. For it is the point in time at which Russell replaces his *Theory of Knowledge* doctrine on which the negation of "aRb" is defined in terms of the occurrence of disbelief. Thus when Russell lays down what it means for a judgment to be positive or negative (in order to define the conditions under which a judgment is true) he writes:

The negative of the positive or negative fact is the negative or positive fact. There is no negative of the neutral proposition or of the neutral fact. Call +J(xRy) the judgment *of* +xRy, etc. Then the negative of a judgment is the judgment *of* the negative (Eames 1984, 199).

Russell's earlier treatment of ~ p as disbelief in p, I suggested above, made truth and falsity overly psychological. On the basis of his new conviction that a proposition must be true or false due to some *fact*, Russell therefore presents his new theory of judging on which truth is defined in terms of the existence of a positive or negative fact. At the same time, he attempts to accommodate Wittgenstein and to provide *more* than just the objective or fact – i.e. more than just what makes the judgment true – by placing something like content, the neutral relation, in a bi-polar relation to the negative or positive fact. Many of these trends are brought by Russell to fruition only in the teens and twenties; as I have tried to show, they had a very long period of incubation and an intimate link to Wittgenstein.

4. A final word: looking back to the beginning

As many now know, on May 20, 1913 Wittgenstein visited Russell with a "refutation" of a theory of judgment which Russell, says, he "used to hold" (Eames 1984, xxvii). Since by that date Russell has already experimented with several versions of his (multiple relation) theory of judgment--versions of it date from 1906, 1910, and 1912 – we might well wonder which version Wittgenstein refuted on May 20th and why. It is often assumed that Wittgenstein is referring to Russell's 1910 theory of belief (Griffin 1985, 227- 228). Griffin, e.g., points out the parallels between Wittgenstein's remark in the *Notebooks* that the subordinate relation in the theory of judgment is not a substantive and Russell's 1918 admission that "the theory of judgment which I set forth in print some years ago was a little simple, because I then did treat the object verb as if one could put it as just an object like the terms..." (Slater 1986, 199). Griffin then links these remarks to Russell's 1917 note to his 1910 Theory (in "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood") that "I have been persuaded by Mr. Wittgenstein that this theory is somewhat unduly simple".

I argue against Griffin that Wittgenstein probably objected especially to Russell's 1912 version. (Some external reasons can be adduced: On May 7, 1913, Wittgenstein expressed "shock" to discover that Russell is writing a book of epistemology, apparently assuming that any such text would be like the *Problems of Philosophy* "which" (according to Russell) "he hates." (Eames. 1984, xxvii). Given this fact, it is plausible that on May 20th Wittgenstein, who is already critical of Russell's theory of belief in the *Problems*, is again referring to it when he visits.) Why? On the 1910 theory a subordinate relation (such as *loves*) distinguishes, e.g., between "a loves b" and "b loves a", but on the 1912 theory *judging* is responsible for such differences of sense. Unlike the 1910 version, on the 1912 theory psychological "relations" organize and "cement" things of various types into a significant whole (Russell 1912, 128).

In light of Wittgenstein's insistence that whatever concerns the *fact* of believing is not relevant to the proposition (my point 1, above), I suggest that on May 20, Wittgenstein objected to the 1912 theory as too psychological, as not grasping that understanding a proposition (as true or false) precedes judgment and thus failing to bring in the whole proposition.

References

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