# LOGICAL FORM
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# 'Obviously Propositions are Nothing': Russell and the Logical Form of Belief Reports

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## Introduction

In *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* and elsewhere, Russell maintains that prop-ositions are 'obviously nothing'. Why he says this isn't entirely clear. We suspect, however, that he reasoned as follows. If propositions 'are', then they must be facts; but if propositions are facts, they cannot be false (or true, for that matter). Hence, Russell concludes, propositions are not facts—and hence 'are not'. Given this, they cannot be relata in a belief relation. Therefore, Russell concludes, belief reports cannot state a relation between an agent and a proposition. In this chapter we explore Russell's rejection of propositions as objects of belief, and the other propositional attitudes. While keeping an eye on exegesis, our central concern is substantive: do Russell's arguments threaten the contemporary consensus about the logical form of belief reports—i.e. that they *do* state a relation between an agent and something proposition-like (e.g. a natural language sentence, a Fregean Thought, etc.)?[1] In what follows we

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[1] The authors of this chapter disagree as to how this question is to be answered. We agree that Russell's arguments do indeed rule out some accounts of propositions as objects of belief, while failing to rule out others. We disagree, however, as to whether or not Russell's arguments provide particular support for the identification of the objects of belief with Higginbotham-style Interpreted Logical Forms. Prof. Stainton maintains that Russell's arguments, broadly con-strued, provide particular support for an ILF analysis of attitude ascriptions. Prof. Clapp, in

explicate Russell's argument against propositions as objects of belief, and then explain how these arguments might be utilized to support the identification of objects of belief with Higginbotham-style ILFs. We conclude with a series of objections and replies.

## What the Objects of Belief Cannot Be

The puzzling passage from Russell, which serves as the title of this chapter, occurs at a point in *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* at which Russell is considering what it is that believers believe. He rightly discounts the idea that belief is paradigmatically a relation between an agent and a *particular*. As he says,

> In the *first* place there are a great many judgments you cannot possibly fit into that scheme, and in the *second* place it cannot possibly give any explanation to false beliefs, because when you believe that a thing exists and it does not exist, the thing is not there, it is nothing, and it cannot be the right analysis of a false belief to regard it as a relation to what is really nothing. (1918: 84)

This paragraph could use some unpacking. There are two worries. First, that beliefs like (1) are a special case.

(1) Cindy believes in God

Being a special case, a model of belief built around (1) will fail to apply to beliefs generally. (For instance, it is unclear what particular Cindy must be related to, to make the following true: 'Cindy believes that Ottawa is cold'.) Maybe worse—this is the second worry—this approach cannot account for false beliefs. This is not to say that beliefs being relations to particulars would exclude false *belief reports*. For instance, (1) could be a false report of Cindy's belief state because, though God exists, Cindy is actually an atheist. But, Russell insists, if believers are related to particulars, there could not be any true reports of false *beliefs*—essentially because, if there is a belief at all, then there is a thing-believed; but if the thing-believed exists, then (on this model) the belief is true. Thus, returning to the example above, God is the thing-believed; and if that thing does exist, then of course Cindy's belief is correct, because God (i.e. the thing-believed) exists.

Russell equally rejects the suggestion that the things-believed are *facts*. He writes: 'You cannot say that you believe *facts*, because your beliefs are some-

contrast, maintains that Russell's arguments, broadly construed, do not provide particular support for an ILF analysis of attitude ascriptions.

times wrong... Whenever it is facts alone that are involved, error is impossible. Therefore you cannot say you believe facts'. Here again, the problem is that there are true belief-reports which report false beliefs. (Another problem is that the things-believed ought to be truth evaluable. And Russell explicitly denies, on p. 43 and elsewhere, that *facts* are either true or false.) Obviously what S believes, when S believes falsely, must exist—otherwise S could not be related to it by the believes-relation. But then what S believes, when she believes falsely, cannot be a fact: if S believes that F obtains, and there *is* a fact F, then S believes truly, not falsely. Because if the fact that F obtains (i.e. exists), then F is true.

For example, (2) cannot mean that the believes-relation obtains between Agnes and 'the fact' that Toronto is the capital of Canada.

(2) Agnes believes that Toronto is the capital of Canada

For there is no such fact as the fact that Toronto is the capital of Canada.[2] Indeed, if this is what the sentence *really meant* then, because (2) is meaningful, the fact that Toronto is the capital of Canada would necessarily exist. That is, it would really be the case that Toronto is the capital of Canada. Which would immediately render Agnes's belief true.

In sum, belief cannot be a relation either to individuals or to facts.

## What Motivated Russell to Reject Propositions?

At this point, those working in contemporary philosophy of language and mind expect Russell to announce that what we believe are *propositions*. And indeed, after concluding that 'you cannot say you believe facts' (1918: 87), he suggests that 'you have to say that you believe propositions' (1918: 87). Immediately following this sentence, however, he issues his puzzling claim: 'The awkwardness of [saying that you believe propositions] is that obviously propositions are nothing. Therefore that cannot be the true account of the matter.'[3] Why does Russell say this? The reason he himself gives is this:

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[2] As Russell himself notes, it might be possible to treat 'know' (and also 'perceive') as relating agents to facts. That is because, though there are false reports of knowledge, there is not any 'false knowledge'. In contrast, there are both false beliefs and false reports of belief.

[3] Shortly after this, Russell cavalierly says: 'There is a great deal that is odd about belief from a logical point of view. One of the things that are odd is that *you can believe propositions* of all sorts of forms' (1918: 91; our emphasis). We take it that he is not here retracting his view that the things-believed are *not* propositions. Instead, we gather he has simply slipped into non-strict

it does not seem to me very plausible to say that in addition to facts there are also these curious shadowy things going about such as 'That today is Wednesday' when in fact it is Tuesday. I cannot believe they go about the real world. It is more than one can manage to believe, and I do think no person with a vivid sense of reality can imagine it. (1918: 87)

And further along, having noted Meinong's supposed lack of just such a 'vivid sense of reality', he adds:

To suppose that in the actual world of nature there is a whole set of false propositions going about is to my mind monstrous. I cannot bring myself to suppose it. I cannot believe that they are there in the sense in which facts are there. There seems to me something about the fact that 'Today is Tuesday' on a different level of reality from the supposition 'That today is Wednesday'. (1918: 88)

One might read these remarks as rejecting propositions on the grounds that they are *abstract* objects, and positing any sort of abstract object violates a 'vivid sense of reality'. But if this is Russell's reasoning, then why does he single out *false* propositions as specifically troublesome? For true propositions, if they existed, would be precisely as *abstract* as false propositions. So it seems implausible that Russell is rejecting propositions merely on the grounds that, if they are, they are abstract objects.

A more plausible interpretation of Russell's reasons for rejecting propositions as objects of belief is suggested by Russell's equation of 'reality' with 'everything you would have to mention in a complete description of the world' (1918: 88). For the Russell of 1918 maintained the view, similar to the view presented in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that words name objects, and sentences represent the facts that have as constituents the individual objects named by the words in them. Hence if reality is exhausted by what would be mentioned in a 'complete description', then reality is exhausted by all the facts and all the objects making up the facts. This suggests the following general argument against propositions as objects of belief:

P1: If propositions *are*, then they are part of reality.
P2: Reality is the totality of facts, and the constituents of facts, viz. individual objects.[4]

usage—as he is wont to do, especially in popular works like *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. For an illuminating complementary discussion of Russell's rejection of propositions, see sections 3 and 4 of Linsky (1993).

[4] Premise P2 is, of course, pretty much directly lifted from the *Tractatus*, which begins: '1 The world is everything that is the case. 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things. 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being *all* the facts. 1.12 For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also what is not the case' (Wittgenstein, 1922: 31).

Therefore,

> C1: If propositions as objects of belief exist, then they are either facts, or they are individual objects.

But Russell has already persuasively argued that

> P4: The objects of belief cannot be individual objects.

And he has already persuasively argued that

> P5: The objects of belief cannot be facts.

Thus he concludes:

> C2: Propositions as objects of belief are not part of reality; they do not exist.

If this argument is sound, then there are no objects of belief, and consequently belief ascriptions cannot be *relational*; they cannot assert that an agent holds the believes relation to some one entity. Russell therefore offers a rather different account of belief ascriptions. Russell writes, 'you are not to regard belief as a two-term relation between yourself and a proposition, and you have to analyze up the proposition and treat your belief differently. Therefore the belief does not really contain a proposition as a constituent but only contains the constituents of the proposition as constituents' (1918: 89).

That is, returning to example (2), what Agnes must be related to, for this report to be true, is not the unitary proposition *that-Toronto-is-the-capital-of-Canada*. Instead, roughly speaking, what Agnes must be related to for (2) to be true is Toronto, the capital-of relation, and Canada severally. Each of these is itself a constituent in the fact that makes (2) true, if (2) is true. But there is no proposition, no complex object, *that-Toronto-is-the-capital-of-Canada*, that is built out of these same parts.

## The Significance of Russell's Rejection of Propositions

One might grant that the above argument accurately characterizes Russell's reasons for rejecting propositions as objects of belief, and yet deny that the argument provides any reason to doubt the standard relational analysis of belief ascriptions. For the metaphysical assumptions upon which the argument rests, P2 in particular, are hardly trivial. Indeed, we suspect that most contemporary analytic philosophers will reject P2 for independent reasons. But

Russell's argument does serve to raise significant questions for anyone who wants to posit propositions as objects of belief, yet *also*, following Russell (1905), accepts the 'neo-Russellian' view that *referents*, rather than 'senses' or some such shadowy entities, must be the constituents of propositions. Suppose propositions contain not objects-under-guises, but rather, following the Russell of (1905), objects themselves. Suppose further that these objects must be combined together into some sort of unity, in order for there to be a single proposition at all. Now, given Russell's long-standing and well-warranted concern with Bradley's problem—i.e. of how relata are related, without an infinite regress of relata whose job it is to relate—a philosopher inspired by Russell might suppose that these objects can only be joined by putting together saturated and unsaturated 'things' (i.e. individuals and propositional functions: the word 'things' is in scare quotes because, as Russell would insist, what predicates stand for are essentially unsaturated, and hence not 'things' in one sense of that word: that is, they are not individuals). But then propositions will be indistinguishable from facts. For propositions, like the facts which make them true, will consist exclusively of the constituents of the fact, 'glued together' in the only way available. Given this supposition, the idea that there is a difference between the thing made-true (i.e. the proposition) and the truth-maker (i.e. the fact) is not the least bit plausible.[5]

An example may help. Imagine, in a broadly Russellian spirit, that the proposition that Chomsky is clever contains two things: the man Chomsky, and the (unsaturated) propositional function IS-CLEVER. There cannot be a third thing required to join these two—if there were, then there would need to be a fourth thing which joined all three, and so on. Thus the manner of combination of the man and IS-CLEVER must be function–argument application. But now the *proposition* that Chomsky is clever has precisely the parts and the manner of combination of the *fact* that Chomsky is clever. But if the proposition that Chomsky is clever *just is* the fact that Chomsky is clever, then there could not be false beliefs. For in order for there to be a belief, there must be a proposition believed. But if propositions are facts, then in order for there to be a belief, there must be a fact believed; i.e. the belief must be true. The upshot is that Russell's argument that facts cannot be the objects of belief

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[5] It seems that Russell never accepts propositions (where by this term we do *not* mean sentences) and facts simultaneously into his ontology. In Russell (1905) there are propositions, but not facts. In Russell (1918) there are facts, but not propositions. The reason for this might be that Russell accepted something like the argument sketched here. Thus the Russell of 1918 might have accepted the claim that true propositions just are facts, while false propositions are impossible. For an interesting discussion of these issues see Linsky (1993).

does not depend upon his dubious metaphysical assumption that reality is exhausted by facts and the constituents of facts. Moreover, 'neo-Russellian' propositions, which abjure guises of referents in favor of the referents themselves, seem to be indistinguishable from facts. Consequently, the neo-Russellian account of propositions is in danger of falling prey to Russell's argument that the objects of belief cannot be facts.
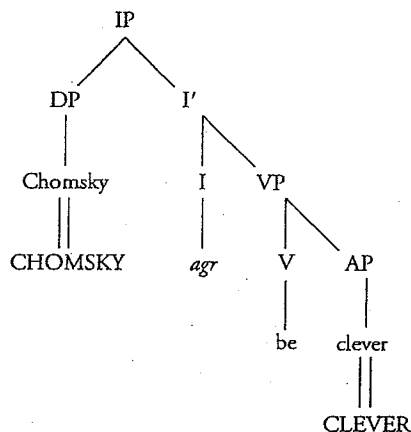
## Propositions that are Not Facts

The central problem posed by neo-Russell propositions is that they seem to be indistinguishable from facts. That is in part because both facts and neo-Russellian propositions are built up out of objects themselves, rather than being composed (à la Frege) of objects-under-guises. But there may be a way to rescue propositions, without giving up the idea that they are made up of the very same things that make up facts. The solution is to give propositions a different manner of composition than facts. Whereas facts are built via function–argument application, propositions need to be built some other way. Which way? This is where Interpreted Logical Forms (ILF) come in.[6]

An ILF is a syntactic tree, whose lexical parts are formed into larger wholes via concatenation.[7] Thus, to take an example, the expression [$_{DP}$ the man] is concatenated with [$_{I'}$ may leave] to form the sentence [$_{IP}$ The man may leave]. But, crucially, an ILF is not just a syntactic tree. What is importantly different about ILFs is that their terminal nodes (typically) dominate not just words but

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[6] Jeffrey King, in a series of instructive publications, independently suggested something very much along these lines. Specifically, and simplifying greatly, King asks us to consider the relation, whatever it is, that obtains between parts of LFs. He then argues that non-linguistics objects, e.g. Chomsky and cleverness, can stand in this relation as well. In which case, 'the structures of propositions are the same as the structures of the syntactic inputs to semantics they are expressed by' (King, 1996: 495). It is then because propositional elements are related by this 'sentential relation' that they are distinguished from the facts which make them true. King's terminology is different from ours. He counts propositions among 'the facts', apparently using 'fact' in the early Wittgenstein's sense of 'complex entity'; and there are differences of detail as well—e.g. there are no linguistic items in King's propositions, and the motivation for the view (i.e. naturalism) is quite different. Nevertheless, on the whole we believe he is proposing a view very like the one presented here. See King (1994, 1995, 1996) for the details.

[7] In recent work this process—i.e. the combination of pairs of syntactic constituents to form a phrase structure tree—has been called 'merger'. See Chomsky, 1995: ch. 4, for discussion. In what follows we will assume a more old-fashioned, and simplified, view of the nature and formation of trees.

also non-linguistic entities, namely the entities denoted by the corresponding lexical elements. Thus, to give a simplified example, the ILF of 'Chomsky is clever' might be as shown in the diagram.

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                IP
              /    \
           DP        I'
            |       /  \
        Chomsky    I    VP
           ‖      agr   / \
        CHOMSKY       V    AP
                      |     |
                     be   clever
                            ‖
                          CLEVER
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The details of the tree do not matter for present purposes. The key point is that the man Chomsky (symbolized by the all-capital word) and the (strictly speaking not-nameable) property CLEVER appear on the tree. Suppose now that we take ILFs to do the work of propositions. They will contain the objects and properties themselves, but they will not be facts—because these objects and properties are not combined together in the way they are within facts. Rather, they are held together by (*a*) being denoted by 'Chomsky' and 'clever' respectively (a semantic mechanism); which in turn are (*b*) joined together (along with an agreement marker and an auxiliary verb, whose status we pass over in silence) by concatenation (a syntactic mechanism). In contrast, the fact which must exist for this ILF to be true will contain the man Chomsky, along with the property CLEVER—but these will be combined by function–argument application. Hence the proposition and the corresponding fact are different. [8]

What is interesting about all this, Russell interpretation aside, is that we seem to have here a metaphysical argument in favor of something like ILFs. The argument goes like this. Assuming we want to be Russellians about propositional constituents—which, given Kripke, Kaplan, and all the rest,

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[8] There is a usage of the word 'fact' on which ILFs will be counted as facts. On this usage, familiar from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, a fact is any complex whatever. This is not the sense of 'fact' we are employing. Facts, as we use the term, are just one variety of complex: the variety which serves as the truth-maker for true propositions. Atomic facts are built from an (unsaturated) property and an object. General facts are built from a higher order property—i.e. a generalized quantifier—and a lower order property. And so on.

we do—we, like Russell, need a way to distinguish propositions (which are capable of being false) from the truth-makers for propositions, which we have been calling facts (and which are not capable of being false or true). Being good Russellians about propositional constituents, we must say that both facts and propositions contain plain old objects and plain old properties. No guises, senses, or what-have-you. Which means that propositions must be distinguished from facts in some other way. What ILFs provide is one way—maybe not the only way, but one way—to explain this difference. Propositions, the ILF theorist says, have extra pieces which facts lack (i.e. words, agreement markers, non-terminal nodes, etc.); and, furthermore, the pieces that propositions share with facts are, in the former, joined together in a wholly different fashion—essentially via concatenation-plus-denotation. Therefore, propositions are different from facts.

## Objections and Replies[9]

### First objection

Russell considers and rejects the suggestion that the objects of belief are propositions because he cannot accept the existence of 'shadowy things'. The shadow metaphor is apt. Propositions are, like shadows, not quite real; as Russell would put it, they are not facts. And propositions mimic meaningful sentences in something like the way shadows are cast by opaque objects: where you have the one, you are guaranteed, somehow, to have the other. Russell's primary objection against propositions as objects of belief in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* is based upon what he claims he should call 'an instinct of reality' (1918: 88). Thus Russell rejects propositions on the grounds that it is implausible to suppose that such shadowy intermediary entities really exist. So even granting that the ILF theorist is able to distinguish (true) ILFs from facts in something like the way described above, distinguishing (true) ILFs from facts in this way provides no response whatsoever to Russell's complaint against such intermediary shadowy entities. Indeed, it is precisely *because* ILFs are not facts, and not sentences, that they violate Russell's 'instinct for reality'. Moreover, ILFs are no less shadowy than are, say, Fregean thoughts. Frege maintained that corresponding to every meaningful sentence there is a thought

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[9] This is the one section of the chapter about which the two authors do not agree. Clapp, who first noted the objections, finds the replies ultimately unsatisfying. Stainton, in contrast, is happy with the replies, though he agrees that the objections are important and interesting.

(*Gedanke*) that is composed of the senses (*Sinn*) that are expressed by the words in the sentence, and he maintained that these thoughts serve as the objects of propositional attitudes. Similarly, ILF theorists maintain that corresponding to every utterance of a meaningful sentence there is a unique ILF, composed of the phrase structure for the sentence, referents of all sorts (people, numbers, countries, political parties, dreams, pains, etc.), word types, utterance event tokens, phonological representations, all somehow 'concatenated' together, and these entities serve as the objects of propositional attitudes (see e.g. Larson and Ludlow, 1993). If one is suspicious of Frege's thoughts, then one ought also be suspicious of ILFs. (Note that just putting referents in ILFs does not make them less shadowy. If it did, a Fregean theorist could just 'concatenate'— whatever that is—referents into his *thoughts* too.) Consequently, even if the ILFs corresponding to true utterances can be distinguished from facts, ILFs are no more plausible than previously proposed shadowy intermediary entities.

## Reply

The first objection stands, but only in a limited sense. If one is committed to a dogmatic denial of any sort of 'intermediary' entities to serve as the objects of belief, then one must reject ILFs—along with Frege's thoughts, Meinong's round squares, and other accounts of propositions. But there is no reason to be committed to such a dogmatic view. Frege's thoughts are ontologically suspicious not because they are 'intermediary', but rather because they are composed of suspicious entities. It is simply not clear what senses, guises, and modes of presentation, etc. are. But, the constituents of ILFs are not suspicious in this way. We have solid and independent reason, from syntax, phonology, and other sciences, for positing phrase structure markers, phonetic representations, and the other constituents of ILFs. Therefore ILFs are not as ontologically suspect as Frege's thoughts, and previous accounts of propositions.

## Second objection

That the ILFs corresponding to true utterances can be distinguished from facts does not provides *special* support for the ILF account of propositions. If one wants to distinguish propositions from facts, then there are *many* ways of doing so. There are even *many* ways of doing so which preserve the Russellian idea that referents, not guises thereof, are constituents of propositions. Suppose that, instead of the referents, times, abstract linguistic entities, event tokens, etc., that ILF theorists build into ILFs, one formulates a structurally

isomorphic account that replaces the abstract linguistic entities with Gödel numbers thereof. Would we have any reason to prefer one account to the other? A little reflection suggests that almost any *appropriately individuated* sort of entity, composed of constituents whose existence we are independently committed to, could serve as propositions as objects of beliefs as well as do ILFs. If *one* sort of abstract entity composed of non-suspicious entities 'concatenated' in some way will serve as propositions as objects of beliefs, then *many* sorts of such entities will. Moreover, this 'problem of multiple reduction for propositions' underscores Russell's suspicion of such shadowy intermediary entities: if propositions could be many sorts of thing, how can they be just one sort of thing?

### Replies to the second objection

First, the second objection wrongly assumes that '*many* sorts of... entities' could serve as propositions as the objects of belief. But this is false. There are several constraints that are met by ILFs, but would not be met by other, even structurally isomorphic entities. For example, entities that serve as propositions must have some sort of logical form, and ILFs have this appropriate form. It is far from clear that set-theoretic constructions of Gödel numbers, for example, would exhibit the appropriate logical form. And second, it is not clear that the ILF theorist is committed to the claim that only one sort of entity can play the role of propositions. This is so in two senses. On the one hand, it seems open to the ILF theorist to claim that anything structurally isomorphic to an ILF just *is* an ILF.[10] That is, it may be that *being an ILF* is a functional property, so that anything capable of playing the appropriate functional role is an ILF. On the other hand, it is no mark against the ILF account of propositions that there may be *some* other proposals that are also compatible with the relevant evidence. In the end, our only claim is that the ILF account has a certain advantage, an advantage that might well be shared by, say, six or seven other views. As long as this 'advantage' is not shared by six or seven *million* other views, we are satisfied.[11]

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