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Judgment, Nonsense and the Unity of the Proposition: Revisiting Wittgenstein's Criticism of Russell

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RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene dos objetivos. En primer lugar, pretende mostrar que la mayoría de los comentaristas interpreta erróneamente la crítica de Wittgenstein a la teoría del juicio de Russell en la medida en que comparten un supuesto común, a saber: al interpretar la llamada objeción del sinsentido, atribuyen erróneamente a Wittgenstein una concepción sustancial del sinsentido que es ajena a su concepción austera del mismo. En segundo lugar, pretende sugerir que esta crítica debe verse como parte de la crítica general de Wittgenstein al enfoque de Russell del problema de la unidad de la proposición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *juicio, sinsentido, unidad de la proposición, rebelión contra el idealismo.*

ABSTRACT

This paper has two aims. First, it aims to show that most commentators misunderstand Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell's theory of judgment in that they share a common assumption, namely: when interpreting the so-called nonsense objection, they mistakenly attribute to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense that is alien to his austere conception of nonsense. Second, it aims to suggest that this criticism should be seen as part of Wittgenstein's overall criticism of Russell's approach to the problem of the unity of the proposition.

KEYWORDS: *Judgment, Nonsense, Unity of the Proposition, Revolt against Idealism.*

This paper has two aims. First, it aims to show that most commentators misunderstand Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell's theory of judgment in that they share a common assumption, namely: when interpreting the so-called nonsense objection, they mistakenly attribute to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense that is alien to his austere conception of nonsense. Second, the paper aims to suggest that this criticism should be seen as part of Wittgenstein's overall criticism of

Russell's approach to the problem of the unity of the proposition. The reading of 5.54-5.5422 of the *Tractatus* that I propose below is intended to show that, although Wittgenstein's criticism was motivated by his reading of some chapters of Russell's 1913 manuscript known as *Theory of Knowledge*, this criticism concerns Russell's failure to account for the unity of the proposition since *The Principles of Mathematics*. By failing to understand the nonsense objection, most commentators fail to understand Wittgenstein's own approach to the problem of the unity of the proposition, for the objection is not intended to show that Russell doesn't ascribe combining duties to the subordinate verb or that the position of the subordinate verb and its terms are occupied by items of the wrong logical type. Rather, it is intended to show that a theory of judgment such as the one developed by Russell cannot take the place of a correct analysis of propositions in general (and not only those containing propositional attitudes).

In 5.54 Wittgenstein repeats one of the fundamentals of the new logic: the principle of extensionality. According to the terminology of the *Tractatus*, the principle says that every (molecular) proposition is a truth-function of the elementary propositions. According to 5.5, every truth-function is a result of the successive applications of the operation (----T) (ξ, \dots), i.e., joint negation, to elementary propositions. 5.541 introduces an apparent counterexample to the principle of extensionality and therefore to the thesis that propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions:

At first sight it looks as if it were also possible for one proposition to occur in another in a different way.

Particularly with certain forms of proposition in psychology, such as ' A believes that p is the case' and ' A has the thought p ', etc.

For if these are considered superficially, it looks as if the proposition p stood in some kind of relation to an object A .

(And in modern theory of knowledge (Russell, Moore, etc.) these propositions have actually been construed in this way.) [Wittgenstein (1961), 5.541].

Wittgenstein's reference to Russell and Moore must be taken seriously. The expression "modern theory of knowledge" is clearly a reference to early writings of Moore and Russell around the end of the 19th century

and the very beginning of the 20th century. More specifically, Wittgenstein is referring to the conception presented by Moore in “The Nature of Judgment”, published in 1899, and the conception presented by Russell in *The Principles of Mathematics*, published in 1903. In his article, Moore inaugurates the criticism of authors such as Thomas H. Green and Francis H. Bradley. In particular, Moore and Russell’s “revolt against idealism” began with their reaction to the British idealists’ conceptions of judgment and proposition. Here is Moore’s own definition of the proposition:

A proposition is composed not of words, nor yet of thoughts, but of concepts. Concepts are possible objects of thought (...) It is indifferent to their nature whether anybody thinks them or not. They are incapable of change; and the relation into which they enter with the knowing subject implies no action or reaction [Moore (1993), pp. 4-5].

Note that propositions are objective entities, composed of equally objective entities, called “concepts”. The nature and unity of concepts and propositions remain unchanged whether they are thought or not. This means that in order to be thought they must first have some kind of “being”. Moore and Russell intended to distance themselves from the idealist view, according to which all experience is essentially judicative and, consequently, from the very idea of what is a possible constituent of a judgment depends on a prior understanding of the act of judging.¹ In short, they opposed the “holistic” doctrine of the primacy of judgment over its constituents and the idea of judgment as an exercise of an active capacity of the mind. This view was a defence of an atomistic doctrine, according to which the act of judging depends on a direct apprehension of the constituents of the judgment, which Moore called “concepts” and Russell called “terms”. In his book on Leibniz, Russell criticized Leibniz’s doctrine of relations, according to which relations are products of the mind, as well as “the view, implied in this theory, and constituting a large part of Kant’s Copernican revolution, that propositions may acquire truth by being believed” [Russell (1997), p. 14]. Moore describes the anti-idealistic view of the proposition in the following terms:

When, therefore, I say “This rose is red”, I am not attributing part of the content of my idea to the rose, nor yet attributing parts of the content of my ideas of rose and red together to some third subject. What I am asserting is a specific connexion of certain concepts forming the total concept “rose” with the concepts “this” and “now” and “red”; and the judgment is true if such a connexion is existent. Similarly, when I say, “The chimera has three

heads”, the chimera is not an idea in my mind, nor any part of such idea. What I mean to assert is nothing about my mental states, but a specific connexion of concepts. If the judgment is false, that is not because my *ideas* do not correspond to reality, but because such a conjunction of concepts is not to be found among existents. [Moore (1993), p. 4]

A proposition may be false or refer to entities that do not exist, but it is still a combination of concepts that, in some way, *are*. A chimera is a concept, for it is possible to say that it has three heads. Therefore, even if it does not exist, it has some sort of reality. Peter Hylton puts this point in a straightforward way: “Moore’s answer to the ancient puzzle, how can we form judgments (or appear to) about what is not, is that we cannot; everything about which we (appear to) form judgments in fact *is* – it has being, even if it does not exist” [Hylton (2002), p. 142].²

Around 1900, Russell conceived of propositions as combinations of terms, as well as terms themselves. The problem with this conception is that identifying the constituents that are combined in a proposition does not mean elucidating what constitutes the unity of this complex entity. During the period of revolt against idealism, Russell rejected the view that the proposition is the product of a mental act as well as the idea that what constitutes the unity of the proposition is a mental act of synthesis. A proposition is a subsistent and/or existent entity. Although Russell was aware of the fact that the unity of the proposition does not result from a mere list of terms, he was unable to explain this unity. Given Russell’s definition of “term” as “whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition” and his thesis according to which “every constituent of every proposition must, on pain of self-contradiction, be capable of being made a logical subject” [Russell (1951), p. 48], he was unable to explain the difference between propositions and complex names. When denying the possibility of a term being a logical subject, one must do this by means of a proposition in which this constituent figures as its logical subject. When saying “*kills* cannot be the logical subject of a proposition”, one employs a concept as a logical subject. Russell concludes that “by transforming the verb, as it occurs in a proposition, into a verbal noun, the whole proposition can be turned into a single logical subject, no longer asserted, and no longer containing in itself truth or falsehood” [Russell, (1951), p. 48]. One may obtain the complex concept “Caesar’s death” from “Caesar died” by transforming the verb into a verbal noun. The proposition “Caesar died” and the concept “Caesar’s death” denote the same thing, for “died” and “death” denote the same entity, although they have different grammatical roles.

Moreover, Russell remarks that “if we ask: What is asserted in the proposition ‘Caesar died?’ the answer must be ‘the death of Caesar is asserted’”. However, we must recognize that there is a difference between the two expressions: only a proposition can be true or false, since “neither truth nor falsehood belongs to a mere logical subject.” This would prevent us from transforming the verb into a logical subject, since the verb would lose something essential to it. One may point out a contradiction in Russell’s view, for he wants to maintain the following assumptions:

(1) that ‘every constituent of every proposition must... be capable of being made a logical subject’ (to deny this he thinks would be self-contradictory and, moreover, would strike at the root of his entire atomist metaphysics and its correlative conception of analysis), and (2) that there are cases of ‘entities’ which apparently cannot be made into logical subjects (the case which here gives Russell pause being that which is expressed by the verb functioning *qua* verb in a proposition) [Conant (2002), p. 100].

A possible solution to this problem would consist in attributing to the subject the task of ascribing a truth-value to the proposition. In this case, we would have a mere “psychological assertion”. However, if propositions are objective entities, there must be something that distinguishes true and false propositions. A psychological assertion would be the external acknowledgment of the presence of a further quality that distinguishes the former from the latter. True propositions must bear this quality, in that they are true independently of an external acknowledgment. In the logical sense – the sense Russell is concerned with – “only true propositions are asserted”:

True and false propositions alike are in some sense entities, and are in some sense capable of being logical subjects; but when a proposition happens to be true, it has a further quality, over and above that which it shares with false propositions, and it is this further quality which is what I mean by assertion in a logical as opposed to a psychological sense [Russell (1951), p. 49].

The theory of propositions in the *Principles* comes to an impasse, which is explicitly recognized by Russell: “This difficulty, which seems to be inherent in the very nature of truth and falsehood, is one with which I do not know how to deal satisfactorily” [Russell (1951), p. 48]. The impasse is due, as mentioned, to two seemingly incompatible assumptions. On the one hand is the necessity of conceiving propositions as objective en-

tities that can be designated by complex names. On the other hand, is the impossibility of ascribing a truth-value to names. Russell acknowledges his own failure to determine the *differentia specifica* of propositions: “I therefore leave this question to the logicians with the above brief indication of a difficulty” [Russell (1951), p. 49].

After abandoning his early theory of denotation, Russell also abandoned his early theories of propositions and judgment. By applying his analysis of definite descriptions to propositions, he was able to show that just as the phrase “the present King of France” has a meaning and can figure in meaningful contexts even though it does not denote anything, false propositions have a sense although they do not correspond to a fact. Russell’s theory of descriptions is a logical analysis of the propositions in which “denoting expressions” occur: expressions such as “a man”, “some man”, “every man”, “all man”, “the present King of England”, “the present King of France”, “the centre of mass of the solar system at the first instance of the twentieth century”, or “the first line of Gray’s Elegy”. Such expressions can figure as a grammatical subject and be replaced *salva congruitate*, but not always *salva veritate*, by proper names. Russell points out that the truth conditions of the propositions in which denotative expressions occur is entirely different from those in which a singular term occurs. In short, his main thesis is that descriptions are not, despite appearances, referential expressions, but quantified expressions; and quantifiers, insofar as they are predicates (more precisely, second-order predicates), are not names; they are an expression of logical generality. The analysis shows why the meaning of a proposition such as “The present King of France is bald” is independent of the truth of the existential assumption which is one of its truth conditions. The fundamental thesis is stated in *14.01 of the *Principia Mathematica*: “Thus when we say: ‘The term x which satisfies Φx satisfies ψx ,’ we shall mean: ‘There is a term b such that Φb is true when, and only when, x is b , and ψb is true’” [Whitehead and Russell (1999), p. 173]. Here is *Principia* *14.01:

$$*14.01 \quad [(\iota x)(\Phi x)] \cdot \psi(\iota x)(\Phi x) \cdot = : (\exists b) : \Phi b \cdot \exists x \cdot x = b : \psi b \text{ Df}$$

The left side of the formula says that the definite description “ $(\iota x)(\Phi x)$ ” (“the x such that x is Φx ”) figures, in the context of the proposition, e.g., “ $\psi(\iota x)(\Phi x)$ ” (“the x such that x is Φ , is ψ ”), in the place corresponding to the argument of a first order function. The right side says that it can be eliminated by means of a formula containing only expressions of logical generality (quantifiers and quantified variables) and logical connectives.

The definition *14.01 summarizes the thesis that definite descriptions can be eliminated from their original contexts by employing quantifiers, bound variables (“apparent variables”, according to the expression Russell borrows from Peano), logical connectives and identity. Russell and Whitehead say: “Whenever the grammatical subject of a proposition can be supposed not to exist without rendering the proposition meaningless, it is plain that the grammatical subject is not a proper name, *i.e.* not a name directly representing some object” [Whitehead and Russell (1999), p. 66].

According to Russell’s early conception of propositions as objective entities, to judge, to believe, etc. requires an objective entity to be judged, believed, etc., whether this entity exists or merely subsists. Even though Russell’s 1903 account of judgment is, according to Stuart Candlish, the merest sketch, in this account “judgment is a single binary relation between two entities, a judging mind and a proposition” [Candlish (1996), p. 103]. The 1905 theory of descriptions not only makes it possible to conceive of descriptions as incomplete symbols, it also prevents Russell from postulating an objective entity corresponding to a judgment, in that judgments are conceived of as incomplete symbols as well. According to this new conception, known as the multiple relation theory of judgment, a judgment is at least a three-place relation (between a subject and two or more constituents). The “judgeable content”, to borrow Frege’s terminology, of a judgment is not an entity independent from the act of judging, but a relation between its constituents. Opposing his own realistic view in the first years of the 20th century, Russell conceives of judging as a mental act of unification. The difficulty that arises is that this act makes no restrictions on what can or cannot be judged:

Russell cannot say that what is judged must be a proposition, for his theory of judgment is not subservient to an independent theory of the proposition. The theory of judgment is, rather, intended to play the role of a theory of the proposition. Nor can Russell happily claim that the mental act of judgment itself imposes constraints upon what can be judged, for such a claim is a significant step towards a Kantian view of judgment. Russell’s 1910 theory of judgment, therefore, does not explain why it is impossible to judge nonsense; it is thus quite inadequate to play the role that Russell intended it to play [Hylton (1984), p. 387].

In 1913, Russell presented a more elaborate version of the theory in the manuscript known as *Theory of Knowledge*. In this version, logical form was supposed to be the source of the constraints on what can be judged. Nevertheless, the last version of the multiple relation theory of judgment

is vulnerable to the same objection as the first version that Russell presented in the 1910 paper “On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood”, namely that it cannot show why it is impossible to judge nonsense.

Although Wittgenstein’s criticism was motivated by his reading of some chapters of Russell’s manuscript, the objection to the 1913 version of the multiple relation theory of judgment is also valid of the 1910 version of the theory.³ The problems that Russell himself saw in the theory are not to be equated with the problem that Wittgenstein points out in his criticism. This is why Russell wrote the following in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell describing his meeting with Wittgenstein on 26 May 1913: “I couldn’t understand his objection – in fact he was very inarticulate – but I feel in my bones that he must be right, and that he has seen something that I have missed” [Russell (1992), p. 459]. Wittgenstein’s criticism has different versions. In a letter from June 1913, he wrote the following to Russell:

I can now express my objection to your theory of judgement exactly: I believe that it is obvious that from the prop[osition] “A judges that (say) a is in the Rel[ation] R to b”, if correctly analysed, the prop[osition] “aRb.∨.~aRb” must follow directly *without the use of any other premis*s. This condition is not fulfilled by your theory [McGuinness and von Wright (1997), p. 29].

In the “Notes on logic”, the same objection is put differently: “Every right theory of judgment must make it impossible for me to judge that this table penholders the book. Russell’s theory does not satisfy this requirement” [Wittgenstein (1984), p. 103]. And finally, the Tractarian version of the objection is in 5.5422: “The correct explanation of the form of the proposition, ‘A judges *p*’, must show that it is impossible to judge nonsense. (Russell’s theory does not satisfy this requirement.)” [Wittgenstein (1961), 5.5422, translation modified]. All versions say fundamentally the same: *one can only judge something that already makes sense*. The first version is a reference to a passage of *Principia Mathematica*, in which the proposition $\phi a \vee \sim \phi a$ is presented as another way of saying that “ ϕa ” is significant.⁴ The second and third say that it is impossible to judge nonsense. The difference between the last two versions is that one says *every theory of judgement must make it impossible* to judge nonsense and the other says that *the correct explanation of the form of a proposition such as “A judges *p*” must show why it is impossible* to judge nonsense. As we shall see, the rephrasing is significant for Wittgenstein does not intend to present the correct theory of judgment in the *Tractatus*. His criticism is aimed at the very fact that the

theory of judgment is intended to play the role of a theory of the proposition where there is no need for a theory of propositions, but only a correct analysis of propositions in general (and not only those containing propositional attitudes).

The reason why the correct explanation of the form of a proposition such as “A judges p ” must show why it is impossible to judge nonsense has been debated by commentators. In his pioneering interpretation, Stephen Sommerville states that “the kind of nonsense with which Wittgenstein was preoccupied in his analysis of atomic propositions through this period – thus, what a proper analysis of atomic propositional judgement must render impossible – is the nonsense that results from violation of type” [Sommerville (1979), p. 702]. According to Sommerville, Russell’s theory of judgment does not satisfy this requirement, because “the type of significant arguments to xRy depends upon the kind of judgement made in asserting xRy of a, b , and so on. And the kind of judgement thus made depends upon what type of argument is related by R in judging that aRb . This circularity is vicious” [Sommerville (1979), p. 706]. Nicholas Griffin agrees with this reading: “Wittgenstein’s requirement that a theory of judgment make it impossible to believe nonsense (...) requires also the exclusion of category mistaken judgments” [Griffin (1985), p. 240].⁵ Recently, José Zalabardo partially agreed with Griffin that “Wittgenstein’s reasons for rejecting Russell’s theory concern the way in which it excludes category mistaken judgments” [Zalabardo (2015), p. 234]. In Griffin’s reading, Wittgenstein is pointing out that Russell needs to invoke type stipulations; in Zalabardo’s reading, Wittgenstein is pointing out that Russell doesn’t ascribe combining duties to the subordinate verb. Despite this difference, they agree on a basic point, namely that Wittgenstein was concerned with a particular kind of category mistaken judgment that results either from type violations or from putting a particular in the subordinate-verb position. According to Zalabardo, “I judge that this table penholders the book” illustrates the kind of nonsense that we obtain when the subordinate-verb position is occupied by something other than a verb.

In my view, these commentators misunderstand Wittgenstein’s criticism of Russell’s theory of judgment in that they share a common assumption, namely: when interpreting the so-called nonsense objection, they mistakenly attribute to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense. According to the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was committed to an austere conception of nonsense. This conception does not admit different kinds of nonsense, e.g., substantial nonsense and mere

nonsense. The first is “the result of putting an item of one logical category in the place where an item of another category belongs” [Conant (2001), p. 44]. The latter is “a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax” [Conant (2000), p. 191]. Wittgenstein’s austere conception admits only one kind of nonsense: mere nonsense. Conant summarizes this conception in the following passage:

Building on Frege’s own methodological practice, the *Tractatus* argues that in the case of a piece of nonsense – that is, in the absence of the provision of a context of *sinnvollen Gebrauch*: a possible logical segmentation of the *Satz* – we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a proposition; for, *ex hypothesi* there are no working parts of the proposition. One can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of the whole only if the whole has a sense – if it stands in some identifiable location with respect to the other occupants of logical space. According to the *Tractatus*, there are [no examples of putting a proper name where a concept word belongs], for if one can properly make out that what belongs in that place is a concept word, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a concept word. There isn’t anything, on the conception of *Un-sinn* which the *Tractatus* advances, which corresponds to a proposition’s failing to make sense because of the meaning which the parts already have taken in isolation. On the Tractarian conception, there is only one way a sentence can be *Un-sinn*: by its failing to symbolize [Conant (2000), p. 194-5].

Sommerville/Griffin’s interpretation as well as Zalabardo’s more recent one attribute to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense, in that they think Wittgenstein was concerned with a particular kind of category mistaken judgment that results either from type violations or from putting a particular in the subordinate-verb position. Paraphrasing Conant’s words, we can say that we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a piece of nonsense such as “I judge that this table penholders the book”, for there are no working parts of the judgment, i.e., it is a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax. One could identify the contribution the meanings of the parts of the judgment make to the sense of the whole only if the whole had a sense. If one could properly make out that what belongs in a certain place is a verb, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a verb, not as something other than a verb. According to the conception of nonsense which the *Tractatus* advances, there is nothing

which corresponds to a judgment's failing to make sense because of the meaning which the parts already have taken in isolation, e.g., "table", "penholders" and "book". In his explanation of Wittgenstein's example, Zalabardo makes two conflicting assumptions: 1) that the whole has no sense; 2) that it is possible to identify what role the parts would have to play if the whole was to make sense. Wittgenstein did not intend to point out that the subordinate verb is not a verb because one has not ascribed combining duties to it; he intended to show that judging nonsense is not judging at all.⁶ Pears and McGuinness's translation of 5.5422, although it is not accurate, expresses this point: "The correct explanation of the form of the proposition, '*A* makes the judgement *p*', must show that it is impossible for a judgement to be a piece of nonsense." In other words, either something is a judgment, or it is a piece of nonsense. There is no other possibility, i.e., it is not possible for something to be a nonsense and have semantically and syntactically recognizable parts.

By failing to understand the nonsense objection, the standard interpretation fails to understand Wittgenstein's own approach to the problem of the unity of the proposition,⁷ for the objection is not intended to show that Russell doesn't ascribe combining duties to the subordinate verb or that the positions of the subordinate verb and its terms are occupied by items of the wrong logical type. Rather, it is intended to show that a theory of judgment such as the one developed by Russell cannot take the place of a correct analysis of propositions in general. Peter Hanks is one of the few commentators who have pointed out that Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell has to do with the problem of the unity of the proposition, more specifically, with the fact that Russell's theory of judgment could not account for the problem that was left unsolved by his theory of propositions in *The Principles of Mathematics*: "The real problem that Wittgenstein raised was essentially the same one that was fatal for Russell's theory of propositions (...) The whole point of the multiple relation theory was to avoid the problems of unity that plagued Russell's account of propositions" [Hanks (2007) p. 122]. In other words, what is judged cannot be a mere list of terms; it must be something that is capable of being true or false:

When we say *A* judges that, etc., then we have to mention a whole proposition which *A* judges. It will not do either to mention only its constituents, or its constituents and form but not in the proper order. This shows that a proposition itself must occur in the statement that it is judged; however, for instance, "not-*p*" may be explained, the question what is negated? must have a meaning [Wittgenstein (1984), p. 94].

Just as it is not possible to deny a mere list of terms, it is not possible to judge a mere list of terms such as “Desdemona”, “loves”, “Cassio”, to borrow Russell’s example, because the collection of a , b , and R , considered as a disunified collection, is not something that can be true or false. This argument refers implicitly to Russell’s discussion of the proposition “ A differs from B ” in *The Principles of Mathematics*. Russell says that, if we analyse this proposition, its constituents appear to be only A , difference, B . But this is merely a list of terms, not a proposition, for “a proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition” [Russell (1951), p. 50]. This shows that Wittgenstein’s criticism is aimed at Russell’s failure to account for the unity of the proposition since *The Principles of Mathematics*. Moreover, his criticism is intended to show that the multiple relation theory of judgment could not be the solution to this problem that was left unsolved since 1903. This is due to the fact that Russell incorrectly analyses the form of judgments:

It is clear, however, that “ A believes that p ”, “ A thinks p ”, and “ A says p ” are of the form “ p says p ”: and this does not involve a correlation of a fact with an object, but rather the correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects [Wittgenstein (1994), 5.542].

According to Russell’s analysis of a judgment such as “ A believes that p ”, a subject stands in a multiple relation to the other terms of the judgment. Nonetheless, as we saw, what is judged must be something that is capable of being true or false. More than that, if what is judged be something that already makes sense, the relation between the subject and the other constituents is irrelevant to the constitution of the sense of the proposition. The relevant relation is not the relation between a subject and the other constituents of a judgment, but the internal relation between a propositional sign and a possible state of affairs. The formula “ p says p ” says that “we use the perceptible sign of a proposition (spoken or written, etc.) as a projection of a possible situation” [Wittgenstein (1994), 3.11]. Conant notes that a number of commentators have attributed to the *Tractatus* the view that a special mental act (of intending to mean a particular object by a particular word) is what endows a name with meaning, even though there is no reference anywhere in the *Tractatus* to a distinct act of meaning (through which a *Bedeutung* is conferred on a sign). The passage from the *Tractatus* most commonly adduced to provide support for this psychologistic attribution is the following sen-

tence of 3.11: “The method of projection is to think of the sense of the proposition”. The Pears and McGuinness translation suggests that there is an act of thinking and that such an act has an explanatory role in the use of a perceptible sign as a projection of a possible situation. According to Conant, the Ogden translation is more faithful to Wittgenstein’s view: “The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition”. Rush Rhees properly glosses this view as: “The method of projection is what we *mean* by ‘thinking’ or ‘understanding’ the sense of the proposition” [Rhees (1996), p. 39]. At the end of the day, the misunderstanding of 3.11 leads commentators to ascribe to the *Tractatus* the sort of Russellian project the work is precisely out to undermine. Wittgenstein’s criticism of Russell in 5.54-5.5422 is not limited to the so-called nonsense objection; this objection must be understood in the context of his criticism of Russell’s failure to account for the unity of the proposition as well as his criticism of Russell’s theory of judgment that attributes to the subject a mental act of unification. As it is well known, the upshot of these criticisms is Wittgenstein’s own conception of the proposition as a “logical picture of facts”.

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NOTES

¹ I rely on Faria (2001) for this very brief characterization of British idealism and the revolt against idealism.

² Russell had a similar view on that matter: “Prior to 1905 and the theory of descriptions he held that the golden mountain ‘subsists’ because it is referred to in meaningful sentences, e.g. ‘The golden mountain does not exist’. Similarly, he held that false propositions, or ‘objective falsehoods’ as he called them, subsist but do not exist” [Hanks (2007), p. 125].

³ See Hylton (1984), p. 389 and Ricketts (1996), p. 69.

⁴ See Withehead; Whitehead and Russell (1999), p. 171, and Zalabardo (2015), p. 89.

⁵ For a more detailed account of Sommerville/Griffin’s interpretation, see Hanks (2007), p. 129-30. Hanks also lists a number of commentators who interpret Wittgenstein’s objection as a point about type restrictions on judgment: Max Black, David Hyder, Gregory Landini, David Pears, Graham Stevens, among others.

⁶ I owe this to Denis Paul's interpretation of the first version of Wittgenstein's objection: "Wittgenstein's meaning here is that what is judged must have content, for if someone misguidedly 'went through the motions' of judging a piece of nonsense to be the case, he could not, in Wittgenstein's language, be said to be judging. He would have uttered a sentence expressing a would-be proposition without content, and thus without truth-value. I use the term 'empty sound', inspired by Roscelin's 'flatus vocis', which meant the reference (non-existent in his view, of course) of an abstract noun, a universal. Just as 'empty sound' has no truth-value, neither has ' \sim (empty sound)', and neither, consequently, has '(empty sound) \vee \sim (empty sound)'" [Paul (2007), p. 70].

⁷ Edmund Dain summarizes the problem of the unity of the proposition in the following terms: "What explains the difference between a proposition and a list of the words it contains in the same order? What unites the words in a proposition to form a whole that is, in contrast to a list, assertable?" [Dain (2018), p. 333]. For a more detailed account, see Candlish and Damjanovic (2012).

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