

# How Are There Any Truths?

---

15

## Do Facts Make True Whatever Is True?

---

### Bertrand Russell, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”

To understand what it is for an individual to have a quality or property (as the previous two readings sought to do) might be to understand part of what it is for the world to contain *facts*. For possibly some facts *are* simply an individual’s having a property – this thing having that feature. At any rate, that could be so *if* there are facts. In this reading, Bertrand Russell (whom we read earlier on appearance versus reality in the physical world) begins developing a metaphysical image of the world that includes at its core the concept of a fact. This reading comes from a series of lectures by Russell that were influential in the development of

---

Bertrand Russell, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” [1918], lectures I, II (excerpts). From his *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901–1950*, ed. R.C. Marsh (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956). Reprinted with permission of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

*Metaphysics and Epistemology: A Guided Anthology*, First Edition. Edited by Stephen Hetherington.  
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

twentieth-century philosophy. His first goal in these lectures was to show how to talk of facts with literal and deliberative philosophical intent.

Why so? Russell argued that facts are genuinely what would make *true* or make *false* our beliefs or claims. Not just anything could do this; only facts could. For example, when you believe that your best friend is a person (rather than a disguised robot), what is making your belief true? The belief has a content: “My best friend is a person (not a disguised robot).” That content is true in virtue of something. Of *what*, though? Russell would say that there is an individual (your best friend); there is a repeatable property or quality of being a person; *and* there is a fact – literally a further component of reality – of your best friend being a person. This fact *is* your best friend having or instantiating that repeatable property of being a person. So the fact is composed of, or constituted by, the individual and the property. But the fact is something beyond these components: it is the friend’s *having* the property. And this fact, with its inner complexity involving your friend and the property, is what renders your belief true. Your friend – the individual as such – does not render your belief true. Only the *fact* does so – the fact of his or her existing with the property of being a person. He or she is a part – but only a part – of that fact.

What *kinds* of fact would there be in the world? Your best friend’s being a person is a *particular* fact – a fact only about a particular individual. But Russell also argued that the world has to include at least one *general* fact, not only particular ones. He reasons in the following way. Even if every particular fact about every particular individual was to be listed, that could not describe all there is. We would have to add this: “and that is *all* of the particular facts.” So the world contains at least these two basic *kinds* of fact – particular and general – literally and every bit as much as it includes you as a particular individual, say.

There might be other kinds of fact, too. Russell proceeds to discuss whether, for instance, there are more logically complex kinds of fact, such as negative facts and disjunctive facts (ones with the form “\_\_\_ or ...”). But thinking about these would take us too far afield for now. We may begin just with simpler facts. Do *these* exist?

The first truism to which I wish to draw your attention [...] is that the world contains *facts*, which are what they are whatever we may choose to think about them, and that there are also *beliefs*, which have reference to facts, and by reference to facts are either true or false. I will try first of all to give you a preliminary explanation of what I mean by a ‘fact’. When I speak of a fact [...] I mean the kind of thing that makes a proposition true or false. If I say ‘It is raining’, what I say is true in a certain condition of weather and is false in other conditions of weather. The condition of weather that makes my statement true (or false as the case may be), is what I should call a ‘fact’. If I say ‘Socrates is dead’, my statement will be true owing to a certain physiological occurrence which happened in Athens long ago. If I say, ‘Gravitation varies inversely as the square of the distance’, my statement is rendered true by astronomical fact. If I say, ‘Two and two are four’, it is arithmetical fact that makes my statement true. On the other hand, if I say ‘Socrates is alive’, or ‘Gravitation varies directly as the distance’, or

'Two and two are five', the very same facts which made my previous statements true show that these new statements are false.

I want you to realize that when I speak of a fact I do not mean a particular existing thing, such as Socrates or the rain or the sun. Socrates himself does not render any statement true or false. You might be inclined to suppose that all by himself he would give truth to the statement 'Socrates existed', but as a matter of fact that is a mistake. It is due to a confusion which I shall try to explain in [a later] lecture of this course, when I come to deal with the notion of existence. Socrates himself, or any particular thing just by itself, does not make any proposition true or false. 'Socrates is dead' and 'Socrates is alive' are both of them statements about Socrates. One is true and the other false. What I call a fact is the sort of thing that is expressed by a whole sentence, not by a single name like 'Socrates'. When a single word does come to express a fact, like 'fire' or 'wolf', it is always due to an unexpressed context, and the full expression of a fact will always involve a sentence. We express a fact, for example, when we say that a certain thing has a certain property, or that it has a certain relation to another thing; but the thing which has the property or the relation is not what I call a 'fact'.

It is important to observe that facts belong to the objective world. They are not created by our thoughts or beliefs except in special cases. [...] The first thing I want to emphasize is that the outer world – the world, so to speak, which knowledge is aiming at knowing – is not completely described by a lot of 'particulars', but that you must also take account of these things that I call facts, which are the sort of things that you express by a sentence, and that these, just as much as particular chairs and tables, are part of the real world. Except in psychology, most of our statements are not intended merely to express our condition of mind, though that is often all that they succeed in doing. They are intended to express facts, which (except when they are psychological facts) will be about the outer world. There are such facts involved, equally when we speak truly and when we speak falsely. When we speak falsely it is an objective fact that makes what we say false, and it is an objective fact which makes what we say true when we speak truly.

There are a great many different kinds of facts. [...] I will just point out a few kinds of facts to begin with, so that you may not imagine that facts are all very much alike. There are *particular facts*, such as 'This is white'; then there are *general facts*, such as 'All men are mortal'. Of course, the distinction between particular and general facts is one of the most important. There again it would be a very great mistake to suppose that you could describe the world completely by means of particular facts alone. Suppose that you had succeeded in chronicling every single particular fact throughout the universe, and that there did not exist a single particular fact of any sort anywhere that you had not chronicled, you still would not have got a complete description of the universe unless you also added: 'These that I have chronicled are all the particular facts there are'. So you cannot hope to describe the world completely without having general facts as well as particular facts. Another distinction, which is perhaps a little more difficult to make, is between positive facts and negative facts, such as 'Socrates was alive' – a positive fact – and 'Socrates is not alive' – you might say a negative fact. But the distinction is difficult to make precise. Then there are facts concerning particular things or particular qualities or relations, and, apart from them, the completely general facts of the sort that you have in logic, where there is no mention of any constituent whatever of the actual world, no mention of any particular thing or particular quality or particular relation, indeed strictly you may say no mention of anything. That is one of the characteristics of logical propositions, that they mention nothing. [...] Then there are facts about the properties of single things; and facts

about the relations between two things, three things, and so on; and any number of different classifications of some of the facts in the world, which are important for different purposes.

It is obvious that there is not a dualism of true and false facts; there are only just facts. It would be a mistake, of course, to say that all facts are true. That would be a mistake because true and false are correlatives, and you would only say of a thing that it was true if it was the sort of thing that *might* be false. A fact cannot be either true or false. That brings us on to the question of statements or propositions or judgments, all those things that do have the duality of truth and falsehood. [...] A proposition, one may say, is a sentence in the indicative, a sentence asserting something, not questioning or commanding or wishing. It may also be a sentence of that sort preceded by the word 'that'. For example, 'That Socrates is alive', 'That two and two are four', 'That two and two are five', anything of that sort will be a proposition.

A proposition is just a symbol. It is a complex symbol in the sense that it has parts which are also symbols: a symbol may be defined as complex when it has parts that are symbols. In a sentence containing several words, the several words are each symbols, and the sentence composing them is therefore a complex symbol in that sense.

[...]

There are two different relations that a proposition may have to a fact: the one the relation that you may call being true to the fact, and the other being false to the fact. Both are equally essentially logical relations which may subsist between the two, whereas in the case of a name, there is only one relation that it can have to what it names. A name can just name a particular, or, if it does not, it is not a name at all, it is a noise. It cannot be a name without having just that one particular relation of naming a certain thing, whereas a proposition does not cease to be a proposition if it is false. It has these two ways, of being true and being false, which together correspond to the property of being a name. Just as a word may be a name or be not a name but just a meaningless noise, so a phrase which is apparently a proposition may be either true or false, or may be meaningless, but the true and false belong together as against the meaningless. That shows, of course, that the formal logical characteristics of propositions are quite different from those of names, and that the relations they have to facts are quite different, and therefore propositions are not names for facts. You must not run away with the idea that you can name facts in any other way; you cannot. You cannot name them at all. You cannot properly name a fact. The only thing you can do is to assert it, or deny it, or desire it, or will it, or wish it, or question it, but all those are things involving the whole proposition. You can never put the sort of thing that makes a proposition to be true or false in the position of a logical subject. You can only have it there as something to be asserted or denied or something of that sort, but not something to be named.

[...]

I explained last time what I meant by a fact, namely, that sort of thing that makes a proposition true or false, the sort of thing which is the case when your statement is true and is not the case when your statement is false. Facts are, as I said last time, plainly something you have to take account of if you are going to give a complete account of the world. You cannot do that by merely enumerating the particular things that are in it: you must also mention the relations of these things, and their properties, and so forth, all of which are facts, so that facts certainly belong to an account of the objective world, and facts do seem much more clearly complex and much more not capable of being explained away than things like Socrates and

Rumania. However you may explain away the meaning of the word 'Socrates', you will still be left with the truth that the proposition 'Socrates is mortal' expresses a fact. You may not know exactly what Socrates means, but it is quite clear that 'Socrates is mortal' does express a fact. There is clearly some valid meaning in saying that the fact expressed by 'Socrates is mortal' is *complex*. The things in the world have various properties, and stand in various relations to each other. That they have these properties and relations are *facts*, and the things and their qualities or relations are quite clearly in some sense or other components of the facts that have those qualities or relations. The analysis of apparently complex *things* such as we started with can be reduced by various means, to the analysis of facts which are apparently about those things. Therefore it is with the analysis of *facts* that one's consideration of the problem of complexity must begin, not by the analysis of apparently complex things.

The complexity of a fact is evidenced, to begin with, by the circumstance that the proposition which asserts a fact consists of several words, each of which may occur in other contexts. Of course, sometimes you get a proposition expressed by a single word but if it is expressed fully it is bound to contain several words. The proposition 'Socrates is mortal' may be replaced by 'Plato is mortal' or by 'Socrates is human'; in the first case we alter the subject, in the second the predicate. It is clear that all the propositions in which the word 'Socrates' occurs have something in common, and again all the propositions in which the word 'mortal' occurs have something in common, something which they do not have in common with all propositions, but only with those which are about Socrates or mortality. It is clear, I think, that the facts corresponding to propositions in which the word 'Socrates' occurs have something in common corresponding to the common word 'Socrates' which occurs in the propositions, so that you have that sense of complexity to begin with, that in a fact you can get something which it may have in common with other facts, just as you may have 'Socrates is human' and 'Socrates is mortal', both of them facts, and both having to do with Socrates, although Socrates does not constitute the whole of either of these facts. It is quite clear that in that sense there is a possibility of cutting up a fact into component parts, of which one component may be altered without altering the others, and one component may occur in certain other facts though not in all other facts.