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0521811392 - The Correspondence Theory of Truth: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Predication

Andrew Newman

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Introduction

The simplest version of the correspondence theory of truth is that a proposition or a sentence is true when it corresponds to an appropriate fact, which is something in the world that makes a proposition or a sentence true.¹ This theory requires propositions or sentences as things that can be true or false, the truth bearers, and it requires facts as things in the world as the truth makers. Consequently, a work on the correspondence theory must not only give an account of how propositions and sentences correspond to the world, but must also discuss the nature of propositions and the nature of facts. The core of this work is therefore the discussion of these four topics:

- (1) How sentences correspond to the world.
- (2) How propositions correspond to the world.
- (3) The nature of propositions.
- (4) The nature of facts.

Most of the discussion concerns predicative propositions and predicative sentences, which are ones that ascribe properties and relations to particulars; they will be regarded as foundational, though how the notion of truth applies equally to other types of propositions and sentences will also be considered.

1 The one fact per proposition theory is simpler and more naïve than the alternative view (i.e., a proposition is true when it corresponds to appropriate facts) and seems to me to betray a lack of thought about what facts might be; whereas the alternative theory immediately requires some thought about the various ways in which different types of proposition are made true by facts and therefore requires some thought about the nature of facts. Alston, for example, appears to assume the one fact per proposition view (*A Realist Conception of Truth*, p. 38). See also Kirkham, *Theories of Truth*, chap. 4, particularly p. 139, and Marian David, *Correspondence and Disquotation*, chap. 2, where there is some discussion of the nature of facts.

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[More information](#)

This work is written from a metaphysical point of view, and within a tradition that is realist about universals. There is an obvious connection between realism about universals and the correspondence theory of truth, since realism about universals implies that there is something in the world other than particulars in virtue of which sentences and propositions are true. For example, the sentence ‘Socrates is snub-nosed’ is made true in part by a certain shape possessed by the front of Socrates’s face, and the sentence ‘the knife is to the left of the book’ is made true in part by a certain relation found in the world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this tradition was represented principally by Bertrand Russell and by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, both of whom devoted considerable attention to the correspondence theory of truth. In mid-century, it was represented by Austin, who also produced a version of the correspondence theory, and more recently Armstrong has developed a philosophy that contains an important role for states of affairs (i.e., facts) as truth makers. As a consequence, I devote a considerable amount of space to discussions of Russell and Wittgenstein, since they are for recent times the classical writers on the correspondence theory of truth, and many important issues and ideas concerning that theory have their origin in their works.

The main difficulty with nominalism and the correspondence theory is that the central doctrine of nominalism is that particulars do not possess real features that could be the references of predicates, and which as things in the world could contribute to making propositions and sentences true.² Moreover, nominalism makes it difficult to make sense of facts as things existing in the world, because it is unable to provide components for facts other than particulars. Nominalists would be better off with theories of truth that consider propositions or sentences as wholes and do not say too much about the world, so that theories of truth of the deflationary type would suit them much better, which perhaps accounts for the popularity of such theories. Theories, such as those of Tarski and Davidson, that make use of the idea of an object satisfying a predicate are obviously nominalist-inspired.

Alston defends what he calls a realist conception of truth, which is that “there is a fundamental sense in which truth has to do with the relation of a potential truth bearer to a REALITY beyond itself”,³ and that there

2 For further discussion of nominalism, see Chapter 1, sections 1.1 and 1.2.

3 Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, p. 8. In the footnote he notes that this statement has to be qualified to handle self-referential statements.

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[More information](#)

is a fundamental sense in which the notion of truth is independent of epistemological concepts, particularly those related to justification. Alston's realist conception of truth is opposed to both old-fashioned idealism and contemporary anti-realism. Crispin Wright, in fact, acknowledges a link between those two,⁴ and Michael Dummett seems clearly committed to a form of idealism: "The picture of reality as an amorphous lump, not yet articulated into discrete objects, thus proves to be the correct one, so long as we make the right use of it."⁵ On this view one of the few propositions that could be taken to be true in a realist sense is this proposition itself about the world out there being amorphous. Not only would it be natural for realists about universals to follow Alston in endorsing a realist conception of truth, I doubt whether a realist conception of truth is possible without some sort of realism about properties and relations.

In his discussion, Alston assumes the simplest version of the correspondence theory of truth, which can be called the naïve version of the correspondence theory, namely, that propositions are truth bearers, with a minimal explanation given of their nature, and that to each and every true proposition there is a single fact in the world that corresponds to it and makes it true. It is a fairly common view and, given that Alston wants to defend a minimalist, realist conception of truth, one that is perhaps suitable enough for his purposes. One of the difficulties with the naïve version is that it is unlikely that there will be enough facts for there to be one fact for each proposition, given the otherwise very sensible supposition that facts are components of reality, things existing objectively in the world. Another is the lack of any account of the ontological status of propositions or facts, which could be a serious problem if there were only a slight ontological distinction between facts and propositions, as is supposed by some contemporary philosophers, such as Chisholm and Bennett.

On account of these difficulties with the naïve correspondence theory of truth, and the claim by some that the objections to the correspondence theory are insuperable, as well as the fact that it has not been defended for quite a while, the defence of the correspondence theory of truth is a worthwhile project, even in the current climate, which is not particularly sympathetic to realism about universals nor uniformly sympathetic to a realist view of truth.

4 Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 3.

5 Dummett, *Frege, Philosophy of Language*, p. 577.

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[More information](#)

In philosophy today, generality is rightly held to be a virtue, and I admit that it would have been better to have developed a correspondence theory that was general enough to appeal not only to the various kinds of realist about universals, but also to the various kinds of nominalist. But, unfortunately, I do not think that it is possible. The most obvious way to study the correspondence theory of truth is to investigate the components and structure of facts and the components and structure of propositions, with a view to discovering how a fact and a proposition could correspond, but such a procedure clearly involves making assumptions about the basic furniture of the world.

Metaphysics, of all philosophical subjects, should go for generality, and should probably deal with the ways things could be rather than trying to deal with how things actually are, since we are not always very sure how things actually are. There is, however, a degree of generality in what follows in that much of the discussion appeals merely to realism about universals and should work for transcendent, that is, Platonic realism about universals, as well as the immanent (or Aristotelian) view of universals, and perhaps some of it could be adapted to suit particularists, for whom the properties and relations actually instantiated by particulars are themselves particulars.

Not only should truth be the same property for all the different forms of proposition, whether predicative or complex, an issue that is discussed in Chapters 2 and 8, truth should also be the same property for all propositions no matter what their subject matter. It should be the same property for logical, mathematical, probabilistic, ethical, and aesthetic propositions, for example. Unfortunately, this work is limited in scope, being concerned mainly with the metaphysical issues associated with predicative propositions and sentences. Perhaps the methods developed for predicative propositions could be extended to deal with modal and mathematical propositions by understanding their ultimate truth makers as being relations between universals, as Russell, in effect, suggests – it would be a matter of first-order universals falling under second-order universals.⁶ But for other types of proposition, the account that should be given of what makes them true will depend on the metaphysical details of the account that is given of that particular subject area.

Truth should also be the same property in whatever realm it is applied. The familiar spatio-temporal realm of physical objects is an example of

6 Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 103. See also Linsky, “Truth Makers for Modal Propositions”, and Newman, *The Physical Basis of Predication*, chap. 3.

Cambridge University Press

0521811392 - The Correspondence Theory of Truth: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Predication

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

a realm, though some philosophers have rejected it and replaced it by one or more other realms with very different characters, while others have kept it and added other realms to it, and yet others have insisted that it is the only realm. Some philosophers have supposed that there are purely temporal realms, such as that occupied by one of Leibniz's monads, or the one occupied by Aquinas's angels, or that occupied by God on some views of God.⁷ These are, nevertheless, all examples of dimensioned realms. A person's visual field is also regarded by some as a distinct dimensioned realm; it is the realm where Russell officially located his particulars and universals in his later discussions of the correspondence theory, though he frequently used other examples.⁸ Two examples of dimensionless realms, which, I assume, are not the same realm, are that occupied by God according to the timeless view of God of Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, and the world of abstract objects, also known as Plato's heaven and Frege's third realm. It seems natural enough to suggest that the natural numbers and the form of justice should occupy a dimensionless realm – on the other hand, it does seem odd to suggest that the ideal sphere should occupy a dimensionless realm, though it has been argued by Armstrong on behalf of Platonists that the ideal sphere is not a sphere. It is significant that the point of view developed in this work is such that Platonists about universals could follow it more closely than the adherents of any other metaphysical position. I maintain sympathy with Platonism about universals throughout, because for the purposes of this work there is no reason not to, though I argue against Platonic propositions.

For the sake of argument and for the sake of convenience, I take "the world" to be the spatio-temporal realm, not on account of commitment to naturalism, but because it is the most familiar realm and it is "the world" in its most canonical form, the paradigmatic realm. On any view it is a good place to start, and any theory developed for the space-time world is indeed likely to be a paradigm for other applications. For example, if there were dimensionless realms, such as a Fregean third realm, then the basic truths concerning that world would be predicative in nature, being about subjects of predication, which would be non-predicative entities such as Fregean objects, falling under entities with a predicative role, such as Fregean concepts. For any version of a correspondence theory that

7 Cf. Strawson, *Individuals*, chap. 2.

8 Cf. Evan Fales, *Causation and Universals*. I do not claim this list of realms is exhaustive; mathematicians, for example, may be able to dream up other types of realm.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

applies to particulars and universals, a similar theory would also apply in a dimensionless realm.⁹

The first two chapters are preliminary discussions. Chapter 1 concerns the relation between theories of universals and the idea of a correspondence theory of truth, and Chapter 2 is about how truth should be the same property for all propositions. Chapter 3 is about correspondence for sentences, while Chapters 4 and 5 are about how predicative propositions correspond to the world. Chapter 6 is about the nature of facts and Chapter 7 is about the nature of propositions, with Chapter 8 being an attempt to extend the ideas developed in previous chapters to complex propositions. The following remarks are a summary of the positions taken on the four principal topics: correspondence for sentences, correspondence for propositions, the nature of facts, and the nature of propositions.

If “the universe consists of objects having various qualities and standing in various relations”, as Russell supposed and as I assume, then there is a sense in which predicative propositions are fundamental, where a predicative proposition is one that ascribes a property to a particular or a relation to a number of particulars.¹⁰ Such propositions appear to be among the most straightforward things that we believe, though it will be seen that they raise several difficult issues.

The correspondence theory of truth works best for predicative sentences. The theory presented in this work is a modification of Wittgenstein’s theory of the truth of elementary sentences of the *Tractatus*, on the interpretation where his “objects” are divided into particulars, properties, and relations, so that his elementary sentences are examples

9 The main difficulty with dimensionless realms from the point of view of realism about universals is that the distinction between particular and universal, or between particular and form (for Platonism), is not immediately applicable, since for both versions of realism it appears that the notion of a particular is that of something that can occur in only one place at a given time. In Chapter 1, n. 40, I make a suggestion about how to make a general distinction between non-predicative entities and predicative entities. In a previous work I gave a characterization of the notions of particular and universal that involved several stages, starting with a syntactic characterization and including modal and causal characterizations (Newman, *The Physical Basis of Predication*, particularly chap. 2). The early phases of that process of characterization can be used to fix a notion of predicative entity and non-predicative entity, where a non-predicative entity is a subject of predication only and never predicated of anything. Non-predicative entity and predicative entity are what particulars and universals become when there are no dimensions. But, as it happens, I do not feel a pressing need to say much more about dimensionless realms, since I do not believe for a moment that there are such things, and I am not convinced that they are even possible.

10 Whitehead and Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, p. 43.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of predicative sentences. It will be seen that this theory can be extended to many other predicative sentences. However, the version I give differs from his in several ways, the most important being that it does not involve an isomorphism or congruence between a sentence and something in the world, but posits instead a type of correlation between a sentence and the world.

For Wittgenstein, an elementary sentence says something, or has a sense, in virtue of having a certain structure and in virtue of its components being related to certain “objects” in the world. The sentence itself is thought of as being directed towards the world and not as having any connection with an abstract proposition. For Russell, a person has a predicative belief in virtue of being related to one or more particulars in the world and also to a relation, which are the same “objects” that Wittgenstein’s elementary sentence is related to on the interpretation of the *Tractatus* that I favour. Having a belief for Russell is a matter of the person’s attention being directed towards these things in the world in a certain way. Wittgenstein’s theory and Russell’s theory are similar in this matter of directedness.

The account given of the truth of propositions is a modification of Russell’s theory of the truth of beliefs put forward first in 1910, the principal part of this theory being a theory of belief or judgement, which is usually known as Russell’s theory of judgement. One of the most striking things about Russell’s theory is the sheer number of objections that have been levelled against it, in contrast to the rather small number of people who have been prepared to defend it. The only explanation I can think of for this disparity is that Russell had touched on a fundamental issue worthy of serious attention. Foremost among the objectors was Wittgenstein, whose theory of the truth of beliefs in the *Tractatus* was a simple modification of his theory of the truth of sentences and was intended to be an alternative to Russell’s theory. For all that, there are some fundamental similarities between Wittgenstein’s theory of the truth of elementary sentences and Russell’s theory of truth; and I develop them in a way that brings out their similarities.

Something like correspondence conditions for propositions can be given, though it must be admitted (and it is admitted in the text) that they are not straightforward. Correspondence would perhaps be more plausible if propositions were abstract entities and therefore quite separate from the world and more plausibly regarded as independent entities. On the view proposed, however, a proposition is a unit not capable of independent existence that is constructed from a type of intentional relation

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Andrew Newman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and which is governed by a certain criterion of identity. Since a proposition is a different type of thing from any other units found in the world – it is a different type of thing from a fact, for example – it makes sense to say that it corresponds to the world. One of the advantages of this Russellian view of propositions is that it enables us to dispense with entities in other realms by providing an explicit, defensible, immanent, or Aristotelian view of propositions.

The second two issues, namely, the ontological status of facts and propositions, are ones that must be discussed by anyone interested in the metaphysical issues associated with the correspondence theory. There is some current interest in the nature of facts and propositions, but what there is is slight and lacks confidence, though they are two issues that are natural areas of investigation for realists about universals. The *Tractatus*'s account of the truth of sentences and Russell's account of the truth of propositions are similar not only in that neither theory involves abstract or Platonic propositions, nor indeed makes any use of entities in a world of abstract objects, but also because both make considerable use of facts as entities.

It is difficult to avoid the notion of "fact". Most writers assume that there are such things, though with varying degrees of ontological commitment. For the purposes of this work I distinguish two general approaches to the nature of facts. The *compositional* approach starts with certain real things that could be the components of facts and regards a fact as something formed by putting those things together, with the result that there are fewer facts than on alternative views. There would, then, be a possibility of a fact being a real unit on account of its components being real units, depending to some extent on the mode of composition that is ascribed to facts. This view of facts could be regarded as the classical view of facts, the one held by Russell and Wittgenstein, and developed recently by Armstrong. I try to maintain sympathy with this view for as long as possible, partly on account of my sympathy with these authors and partly on account of the convenience of facts as entities. But in the end, despite my sympathy and despite their convenience, I shall find the case for facts as real units unconvincing.

The *linguistic view* of facts starts with certain linguistic expressions and singles out some of these on account of their linguistic form as describing states of affairs, states of affairs being introduced merely as entities described by such expressions, and it then explains facts as states of affairs that obtain. This view leads to a large number of states of affairs, because there are a large number of possible linguistic expressions of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

right type. Although the linguistic view of facts usually comes without much in the way of ontological interpretation, it will be seen that the best way to make sense of its various claims is to regard the facts and states of affairs of the linguistic view as abstract things or Platonic entities, following Plantinga. In fact, a number of writers, such as Chisholm and Bennett, have recognized a close similarity between states of affairs and propositions, but then they seem to be at a loss to explain how they might differ.

The unadorned term ‘proposition’ will be used for the content of what is believed, or the content of what is stated, and for what is expressed by an indicative sentence; it is what writers such as Richard Cartwright and J. L. Austin call a ‘statement’. This use of the term ‘proposition’ carries with it no commitment as to the nature of propositions, other than that propositions are different from sentences and that the same proposition can be believed, stated, or expressed on many different occasions. It is, in effect, a minimalist notion of proposition similar to that employed by Alston, minimalist in the sense of carrying with it minimal ontological commitment.¹¹ The use of the term ‘Platonic proposition’, on the other hand, indicates a commitment to the view that propositions are abstract entities that exist in the Platonic realm.

I argue against Platonic propositions, and argue for Russellian propositions, where Russellian propositions involve the things they are about and are only instantiated when thought by someone. They are more or less equivalent to the currently popular singular propositions, which normally come without any metaphysical clothing, and are usually discussed without much recognition of the metaphysical problems associated with them.¹²

11 Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, pp. 17–22.

12 Mark Sainsbury says that a number of philosophers today, such as Kaplan and Recanati, accept theories similar to Russell’s but do not appreciate that they raise a problem of propositional unity, “How can something say something?” (pp. 144–45).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Universals, Predication, and Truth

1.1 THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a strong tradition of realism about universals that was closely associated with a correspondence approach to truth. This view was represented by major figures such as Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, according to many interpreters, such as Black and Fahrnkopf.¹ It was also represented by less well-known figures, such as W. E. Johnson; John Wisdom, who endorsed Russell's 1910 theory of truth; and F. P. Ramsey, who endorsed the associated theory of judgement.² Russell and Wittgenstein's work on logical atomism is to a large extent devoted to the correspondence theory of truth, despite the fact that neither used the term 'correspondence theory of truth' in the titles of any of their works. Russell, while being clear about the nature of the immanent realist view of universals, was apparently a Platonist about properties and relations in the early part of the twentieth century, though he was less clear about the nature of Platonism.³ And despite the fact that he made a point of rehabilitating relations, he echoed the scepticism about relations of Leibniz and Ockham by regarding them as things obviously not found in this world. But by 1940, at any rate, Russell had become an immanent realist.⁴

1 Black, *Companion to the Tractatus*; Fahrnkopf, *Wittgenstein on Universals*.

2 See Johnson, *Logic*; Ramsey, "Universals"; Wisdom, *Problems of Mind and Matter*.

3 He argues for this position in "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars" of 1911; on the other hand, there are hints of immanent realism in *The Principles of Mathematics*, e.g. pp. 51–52 and 467. See J. O. Urmson, "Russell on Universals".

4 See Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* of 1940 and *Human Knowledge* of 1948.