

# Russell on particularized relations

by Thomas R. Foster

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IN CONTRAST WITH Russell's mature view on the status of relations and properties, namely, that they are universal, is an earlier, less well-known view. This view is that some are universal and the others, instances of the universals, though themselves relations or properties, are still particular. Views embracing both universal and particular properties (and/or relations) are not new with Russell. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Plato accepts something very much like particularized properties.<sup>1</sup> And Moore, friend and philosophical correspondent of Russell, claims that "particulars may be instances of qualities ... or relations.... Only particular instances of ... [difference] ... alone can relate."<sup>2</sup>

The "instances" here of universal relations are particulars which also relate—not pairs or triples nor yet facts or states of affairs.<sup>3</sup> In tracing and examining the arguments concerning particularized relations and/or properties, we shall see Russell arguing both for and against these entities.

<sup>1</sup> See *Plato: Selections*, ed. Raphael Demos (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 212–14.

<sup>2</sup> G. E. Moore, "Quality", in J. B. Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1901), II: 406.

<sup>3</sup> For a documentation of the development of Moore's early views, see Herbert Hochberg, "Moore's Ontology and Non-natural Properties", in *Studies in the Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), pp. 95–127.

In earlier unpublished works, Russell reaches two distinct conclusions. For one, he concludes that at least some relations as well as some predicates are able to be particularized since they are localizable. Russell held that localizable properties and relations between such properties are *existents* (not merely beings). For another, Russell concludes that all relations which actually relate are particularized, that is, none of them are shared, by arguing that if relations are shared certain vicious regresses result.

Later Russell argues against particularized relations on several counts. First, since the *instance-of* relation can not be coherently particularized, the argument concluding all relations are particular is lost. Second, particularized relations will not serve to mark off true from false propositions, since they *subsist* irrespective of the truth-value of the proposition associated with them. Upon dropping this notion of subsistence, Russell again considers particularized relations to serve as an object for the *denoting* relation.

## I

Though Russell's primary concern (as will be ours) is with particularized relations and not properties, one of the earliest appearances of particularization is with reference to properties.

Some predicates have essentially a temporal or spatio-temporal distribution. Such are happy, angry, good, red, heavy. In this case, though the predicate as such does not exist, yet, as being in a part of space or time, it acquires that unique relation to a particular place which shows a term to be an existent. Thus redness in this place is one existent, and redness in that place is another. These two are materially diverse; each is an existent, and each may be a logical subject. We shall find the judgments asserting the existence of these particularized predicates of fundamental importance in the theory of quantity. I propose to call predicates which are capable of such particularization, *qualities*; and to call the actual particulars *attributes*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Russell, "An Analysis of Mathematical Reasoning", an unpublished manuscript written in 1897, pp. 13–14. Pagination refers to the typescript to be found in the Russell Archives.

This view embodies a tension, one that continues throughout Russell's consideration of particularized properties and relations. First, Russell claims above that the "predicate as such" does not exist. This is his view that "predicates" (universals) have being but not existence. Second, a term *qua* related to a time and/or place is an existent. How can the universal, say redness, have only *being*, be related to a space and/or time, rendering it an *existent*? This is the tension, reflecting a shift in context between the use of "redness" by itself, as it were, designating the universal, and its use in the context "redness in this place", where it designates a particularized property. This shift is reflected in Russell's claim that "the predicate ... acquires that unique relation to space and time which shows a term to be existent." Does the universal become a particularized property? Does redness *change* into *redness in this place*? "Redness in this place" is not merely another way of expressing the true proposition that redness is in this place, but rather seems to designate a new entity, an instance of redness, existent because of the truth that redness is in this place. Note that the use of "redness in this place" and "redness in that place" sounds like a contrast of different rednesses. But surely, it does not follow from the fact that redness is in this place that, in another place where there is also redness, it must be another redness. We shall see this tension in various forms throughout this paper.<sup>5</sup>

Russell's first mention of particularized relations occurs in the following:

There is a difficult class of existent relations. Distances between actual points, areas of actual triangles, and so on, must be regarded as existents: they differ from the previous classes in that they refer to two or more parts or points of space or time, but this cannot destroy their existence. Geometrical relations, as dealt with by Geometry, do not exist, for they refer to *any* point, or *any* distance, which is not one actual particular in space or time, but the content "existent particular of some kind", which is itself not an existent. But the actual relations, whose prototypes are dealt with by Geometry do exist, as do the relations between actual points of time.

<sup>5</sup>For example, we shall see Russell is not clear on what "the difference between *a* and *b*" designates: the universal (which happens to hold between *a* and *b*); another form of the proposition *a* is different from *b*; or, alternatively, the particularized relation.

The question of existent relations is difficult, and it is hard to find a principle upon which to decide when relations exist. But it would appear that there is one important type of relations, to wit those of causation, which are existent relations between things, or at least between their attributes. When one temporal or spatio-temporal particular has caused another, it would seem that the particular case of causation must exist. There may be other relations which, like qualities, have a spatial or temporal distribution, and in such cases the particulars, presumably, are existents.<sup>6</sup>

Again relying on the localization pattern, Russell has here claimed that some relations are particularized. In the next section, we shall see Russell's argument which concludes that all relations which relate are particular. He will argue that we need both general and particularized relations to block certain infinite regresses.

## II

In a manuscript<sup>7</sup> written before 1900, Russell argues again for particularized relations. This time, however, the localization pattern plays no role. Instead, Russell argues to a conclusion about the nature of relations in general—not merely some among them. He reaches such general conclusions by exploring questions about the relation of difference. Russell begins by asking: “Does the difference between red and blue differ from the difference between identity and difference?”<sup>8</sup> At the end of his argument, where Russell concludes that differences do differ and hence, that there are particularized relations, he claims that “the doctrine [that there are particularized relations] may be extended to all relations.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “An Analysis of Mathematical Reasoning”, pp. 15–16.

<sup>7</sup> “Do Differences Differ?”, an unpublished manuscript written about 1900, pp. 1–4. Pagination refers to the typescript to be found in the Russell Archives.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. Russell elsewhere claims that “mere difference *per se* appears to be the bare minimum of a relation, being in fact a precondition of almost all relations” (*Principles of Mathematics*, 2nd ed. [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1938], p. 172). This edition identical in content to the first, 1903, edition. For purposes of history and perspective, Russell added an Introduction.

In arguing for particularized relations, Russell forms the following hypotheses:

- (a) There is merely the abstract relation of difference—identical in each context.
- (b) When two items are distinct, there are two relations between them—one the general relation of difference, the other a specific difference particular to this pair.
- (c) When pairs of things are different, their difference is unique to them, while *difference* (the general term) relates nothing, but functions as class concept.

Russell's final view is (c), that is, he concludes that differences do differ and that the Platonistic term *difference* is not itself a relation. Since the reasons Russell advances for his conclusion involve regresses, a point about regresses is in order.

To outline this point, consider the following unending series:

$$\begin{aligned} R(a, b) \\ R'(R, a, b) \\ R''(R', R, a, b) \\ : \\ : \end{aligned}$$

If we assume possession of some property (e.g., truth or meaning) by the first member of the series is somehow dependent upon, or *grounded in*, possession of that same property by the second, and the second upon the third, etc., then there is no final *grounding*. From this kind of reasoning, some philosophers (e.g., Bradley) conclude there are no relations. Russell, however, who believes there are relations, replaces this assumption with another, holding that if  $R(a, b)$  has the given property, then so too does  $R'(R, a, b)$ , etc. Notice this gives Russell the same series, but with the grounding in the first, not the last member of an unending chain.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear from the paper under discussion whether Russell is aware that if  $R'(R, a, b)$ , then  $R(a, b)$ . This would mean that the *truth* of any member of the series would “ground” the rest. Russell's point, as we shall see, is not about truth but rather about meaning.

Russell does not argue for hypothesis (c) above as much as he argues against hypotheses (a) and (b). Since the assertion of the general relation is common to both (a) and (b), Russell reasons that if, say, the proposition expressed by “*A* differs from *B*” is true, then if

... what is asserted here were the abstract relation of difference, it would seem that the proposition could be analyzed into “*A*, difference, *B*”. But this is obviously not the case. We must suppose some relation between difference and the whole composed of *A* and *B*: “*A* and *B* have difference” will express this fact. Since this necessity arises from the analysis of the proposition, the relation of *difference* to *A* and *B* must be part of the *meaning* of “*A* differs from *B*”.<sup>11</sup>

Suppose we represent the relation between difference and *A* and *B* with “*R*”. Then just as

$$D(A, B)$$

expresses “*A* is different from *B*”, so too

$$R(D, A, B)$$

expresses “*A* and *B* have difference”. However, analysis of this latter proposition gives us “*R, D, A, B*”—which requires yet a further relation. Russell claims that by this route “we shall be led to an endless regress, not ... to new propositions implied in previous ones, but to greater and greater complexities in the *meaning* of our original proposition.”<sup>12</sup>

We have here an instance of our above general point about regresses, the “property” in question being the meaning of the proposition. Russell considers two regresses—admissible and inadmissible—each involving the same series, namely,

$$\begin{array}{l} D(A, B,) \\ R(D, A, B) \end{array}$$

$$R'(R, D, A, B)$$

⋮  
⋮

The “admissible” regress associated with this series is the claim that if the first holds then the second holds, or more generally, if the  $n^{\text{th}}$  member holds then the  $n+1^{\text{th}}$  member holds. Thus the series is generated by a process of implications and is, for Russell, harmless. The “inadmissible” regress associated with this series is Russell’s view that

- (i) If the difference between *A* and *B* is non-particular then analysis of the *meaning* of the proposition expressed by “*D(A, B)*” is, at least in part, *D, A*, and *B*.
- (ii) *D, A*, and *B* misses the proposition’s original connectedness, however.
- (iii) This connectedness is itself a relation, call it “*R*”.
- (iv) So, if the difference between *A* and *B* is non-particular, then *D(A, B)* means *R(D, A, B)*.
- (v) By a similar reasoning, if *R* is non-particular, then *R(D, A, B)* means *R'(R, D, A, B)*, etc.

It is as if one can not completely express the proposition *D(A, B)* until one has given expression to the last member of an infinite series, if the difference between *A* and *B* is non-particular. So, since we can give expression to *D(A, B)*, it follows that the difference between *A* and *B* is particular.

Russell will soon realize that at least one relation (*instance-of*) can not be particularized, and that the above argument against abstract relations also works against particularized relations. This will be the beginning of Russell’s arguments against particularized relations.

### III

In the *Principles*, Russell rejects his above conclusion that there are particularizations for all relating relations. Russell argues, again in the context of whether differences differ, that

... the most general way in which two terms can have something in common is by both having a given relation to a given term. Hence if no

<sup>11</sup> “Do Differences Differ?”, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

two pairs of terms can have the same relation, it follows that no two terms can have anything in common, and hence different differences will not be in any definable sense *instances* of difference. (*Principles*, p. 51)

Let us examine the argument in detail:

- (i) Russell assumes that different differences have something in common.

This notion is defined as:

- (ii) To have something in common is to bear one relation to a given term.

From (i) to (ii) it follows that

- (iii) Two particularized differences bear some relation (say, *instance-of*) to some term (say, *difference*), and thus, the relation that the particularized differences bear to a given term can not itself be particularized, or else there would not be one relation.

- (iv) So, if (i) and (ii) are true, it must be false that all relations are particularized.

Briefly, what the argument shows is that if the relation *instance-of* is particularized, then there will be nothing in common between different differences. Russell, however, takes his conclusion to be stronger:

... the relation affirmed between *A* and *B* in the proposition “*A* differs from *B*” is the general relation of difference, and is precisely and numerically the same as the relation affirmed between *C* and *D* in “*C* differs from *D*.” ... relations do not have instances, but are strictly the same in all propositions in which they occur. (*Principles*, p. 52)

Russell’s conclusion seems mistaken on several counts. For one, he should have concluded (from (i)–(iii)) that not all relations are

particularized—not that no relations are particularized. For another, he should have concluded the relation *instance-of* was not particular—not that there were no *instances*.

Instead of viewing Russell as having reached an invalid conclusion, namely, that all relations are general, we may instead view him as realizing that he has lost his reason for holding that any relation is particularized. Although Russell’s “inadmissible regress” argument concludes all (relating) relations are particularized, here he has discovered at least one relation, the *instance-of* relation, which can not be particularized. Russell himself seems to realize that the logic of the situation does not demand the conclusion that *no* relations are particularized. Almost as an afterthought, in a footnote, Russell notes that

... Mr. Moore’s theory of universals with numerically diverse instances ... must not be applied to all concepts. The relation of an instance to its universal, at any rate, must be actually and numerically the same in all cases where it occurs. (*Principles*, pp. 51–2n.)

Since Russell’s initial attempt to argue for particularized properties has failed—as he himself has just shown—Russell has to change the argument so the “inadmissible regress” does not occur. One way he does this is by claiming that although a series of propositions may imply each other, their meanings are distinct:

... when a relation holds between two terms, the relations of the relation to the terms, and of these relations to the relation and the terms, and so on *ad infinitum*, though all implied by the proposition affirming the original relation, form no part of the *meaning* of this proposition. (*Principles*, p. 51)

Russell has realized that his previous argument about meaning and analysis is completely general, applying to both particularized as well as abstract relations. Russell claims that

... even if the difference of *A* and *B* be absolutely peculiar to *A* and *B*, still the three terms *A*, *B*, difference of *A* from *B*, do not reconstitute the proposition “*A* differs from *B*,” any more than *A* and *B* and difference did. (*Principles*, p. 51)

Russell still has to “explain” what went wrong with his analysis of  $D(A, B)$ . He now holds that a proposition has

... a kind of unity which analysis cannot preserve, and which is lost even though it be mentioned by analysis as an element in the proposition. (*Principles*, p. 51)

## IV

Contrast Russell’s above weaker conclusion with:

But there are logical reasons for supposing that there are no such entities at all as particularized relations; most of these I have set forth elsewhere....<sup>13</sup>

The reference in the quote is to the argument given in the *Principles* as outlined in the previous section. In that argument, contrary to what Russell claims, he has not concluded that there are no particularized relations—rather, his conclusion was a weaker, twofold one. He concluded, first, that his earlier reason for adopting particularized relations did not seem correct, and, second, that this was so because the *instance-of* relation could not be particularized. So in spite of his claim to “logical reasons”, the issue is hardly settled. Russell seems aware of this—since a good part of his Meinong work is devoted to discussions of particularized relations.

Russell’s work on Meinong may be viewed as an attempt to resolve two conflicting pressures, viz., his view that everything has Being and his need to find a mark for true propositions. Briefly, he speculates that the subsistence of a particularized relation will serve the latter function; but, since everything—including particularized relations correlated with false propositions—subsists, the use of particularized relations as a mark of true propositions is thwarted. In more detail, remember that Russell holds the following:

<sup>13</sup> Bertrand Russell, “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions”, in *Mind*, 1904. Reprinted in D. Lackey, ed., *Essays in Analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 48 (emphasis mine). Pagination here is from Lackey’s collection.

(A) Nothing can be claimed not to have Being.

This entails

(B) Both true and false propositions have Being.

Since Russell also wants a mark of true propositions, something which distinguishes them from false propositions, he holds

(C)  $T“aRb”$  iff  $R$  subsists between  $a$  and  $b$ .

Unfortunately, the very notion of *subsistence* is ambiguous, sometimes functioning as a relational term, sometimes as a predicate. As a result, Russell also holds

(D)  $R$  subsists between  $a$  and  $b$  iff the relation  $R$  between  $a$  and  $b$  subsists.

Not surprisingly, Russell claims that

(E) The relation  $R$  between  $a$  and  $b$  is the particularized relation.

What follows from the above is that

(F)  $T“aRb”$  iff the particularized relation subsists.

and

(G)  $F“aRb”$  iff the particularized relation fails to subsist.

This would be fine, except for the following:

(H)  $X$  subsists iff  $X$  has Being.

Obviously, nothing can fail to subsist, given (A) and (H). Yet (C) seems undeniable. So Russell is caught between two pressures: first, the “fact” that nothing can fail to subsist, generated by (A) and (H) above; and second, the need to find a distinguishing mark

for true propositions. The mark he finds, time and again, is the particularized relation, which subsists if the proposition is true, yet fails to subsist if it is false. Yet, since nothing can fail to subsist, he has no special mark for truth. Russell's arguments against (and for) particularized relations in the Meinong work exhibit his yielding to first one, then the other, pressure. Contributing to this difficulty is the ambiguity in the very notion of subsistence. Russell wants "subsistence" to serve as an alternative term for "being", a predicate that applies to everything. In this sense "subsistence" is a predicative term which can not fail to apply. However, when Russell says " $R$  subsists between  $a$  and  $b$ ", he means that  $aRb$  is true. In this sense subsistence is a relational term which can fail to obtain. This dual use of the term, not recognized by Russell, is what leads to (D) above.

Not only is there an ambiguity in the notion of subsistence, but there is also the difficulty of determining exactly what is subsisting. Compare the following:

- (X)  $R$ , which obtains between  $a$  and  $b$ , subsists.
- (Y)  $Rab$  subsists.
- (Z) The  $R$ -between- $a$ -and- $b$  subsists.

In all these cases, subsistence means being. But in (X), it is merely the general relation  $R$  which is claimed to subsist. (Y) we may read as the proposition (true or false) subsisting. And (Z) is the claim that the particularized relation subsists. (Of course, in contrast to the above three is " $R$  subsists between  $a$  and  $b$ ".) Russell finally distinguishes (X) from (Z):

there is a relation  $R$ , and there are terms  $a$  and  $b$ ; but if  $R$  relates  $a$  and  $b$ , then "Relation  $R$  between  $a$  and  $b$ " is simply the relation  $R$ , together with a reminder that  $a$  and  $b$  are related by it.... [The] whole proposition  $aRb$  seems essential, and ... there is no relation particularized by its terms, as opposed to the abstract relation  $R$ . ("Meinong's Theory", pp. 71–2)

The view that Russell considers but finally rejects in the Meinong papers is the following: When " $aRb$ " is true, correlated to it are *two* entities—the proposition  $aRb$ , and the  $R$ -between- $a$ -

and- $b$ , what we have called the particularized relation. If false, however, only the proposition is involved. Structurally speaking, this resembles a correspondence view of truth, a view that Russell is not ready to accept.

There is ... a proposition  $aRb$ , and in this proposition the abstract relation  $R$  occurs, not the relation particularized by its terms; but in the case where  $aRb$  is true, there is such an entity as the particularized relation, whereas, when  $aRb$  is false, there is no such entity. This entity, when it subsists, is distinct from the proposition. But the difficulty of this view is to see what it is that is denied when the particularized relation is said not to subsist; and this difficulty seems fatal to the view in question. ("Meinong's Theory", pp. 27–3)

Russell's difficulty is that, not noticing the ambiguity in "subsists", he does not at first realize that the two "pressures", as I have called them, are in conflict. Finally, however, he does reject one of them, holding

that there is no problem at all in truth and falsehood; that some propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white. ("Meinong's Theory", p. 75)

This, we can see, is Russell's rejection of one of the pressures mentioned above—*there is no special mark of true propositions beyond being true*. Although Russell does claim it to be the "correct view", he is not satisfied, claiming that "this theory *seems* to leave our preference for truth a mere unaccountable prejudice" ("Meinong's Theory", p. 75).

This would seem to finish matters in the Meinong work—except for the following claim:

If " $A$  exists" is false, not only  $A$  does not exist, but also, we are to suppose,  $A$ 's existence does not subsist. ("Meinong's Theory", p. 76)

Without realizing it, Russell has rejected the other pressure mentioned above, since he allows himself to refer to non-subsistent items. This is a turning-point in several ways. Following this

work, he will find a number of reasons for rejecting the view that anything you can mention must subsist, some of them culminating in his work on descriptions. Along with this, Russell will explore ways to find a mark of a true sentence or proposition, eventually accepting a correspondence view of truth.

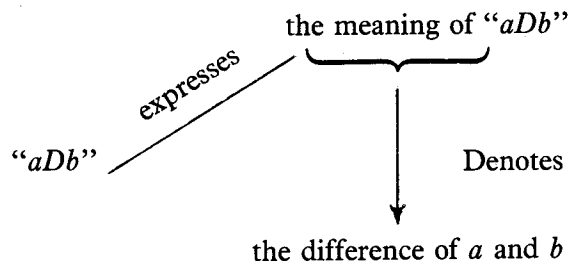
## V

Recall that Russell had given up particularized relations on two occasions. First, in the *Principles* Russell argued that not all relations could consistently be particularized. Second, in his Meinong work Russell concluded that particularized relations could not account for truth.

With the concept of *denoting*, however, he has a relational concept which can fail to obtain. A false proposition will not be accounted for by, say,

*The difference of a and b has no being,*

but rather that the sentence “*aDb*” will express a *meaning*, and it is this latter entity (the meaning) which can fail to denote. *Denoting*, a relation that can fail to obtain, is thus the beginning of the end of *being*, a predicate that can not fail to apply. This possibility of failure allows him to reconsider particularized relations. Consider again the sentence “*aDb*”: Russell holds that this expresses the meaning of “*aDb*”, which then may denote the difference of *a* and *b*. Put schematically:



What is this object of the denoting relation, that is, what is the difference in question? Russell’s answer should not be surprising. In a work written in 1904, he calls the entity, the difference

between *a* and *b*, a particularized relation.<sup>14</sup> He can accept this now since he has given up his notion of subsistence. The abandoning of subsistence is not, however, an argument for particularized relations. Indeed, in a separate work, written about the same time, Russell concludes that “there is no particularized relation”.<sup>15</sup>

## VI

Russell finally abandons particularized relations. They are replaced, however, by facts. This later view of Russell’s can be seen in light of his earlier struggles with the issue of particularized relations. For a fact is not like a set of its constituents, but rather some particular arrangement of them. Because a fact is a particular arrangement of its constituents, it is non-shareable and unique. Since a fact is an arrangement, the “fact of connectedness” is not part of it, nor yet another fact implied by it—instead, it is it. And, because a fact can fail to obtain, its subsistence can be held to account for truth.

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<sup>14</sup>“On Meaning and Denotation”, unpublished manuscript, p. 22. Pagination refers to the manuscript to be found in the Russell Archives.

<sup>15</sup>“Dependent Variables and Denotation”, unpublished manuscript, p. 5. Pagination refers to the manuscript to be found in the Russell Archives.