Reviews

A HISTORICALLY INFORMED DEFENCE OF THE MULTIPLE-RELATION THEORY OF JUDGMENT

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*I*n his book Lebens discusses the history of Russell's much-maligned multiple-relation theory of judgment (mrtj); he also defends a mrtj (p. 1).[1] The book is well written. It gives clear arguments. It interweaves seamlessly historical and ongoing controversies within unified narratives. For these reasons a close study of Lebens' book will richly reward scholars interested either in Russell's mrtj or in the metaphysics of meaning. His book stands out for its detailed attempt to trace the origins of mrtj through Russell's pre-*Principia* writings. I recommend Lebens' book to the attention of readers of *Russell*.

Lebens' book is framed around the need for "an account of *the metaphysics of meaning*" (p. 6). His defence of his mrtj focuses on mrtj's suitableness as giving a metaphysics of meaning. To grasp his book, one must understand why Lebens thinks we need a metaphysics of meaning.[2] And to grasp his book's significance for Russell's scholarship, it is vital to understand whether and in what sense Russell also thought we need a metaphysics of meaning, and whether he deployed mrtj to give us a metaphysics of meaning.

Lebens understands "metaphysics of meaning" in terms of eleven roles that propositions play (pp. 2–4). Propositions are sometimes said, for example, to be *truth-bearers*; they are sometimes said to be the *common content* of different

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[1] It is important to distinguish Lebens' mrtj from Russell's mrtj, and to distinguish both of these from a mrtj in general. Where context does not indicate which is meant, I will use, say, "Lebens' mrtj".

[2] "In order to understand Mr. Wittgenstein's book, it is necessary to realize what is the problem with which he is concerned" ("Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" [1921]; *Papers* 9: 101).

sentences, like "snow is white" and "Schnee ist weiß"; they are sometimes said to be *the objects of propositional attitudes*; and so on. Lebens' book starts from the claim that at least some of the eleven roles that propositions play "represent genuine *explananda*" (p. 6). That is, at least some of these roles demand a metaphysical explanation of what it is to play these various roles: "I want to know what it means for a sentence to mean something. I want a metaphysics of meaning" (p. 6). Lebens undertakes this work of giving a metaphysics of meaning; he believes MRTJ is well-suited to that work (p. 18).

Now, Russell's MRTJ is a *no-propositions* theory of propositions, that is, an account "of" propositions on which there are no propositions as entities (p. 1). And yet rejecting propositions as entities does not thereby eliminate the need to offer a metaphysical explanation of the eleven roles Lebens describes (p. 6). Lebens for his part feels the need for a metaphysical explanation despite the fact that he, like the Russell of MRTJ, rejects propositions as entities.

Lebens believes Russell likewise felt this need. Lebens writes:

> [MRTJ] was Bertrand Russell's attempt to give an account of propositions—i.e., an explanation of the 11 *explananda* of §1 (or most of them)—without incurring ontological commitment to propositions. […] [MRTJ] takes the metaphysical task of a theory of propositions seriously, and doesn't desert the undertaking. …
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> (Pp. 17–18)

Contrary to Lebens, I do not believe Russell had this problem in mind when devising the MRTJ. First, supposing that giving a metaphysics of meaning was Russell's goal—even as far back as 1903, if Lebens is right—is contrary to Russell's recounting of his intellectual development. Russell wrote:

> When, in youth, I learned what was called "philosophy"… no one ever mentioned to me the question of "meaning".
>
> ("The Meaning of Meaning" [1926]; *Papers* 9: 138)

> One of the things I realised in 1918 was that I had not paid enough attention to "meaning" and to linguistic problems generally.
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> (*MPD*, p. 98; *cf.* also pp. 11, 108)

Russell further says regarding "very largely linguistic" issues like "the unity of a complex, and, more especially, the unity of a sentence", that his 1905 theory of descriptions resolved all these difficulties (*MPD*, p. 49). The record seems to bear him out. His characterizations of propositions in 1905 show no concern with the metaphysics of meaning, or with leveraging his ontology of propositions to meet any of Lebens' eleven explananda. Here is a typical example:

> It is the things which are or may be *objects of belief* that I call *propositions*, and it is

these things to which I ascribe truth or falsehood…. It is this kind of entity that I wish to direct attention to, for it is this kind of entity that, in my opinion, is true or false.   ("The Nature of Truth" [1905]; *Papers* 4: 494–5)

The only case I found in the pre-1913 texts, where Russell may be concerned with "aboutness of propositions", occurs in a discussion of Meinong. There he distinguishes a relational proposition "*about* its terms" from a proposition "*about* the relation": this "real logical difference" is as between "*A* is the father of *B*" and "fatherhood holds between *A* and *B*".[3] But this is a logical distinction of a relation being a logical subject from its being a logical predicate.

In favour of Lebens' position, Russell's early, ontologized propositions are truth-bearers, and objects of dual relations of belief.[4] But Russell also says:

Our calculus studies the relation of *implication* between propositions…. A definition of implication is quite impossible…. It may be observed that although implication is indefinable, *proposition* can be defined. Every proposition implies itself, and whatever is not a proposition implies nothing.   (*PoM*, §§15–16)

Propositions in this sense are unrelated to a metaphysics of meaning. Nor does Russell leverage them to give a metaphysics of meaning.

So far as I can see, the 1913 manuscript also supplies no evidence that Russell wanted a metaphysics of meaning. There Russell writes, "The fundamental characteristic which distinguishes propositions, whatever they may be, from objects of acquaintance is their truth or falsehood" (*TK*, p. 108). There is nothing in his description of propositions relating to a metaphysics of meaning. Nor do I see anything like a connection of propositions to a metaphysics of meaning in the text of the 1913 manuscript.

The only place where Lebens gives something like an argument for Russell's being concerned with a metaphysics of meaning is around pages 100–1. There Lebens argues Russell's propositions as entities are representational.[5] He gives only one example of what "representing" means here: when we see a car turning, he says, we "experience the car *as* turning a corner" or we "see *that* it is turning a corner" (p. 3). Lebens argues Russell's propositions as entities represent in this sense because:

(*a*) propositions as entities contain *denoting concepts*, and denoting concepts are "about" entities besides themselves; ergo, in the case where

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[3] "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions" (1904); *Papers* 4: 456–7.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 432; see also *PoM*, 1903, §13.
[5] By the problem of representation Lebens means, following Soames, the issue of how abstract entities, like sets, sequences, or propositions as entities "could have the power, all on their own, to be representational" (p. 10).

propositions contain no denoting concepts, they are "about" themselves, and thus can represent all on their own in Lebens' sense (p. 100);

(*b*) Russell says propositions have "*assertedness* (pp. 48–9)", or a unity about them; this means "it has a non-psychological, inherent, representationality to it" (pp. 100–1).

Against (*a*), Russell in 1903, when he had denoting concepts, viewed denoting, in the sense he wanted to discuss, as "a logical relation" (*PoM*, §56). It is this logical relation that is the basis for Russell's discussion of denoting concepts. Against (*b*), Russell in 1903 held ontologized propositions need not be unified: it may be merely considered (*ibid.*, §38). Even if Russell's ontologized propositions were representational when asserted, which is doubtful, his ontologized propositions are not essentially representational.

I think Lebens' book should be understood as leveraging MRTJ to solve a contemporary problem, though Lebens' repair may have been of interest to Russell. Giving a metaphysics of meaning was not Russell's concern. This is quite alright, as the MRTJ is free to be leveraged to give a metaphysics of meaning, and so-leveraging the MRTJ is Lebens' stated goal: Lebens aims to revive MRTJ for "*contemporary* philosophers of language" (p. 96, italics added). His book, then, treats a contemporary problem in an illuminating way and, happily, with cognizance of the history of the theory. It is, in short, a rich book for those thinking about the problem of a metaphysics of meaning, and includes much to engage Russell scholars writing on the history of Russell's MRTJ with a view to Russell's problems.

I next briefly summarize the book's specific contents. Lebens' book has three parts: the first two parts are historical, detailing Russell's MRTJ and his subsequent abandonment of it, while the third is avowedly not historical, but a defence and development of Lebens' own MRTJ (pp. 18–19).

Part 1 is three chapters on doctrines adopted by Russell *before* his MRTJ.

Chapter 2 discusses Russell's Moore-led revolt against Bradley's British idealism with the goal of explaining doctrines Russell adopted in the course of his rebellion (p. 23). The five doctrines explained are: (1) *propositional realism*, that is, mind-independent propositions exist; (2) *predicate reference realism*, that is, universals exist and predicates pick out universals; (3) *direct realism*, that is, propositions contain all entities they are about; (4) *linguistic transparency*, that is, all meaningful phrases refer to some mind-independent referent; and (5) *termism*, that is, all entities are terms, meaning that all entities can occur in subject-position in propositions (p. 37).

Chapter 3 then concerns refining doctrine (4) above. It mainly treats a puzzling remark from *My Philosophical Development*, and the three main readings of that remark (p. 52). There is also an explicit connection made between the

notion of an incomplete symbol, the possibility of analyses that eliminate purported terms that pick out entities, and MRTJ (pp. 53–5). It also rightly affirms the importance of the theory of descriptions in "ontological pruning" (p. 54).

Chapter 4 concerns the theory of descriptions. Its main claim is that this theory "is concerned with the *objects of assertion*" and not semantics (p. 60). Lebens makes a nice point about Russell's idea of epistemology and his concern with our access to objects (p. 74). Lebens also usefully distinguishes between two forms of both direct realism and linguistic transparency: they may be applied to objects of assertion, or to semantic values (p. 86).

There is much to like about this chapter, especially Lebens' extension of doctrine (4) to Russell's notion of a logically perfect language (p. 76). I think he is correct in his assessment of the Strawson–Russell debate (§1.5). Lebens errs in suggesting descriptive phrases, on Russell's view, sometimes "will contribute some descriptive content … to the object of assertion" (p. 70). This is a doctrine that Russell is at pains to reject in "On Denoting" (*OD*, p. 423).

Part II is three chapters on the rise, development, and fall of Russell's MRTJ.

The first half of Chapter 5 ("Rise") discusses how MRTJ solves problems presented by the five doctrines Russell adopted after revolting against idealism (listed above). There is a brief discussion of the propositional theory, which is nice chiefly because it serves as a gateway to the literature on that subject. There is also an interesting discussion of what led Russell to turn on objective falsehoods. The second half repeats the claim that MRTJ was developed partly for the idealist revolt and partly by "the desire to give a fundamental account of the metaphysics of meaning" (p. 109). Lebens seems to suggest Russell's MRTJ was to answer the question "What do two people share when they make identical assertions?" (p. 109). I do not see this in the text.

Chapter 6 concerns criticisms of MRTJ from G. F. Stout that spurred its development in 1910–12. As Lebens' tells the story, Stout raises the representation concern (p. 120). In Stout's hands, this takes the form of asking how the MRTJ explains the appearance of a relation relating in a judgment (its being represented as relating) while being the sort of complex entity like a list which does not relate at all (p. 124). Lebens then treats, for instance, Russell's revisions to the MRTJ of his 1912 *Problems*, and Stout's criticisms of *Problems*.[6]

Chapter 7 concerns Wittgenstein's June 1912 criticism of the MRTJ, announced in a letter from Russell to Morrell, and such as led Russell to abandon the 1913 manuscript (p. 131). Lebens does a superb job summarizing the various positions in the debate. No paragraph-long summary of mine will clarify the issue. And this is well and good, because Lebens is not concerned

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[6] Incidentally, if Russell were concerned with giving a metaphysics of meaning, we would expect him to discuss Stout's criticisms of the *Problems* in the 1913 manuscript. But his only references to Stout in the 1913 manuscript concern idealism.

with arriving at a definitive account of what led Russell to abandon the 1913 manuscript (pp. 149–50). This chapter also includes an interesting discussion of MRTJ in the 1918 logical atomism lectures (§2.4) and a discussion of MRTJ's reception in twentieth-century analytic philosophy (§2.5).

I am not convinced by Lebens that Russell's logical forms are a hopeless posit. Lebens says that Russell's logical forms are truth-bearers (p. 143); further, he says a logical form exists only if a non-general fact with that logical form exists (p. 144). Both of these features lead, Lebens argues, to certain flaws. On the first point, I think the story is more complicated: Russell denies that we stand in multiple relations to logical forms, and he describes our relationship to them as a "neutral attitude [with respect to truth and falsity], namely understanding" (*TK*, p. 137). He does elsewhere say a pure form like *something-has-some-relation-to-something* "is a proposition, and is true" (*ibid.*, p. 130). But I would argue this should be read as elliptical for "there is an x and a y and an R such that xRy", as Russell wrote a page earlier. On the second point, Russell denies that logical forms exist only when there exists a non-general fact with that form (*ibid.*, p. 89).

Part III consists of four chapters. This part concerns Lebens' repair to the MRTJ, how his repair enables MRTJ to account for molecular propositions, a detailed explanation of how his proposal accounts for the eleven explananda, and an argument that his proposal fares better than its competitors.

Chapter 8 concerns the standard criticisms of MRTJ and Lebens' response, along with his proposals for repairing MRTJ. Lebens dismisses Wittgenstein-inspired criticisms about category and type constraints and judging nonsense (§8.1), and tackles the Stout-inspired concern about what it is to represent, which Lebens views as more important (p. 179). He says that what makes a judgment representational is the mind's capacity for predication (p. 186). This capacity being taken as primitive, we have a ready explanation for how judgments represent: judgments represent by being predications (§8.2). Lebens says we need an axiomatic theory of predication with axiom schemas specifying that judgments may relate entities in relations of various adicities (p. 185).

Now in taking the mind's capacity to predicate as primitive, Lebens says, "we know how the mind does what it does" (p. 187). One might object that "explaining" representation through primitively understood capacities to predicate leaves the "mystery" unsolved: it leaves unexplained how we have the capacity to predicate, much less what predication is. So it leaves representation unexplained. I do not fault Lebens here: I do not see how to explain our capacity to predicate. So I agree with his strategy, at least given the present state of our knowledge, of taking this capacity as basic, describing it in so far as we can through an axiomatic theory of predication.

Chapter 9 concerns the MRTJ and molecular propositions, and in particular how MRTJ, as a no-propositions theory of propositions, can account for

molecular propositions without an ontology of (atomic) propositions. Lebens first distinguishes molecular propositions formed by joining two atomic propositions with a truth-functional connective (molecularity₁) and those formed by quantifying over an atomic proposition (molecularity₂) (p. 191). I cannot endorse Lebens' account of quantified propositions. He says, "Propositions involving generality really are molecular. They really are constructed out of atomic propositions in successive stages" (p. 204). Yet some logical languages are such that all their well-formed formulas contain only variables, quantifiers, and truth-functional connectives but no constant terms:[7] such logical languages contain no atomic propositions in Lebens' sense, despite his claims to the contrary (pp. 205–6). Now if Lebens means to say what he sometimes does say (p. 204), that we only understand such languages through an understanding of atomic propositions, and in particular the truth-conditions of atomic propositions, then perhaps Lebens is correct. But Lebens is wrong if he means what I think he does mean, that well-formed formulas in all languages arise from atomic propositions by iterations of cognitive acts.

Regarding molecularity₁, Lebens posits various cognitive states of understanding with corresponding states of judgment (pp. 200–1). Here is an example. A conjunctive proposition like (*Fa* and *Gb*) is formed, on Lebens' revised MRTJ, by a conjunctive-judgment, a primitive kind of judgment relating a mind to two conjunctive-understanding states. Its conjunctive-understanding states are primitive mental states that relate a mind to its understanding-states. Understanding-states are a kind of primitive mental state in which a mind is related to the objects *F* and *a* and *G* and *b* that are constituents of the atomic judgments *Fa* and *Gb*.

Lebens' proposal raises at least two issues. The first is historical. Russell himself posits understanding relations in the 1913 manuscript (*TK*, p. 110). Lebens' solution, if adequate, raises the question of why Russell never adopted Lebens' solution when Russell also had understanding relations. Perhaps this is explained by his positing logical forms as constituents of his understanding relations (*TK*, pp. 117–18), a posit Lebens rejects in §7.2.4. Maybe Russell did not see the option Lebens pursues because of his other posits. But there is some story to be told as to why he did not pursue Lebens' view.

The second issue is logical. Lebens posits capacities for predication and various understanding-states as primitives. But it seems our predicational capacities, which he already uses in his account of atomic propositions, could similarly account for molecular₁ propositions without positing primitive understanding-states. On that view molecular₁ propositions are predications just as atomic propositions are, where truth-functional connectives, like *not*, *and*

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[7] MENDELSON, *Introduction to Mathematical Logic* (1997), §6.

and so on, are the predicates in the case of molecular$_1$ propositions.[8] It is unclear whether Lebens would accept this suggestion since he proposes no axiomatic theory of predication, though he says such a theory is necessary. Lebens' primitive cognitive states of, say, conjunctive-understanding are perhaps not explicable in terms of other primitives like predication. Or perhaps Lebens views understanding-states as predications. They certainly are constituents of judgments on his view. A fruitful extension of his book would be, then, to offer an axiomatic theory of predication[9] and to explain how truth-functional connectives are understood. We could then see whether Lebens' view treats molecular$_1$ propositions as predications or not.

Chapter 10 concerns the eleven explananda and how the MRTJ explains or deflates each (p. 215). Two highlights here are an interesting extension of the MRTJ to perception in the form of an Alston-inspired Multiple Relation Theory of Appearances (§10.3), which Lebens endorses (p. 226); and a discussion of the dependence problem (§10.4), with stress on a modal version of that problem in the context of treating explanandum 7, "the ontological foundation of possible worlds" (p. 229). It bears noting that, unlike Russell, Lebens takes for granted that there are modal facts (pp. 242–3).

Chapter 11 concerns mainly the theories of propositions advanced by Jeff King, Scott Soames (with Peter Hanks' view subsumed under Soames' view), and Jeff Speaks. I leave them to answer Lebens' arguments as they like. Lebens also discusses *Principia*'s Appendix B paradox (§11.5) and endorses a theory of types for certain predicates like "… is true" (pp. 278, 280).

In summary, Lebens has demonstrated that more remains to be said about the MRTJ, and he convincingly argues that MRTJ (in some form) was buried before it was dead, even, arguably, by Russell himself.

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[8]   COCCHIARELLA offers such a treatment in "On Predication" (2016), §5.

[9]   Along the lines of COCCHIARELLA, *Formal Ontology* (2007), pp. xvii–xviii.