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Reviewed by Rosalind Carey

Review: *Bertrand Russell and the Nature of Propositions: A History and Defence of the Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement*, by Samuel Lebens

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This is an interesting, faintly subversive book. It describes the background to Russell's multiple relation theory of judgment (MRTJ), and its emergence and demise, but giving that history is not its primary goal. Rather, the goal is to re-engineer the multiple relation theory of judgment while revising how we see its overall nature. On Lebens's revisionist account, *representation*—or more accurately, *using* things *to* represent—underlies the multiple relation theory and Russell's 1903 doctrine of propositions. Lebens is examining the theory of judgment, moreover, in light of a problem in philosophy of language: do propositions have truth conditions, or do acts of belief? Do propositions have meaning and truth conditions, and acts of judging derive truth conditions from the propositions they express, or does it go the other way around? Lebens thinks it goes the other way around. Acts of judging, that is, of predicating, generate propositional content and have truth conditions. He therefore values Russell's multiple relation theory of judgment as providing insight into the issue because it respects the fact that thinking is about things, but that it generates the content thought about.

So, this is a complicated book. In its historical parts, I think that it makes a plausible case for some of its revisionist claims, perhaps more as a retrospective diagnosis of what Russell is facing than as a report of the actual stages of his views on propositions. I note that its treatment of the history is both informed and interesting but necessarily limited in scope by the book's philosophical aim. Philosophically, with respect to revising and extending a multiple relation theory of judgment, there, too, the book makes a case, providing we accept the author's premises and commitments. Lebens makes an effort to introduce readers to the relevant concepts and arguments in philosophy of language, but I sometimes wished for more explanation of the concepts of using, intending, interpreting, representing, picturing, predicating, and about-ness.

In sum, this is an interesting, faintly subversive, complicated book. The book's appeal comes from its subject, but also from the intensity of purpose with which it addresses its interlocutors: past, present, and eternal. It will interest Russell scholars, Wittgenstein scholars, and anyone interested in meaning and representation.

1. The framing question, and the background to the MRTJ (chapters 1–4)

A multiple relation theory of judgment, Lebens says, ought to do more or less what propositions (as complex entities) are supposed to do. He therefore begins by laying out what entity-propositions are supposed to do and what problems any substitute for them must avoid. This is chapter 1. (He eventually has to show that of these desiderata his multiple relation theory meets all it *should* meet, and that of these concerns, that it avoids all it *should* avoid.) After laying out what propositions are supposed to do, he describes the doctrines, such as propositional realism and direct realism, that constitute the philosophical background of that theory of propositions for Moore and Russell. This is chapter 2. In the next two chapters, some of these doctrines are then elaborated in connection with incomplete symbols and the theory of descriptions.

Despite the interesting material in these chapters, I will note only a few points. One of the doctrines laid out in chapter 2 is direct realism: "the doctrine that a proposition contains the very entities it is about and/or invokes as constituents" (34). This, in

connection with his conception of using *things* to represent, is a central concept in the book. Since Lebens is concerned, not with compositional theories of sentence meaning, but with an expression's assertoric content, i.e., "what is *said* in the utterance of that expression" (60), his fourth chapter distinguishes between correspondingly different kinds of direct realism (86). Finally, one of the doctrines endorsed by Russell and Moore in this early period is terminism (that everything can be a term or subject). Lebens continues to accept this doctrine, but thinks the point is not essential since the multiple relation theory can be made to work even without that assumption.

2. The emergence of the MRTJ, and its "representation concern" (chapters 5–6)

In 1903, Russell says that the mind is in direct contact with objective propositions. Propositions containing denoting concepts are about things not contained in the propositions. But, Lebens says, Russell thinks that propositions containing no denoting concepts are about their own constituents (100). To say that propositions are about what they contain means that minds use propositions to represent what they contain.[1] This last claim can be doubted, and the textual evidence is ambiguous, but the philosophical point emerges from thinking about what is implied by holding that propositions are complex extra-mental *objects*. On Lebens's view, an object cannot make *itself* represent; representing comes from the use we make of things. Without an intentional element, and use, there is no reason why states of affairs that contain *x* doing *y* represent *x* doing *y* (100). He says, "the idea was that when we assert a proposition, we *use* it to represent itself" (101). This rather esoteric point constitutes, I think, a diagnosis of what we can now say Russell was doing, and not a description of what,

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[1]Lebens reaffirms that the early Russell used propositions to represent themselves on page 257, note 4, and on page 281, note 4.

at the time, he could say he was doing. It turns on the insight that a state of affairs cannot possess meaning or truth in itself.

Putting the above perspective on hold for the moment, one reason for Russell to move away from propositions comes from his direct realism, i.e., from "the desire to put our minds in contact with the world without any intermediary veils" (110). In 1903, that contact is indirect: a mind stands cognitively related to a proposition, but even when the proposition is "about" its parts (that is, when its parts are not denoting concepts), the person stands related to the proposition and not what the proposition is about. Thus, the proposition stands between the person and what the proposition is about. Russell's move to the multiple relation theory is thus a move to a "purer form" of direct realism, where the veil of the proposition falls away (110). Because the multiple relation theory gets rid of the veil of propositions, "to judge that Desdemona is in love is . . . to stand directly related to her rather than to some complex of which she is a part" (110).

Though Russell's move to the multiple relation theory puts mind in a more active role, it confronts a "representation concern", for in *judging* (*understanding*, etc.) the object-relation has to *appear* to relate. Citing Russell (1910) on how the relation "must be before it [the mind] *as* proceeding from *A* to *B*", Lebens writes: "the phenomenological language is important here. What makes the object terms representational is how they *appear* to us in the act of assertion" (122). He takes G. F. Stout's (1910–11) criticisms of Russell's version of the 1910 theory to reinforce the notion that, "when we judge, we *feel*, . . . , as if we're related to a unity" (123). But "the fact that an *appearance* of a thing would suffice, indicates that what we're after here, isn't fundamentally, a single entity [a proposition] to serve as an object of a belief, but that there should be some *representation* going on" (124).

To meet this concern, Russell tries different strategies. As Lebens explains it, in 1910 the direction of the subordinate relation R (e.g., from *A* to *B*, not *B* to *A*) is not used, as is often said, to disambiguate senses (the so-called narrow direction problem),

but to give an appearance of unity among the object terms (120). In 1912, the directional feature moves to the relation of *judging*. While he approves of placing responsibility for meaning on acts of judging, Lebens thinks this is not enough. Anticipating his own treatment of the theory, he says: "we want to know *how*" judging does what it does (126).

Since Lebens values the multiple relation theory for bringing mind, intention, and use, to bear on a theory of content, he especially values the 1912 version, which makes *judging* crucial to establishing content. In chapter 8 he suggests two ways of adopting the theory. (These ways are suggested by the work of Sainsbury (1996) and MacBride (2013), who do not go on to adopt the theories.) In chapter 9 Lebens embraces an extension of the theory on which molecular propositions are constituted by cognitive acts. Referring there to Stout's remark that Russell's theory of 1912 suggests an idealist doctrine that there are no propositions outside of judgments, and referring to my 2007 suggestion that, for Wittgenstein's taste, Russell's 1912 theory of judgment makes a proposition *too* dependent on a cognitive act, he notes that what is apt to seem like a weakness is the strength of the original version and his extension. Lebens's point is not to disagree with my interpretation of how Wittgenstein may have viewed the 1912 theory (although perhaps he does). Rather, he rejects the notion that dependence of representation and truth on judging is a problem; this dependence is a virtue of the theory of judgment (273).

3. The demise of the MRTJ (chapter 7)

In chapter seven, Lebens turns to why Russell puts aside the *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript (Russell 1984) unfinished, and why he eventually abandons the multiple relation theory. Since his task is not primarily historical, he need only show that whatever concerns might be or have been leveled against Russell's theory are either not his own or can be met. Wittgenstein's objections

may not have been definitive in Russell's abandoning the theory, he says, but he has to address them. To respond to Wittgenstein's objections, he must first say what they are. We know, for example, that Wittgenstein objected that Russell's theory did not prevent nonsense, but it is not clear exactly why it didn't, or in what sense. To clarify the point Lebens distinguishes different kinds of nonsense (category errors, etc.), which are constraints that he later dismisses.

His description of the literature on the demise of Russell's theory is swift and expert, but his description of the nonsense objection raises a question. Wittgenstein says Russell's theory of judgment fails because it permits nonsense. In considering this point, are we supposed to imagine judging, so to speak, emanating from the mind, or are we supposed to imagine what occurs when we read or hear sentences, as you are doing right now? If the former, we can always respond that, after all, people do assert nonsense. This is why Lebens dismisses Wittgenstein's nonsense objection in chapters 1 and 8. But if we're hearing or reading, there may well be "sentences" so lacking in sense that they *cannot* be understood or judged. And a theory of understanding and judging *should* make it clear that a person who hears or reads (e.g.) "Japan celery" cannot understand or judge it. So, as applied to judging *another person's* utterances or sentences, Lebens's rebuttal perhaps fits less well.

Although Russell stops work on his 1913 text before *officially* reaching molecular thought, the way he disambiguates beliefs involving asymmetry, e.g., that *A* is before *B*, makes them molecular, and he cannot analyze the atomic components into their parts or the ambiguity reappears. Lebens points out that Russell also can't use the judging relation to order the elements involved since he "no longer thought that relations (including the *judgment*-relation) relate in any direction at all" (146). Though Russell foresees that molecular propositions may commit him to false atomic parts, he could avoid this by allowing judging once again to order its elements, Lebens says. Lebens employs this

strategy later.

The molecularity issue might bring Russell's work on the *manuscript* to a halt, but it is unlikely to be disastrous for his theory of belief, Lebens says. Given his purpose, Lebens need not explain *why* Russell decided to abandon the multiple relation theory. He thinks that Russell gives up the theory primarily "because he no longer believes that there is a particular thing called the self" (155). Lebens at least "initially" finds this claim "not entirely convincing" because Russell had already abandoned acquaintance with the self and its persistence in time, but the causes, which lie in Russell's "drift away from the spirit of direct realism" in the direction of sense-data theories (154), lie apart from Lebens's purpose with the book.

For the same reason, Lebens need not take a stand on *when* Russell abandoned the theory of judgment. In fact, he thinks that Russell continues to subscribe to the multiple relation theory for some time after the demise of the text (192). In this context, Lebens says that I claim that, at a certain point in 1913, namely, in the "Props" notes, Russell's theory of judgment "seems to be a binary relation" (148). His wording is careful ("seems to be a binary relation") because the point is not clear. So, to clarify: I did not say *judging* is a binary relation. Based on Russell's diagrams, I thought *understanding* might be. I said: "Russell explains *understanding* in these notes in terms of direct perception" (Carey 2007, 102). With respect to *judging*, I said that his diagrams show that he has "bypassed a map . . . of the form of belief for a picture of its correspondence to fact" (105), using representations unlike his earlier "spatial illustrations" (105). What causes confusion is a misquote (mine, not Lebens's).[2] Where Russell says judgment is "still a multiple relation", I typed "still a neutral relation" (98).

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[2]The quote reads: "Judgement involves the *neutral* fact, not the positive or negative fact. The neutral fact has a relation to a positive fact, or to a negative fact. Judgement asserts *one* of these. It will still be a multiple relation, but its terms will not be the same as in my old theory. The neutral fact replaces the *form*" (Russell 1984, 197).

This does not shape my argument. Indeed, the correct quote supports my central argument, which is that "even though he can go no further on the manuscript, Russell doesn't abandon his theory of judgment" and continues "for some time to have faith in his theory of judgment" (95). I therefore share Lebens's view that Russell continues to subscribe to the theory of judgment for several years after 1913. Yet I would now resist putting the question as "did Russell have or not have the theory by . . . ". He did in one sense and did not in another. That a person's belief must have propositional unity *of a sort* comes to seem inevitable, but belief as a dual relation to that content remains unacceptable.

With respect to the 1918 period, Lebens takes Russell to have gained, from "Props", a view of how to sustain the unity of what is believed without implying that it is true. The way he describes the problem seems to imply that, for Russell, *there are* relations, but I think it would be closer to say that, after 1914, Russell has to treat a relation word "*R*" as part of a sentence's built-in instructions as to how to use the names in the sentence to represent. If we look at propositional unity this way, it introduces an element of use compatible with Lebens's thesis, but it places it within how we read sentences. This is important, because acts of beliefs are mostly private but we can only apply truth and falsehood to what is public, and so there has to be an account of how we understand and judge sentences.

4. The philosophical defense of the theory of judgment (chapters 8–11)

In the third and last part of the book, a historical survey is replaced by a philosophical defense of a re-engineered multiple relation theory of judgment. Chapter 8 lists what are, or may have been, Wittgenstein's constraints on a proper theory of belief. They require that it protect significance, avoid category errors and type errors, extend to molecular propositions, and yet involve no extra premises. It then addresses all but the molec-

ularity issue, which is reserved to the next chapter. As noted, Lebens argues that the multiple relation theory needs no apology for permitting categorical nonsense, e.g., nonsense of the form "my toothbrush is trying to kill me", or other kinds of nonsense, since people do make such assertions (as we have daily proof). Moreover, Stout's "representation" concern is more difficult for a revised theory of judgment to meet, and more fundamental, since to solve it is to solve significance concerns (179).

The difficulty is to explain what *judging* is, that representation should occur by its means. Lebens wants to push farther than Russell's 1912 theory and to describe what judgment already does, so that it is neither an extra premise nor an empty assertion on the order of "judging just does represent". Following Sainsbury (1996), he suggests that objects can be used to mean themselves and that, universals, taken as objects, can be used predicatively. We are to regard judging as an act of predicating, and predicating as mentally passing over things and (I think) sorting them. In this sense, predicating, e.g., *blue* to this object, can be right or wrong, and so the truth or falsehood of an act can be determined. But predicating/judging uses objects. Thus, we predicate *love* of Juliet and Romeo by "ordering *love*, Romeo, and Juliet" in our minds (184). The ordering is not pushing objects around or "sticking anything together to create a unified propositional entity" (184). Propositional content comes from an act of predicating/judging.

Lebens writes: "the object-relation doesn't occur as a relating-relation, nor does it occur merely as an object; it appears *predicatively*" (186). Note the word "merely"; as is explained shortly, the object-relation occurs first as an object, and then the mind "*uses its object relation as a predicate*" (187). After 1913, the meaning of these cited sentences would be problematic for Russell. There ceases to be a single meaning to "meaning" or "thinking", such that we can think about particulars and about a relation. Lebens seems to relegate this kind of problem to claims that there are things to which we can't refer, which he thinks are absurd (37),

but Russell's problem is up-stream of this. It means, as he says in "Reply to Criticisms" in his Schilpp volume (1944, 691), that we do not think of *continuity* but of continuous series. Evidently, we only think we can think of object-relations.

Sainsbury's theory has an alternative in MacBride's (2013) analysis. That approach shows that a multiple relation theory of judgment is compatible with disallowing relations to occur as terms in the form of adverbial judging acts, one of which might be rendered "judging *love*-wise". Although MacBride's work shows that on this point, and on the existence of universals, one can "remain neutral" (188), Lebens doesn't embrace that approach; he prefers Sainsbury's, which comes closest to the Russell's philosophical program (189). Thus, a rejection of object-relations and universals is not essential to rehabilitating the multiple relation theory. Lebens says, "As a terminist, a realist about universals, and a direct realist, it makes sense to me to say that when Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, he doesn't just stand related to *D* and *C*—he also stands related to love" (189). Given his tolerance towards relation terms and universals, his own theory is unlike any "modification" Russell had in view after 1913.

5. Molecular judgments and understanding (chapter 9)

One objection to the multiple relation theory is that it cannot account for molecular propositions (including propositions containing quantifiers), but "requires readmitting atomic propositions" (191). Russell's 1913 worry on this score was due to his "eccentric" rejection of the direction of *judging*, Lebens says, and is resolved by reinstating judging's direction (191). But the difficulty remains in another form, for "we feel that when we assert a disjunction, for example, that Ga or Fb, the atomic constituents of that disjunction exist *prior* to the conjunctive act of my asserting the conjunction". That is, "it seems to us that when we

make such a judgment, we stand related to the disjuncts, (*Ga* and *Fb*) not merely to their disjointed parts (*G*, *F*, *a*, *b*)—it is *their* disjunction that we assert." (192).

When he says that this is a problem I put forward in "Wittgenstein's name" (192), Lebens means that I argue that Wittgenstein pressed Russell to address understanding before judgment, to identify something that is understood (to be true in this case, false in that) and judged. This is right, but Lebens's interest in the point is different than mine. It is the *seeming* that concerns him. He has to "guarantee that, in some sense or other, the propositions *Ga* and *Fb* are prior to any act of asserting their disjunction" (199). But he has to do so without admitting atomic propositions, i.e., objective contents existing apart from minds. He meets this new "phenomenological concern" by allowing that atomic "understanding states have to preexist molecular judgments" (202). What is needed are states, arrived at by cognitive acts. On his example (204), a certain mind's understanding of Peter's envy for John consists of a relation of *understanding* between that mind, envy, Peter, and John; in short: $U(m, E, p, j)$. The multiple relation of *understanding*, which relates a mind "in a specific order" to the constituents of the "proposition", also "predicates, for the sake of understanding, its object-relation of the remaining objects in a specific order" (200). For example, you stand related by understanding to objects *G* and *a*, Lebens says, and then "predicate, for the sake of understanding, *G* of *a*", giving rise to your state of understanding (200).

This is where I get stuck. Assuming that "standing related" has the same meaning said of relations as it has said of particulars, how I am to know which to predicate of which? Moreover, complex cases of understanding are said to presuppose atomic states of understanding, which states may be merely dispositional (209). *Being dispositional* cannot imply a kind of latent content, or that would have to represent, but if it is not content, what is it? If it consists of latent behavior awaiting a stimulus, why not shove most of judging and thinking that way, too? In

discussing Sainsbury's theory, Lebens mentions axioms or rules for correctly using known universals. Our knowledge of these rules is problematic for similar reasons.

These concerns aside, given understanding-states and given a cognitive act consisting of understanding alternatives, we understand (e.g.) that either Desdemona loves Cassio or she loves Othello. When we judge this, we apply an act of disjunctive judgment to these alternatives. For, with respect to judging, there are various kinds of acts of judging, and one kind, a disjunctive act, explains how "you can use the understanding states to create the disjunction" (201–02). In this way, states of understanding create the "content" that enters into molecular judgments, but content is not thereby reified; it is a *façon de parler* "cashed out by the multiple relation theory of understanding" (208). Although this means that in judging molecular cases the mind stands related to contents that contain parts, this dilution of "about-ness" (272) merely captures how understanding atomic propositions is presupposed in judging more complex kinds. And making molecular propositions result from mental operations is preferable to admitting logical operators and forms, since its preserves the insight of the original multiple relation theory that "minds are responsible for the genesis of meaning" (210) although truth is determined by fact.

6. Explaining the explananda (chapter 10)

Lebens reminds the reader of the eleven roles propositions are supposed to play (e.g., what is the information content of a certain sentence utterance; what do synonymous sentences share in common, etc.) and describes how his extended theory of judgment can fill those roles. With regard to the first role, what takes the place of "the" object of assertion is an "ordered-many", that is, a plurality that has an order, such as *love*, Romeo, Juliet, and that ordered plurality "only becomes representational when a mind stands related to it, and predicates its first term of the re-

maining two" (217). With regard to how two people's sentences mean the same, the multiple-relation-theorist claims that "two people make the same assertion when they stand judgment-related to the same object-terms in the same order" (218). That is: "two sentences are used to say the same thing if their speakers use these sentences to express that they stand judgement-related to the same objects in the same order" (218).

Lebens regards Russell's theory of judgment and his own version as a kind of proto-picture theory, except that it does not involve a language of ideas, images, or psychical ingredients. He applauds the multiple relation theory as one on which "assertion is a mental act that directly utilizes that which it's about. This act . . . is more basic than languages that use *words* to refer to objects" (220). I think that this consideration is probably what people mean who attribute a *non*-representational view to Russell. We may "express our thoughts to ourselves in a conventional language (of words)", he continues, but, in thinking, we "arrange worldly items in our minds" (220). This shows admirable confidence about the nature of thought. But can we be so sure as to what thinking is like? Besides being much less sure on such points, I admit that Lebens's description of thinking seems alien. What is familiar (to the extent that I trust descriptions of thinking) comes closer to William James's description of understanding as involving "flying leaps" over words, filled out by anticipatory feelings for grammar (James 1890, 264) and images, e.g., of a corner of Newton's periwig (James 1909, 33–34). For the most part, it is noodling. I have zero sense of reaching out to objects that I think about (fortunately). But I do experience "passing over" objects in thought, and ordering them, sometimes obsessively.

With regard to the fourth item—that propositions are truth-bearers—Lebens's position is that only beliefs, or acts of mind, are true or false. Thus, "in a world where no one makes an utterance, thinks a thought, or makes any kind of assertion, there will be no truth. The MRTJ agrees. It is acts of mind, and not abstract propositions, that ultimately bear truth and falsehood" (221). At times Lebens attributes this view to Russell. It applies to 1912, yes, but Russell wavers on the point by 1913. In fact, what to regard as true or false, particular beliefs, or propositions, is a central problem there, and his chapter on truth and falsehood treats these as properties of beliefs *and* propositions (in a sense special to that text) and, derivatively, sentences. As he later says, what we regard as primarily true or false depends on whether we are doing logic or theory of knowledge. I accept this, and I do not see why truth and falsehood cannot be housed in either way, depending on the inquiry. Why not? But I suppose Lebens is concerned with what is the ultimate bearer of truth and falsehood, and not what is convenient to treat as the bearer.

7. The competition, and what has the power to represent (chapter 11)

In the final chapter Lebens reviews some of the alternative strategies posed by interlocutors who share his concern over representation. As he reminds us, he has constantly urged that "the power of the mind to represent things is so much less mysterious—so much less calling out for explanation—than the power of inert, inanimate abstract propositions, to represent the world" (264). He therefore rejects the claim that it is the content of a mental act that is true or false, not mental acts themselves (267). "What we learn when we realize that representation is firmly anchored in *acts* of representation, is that mental acts are indeed the only things that can be, ultimately, true or false" (267). In saying this, Lebens may appear to be talking about a type, but his intention is not to attribute representation, or truth and falsehood, to an "act-type". Thus, against Peter Hanks (2013), Lebens says that the mental act tokens suffice as bearers of truth values; there is no need for act-types to inherit a derivative truth value (268).

The elimination of propositions or types is (I assume) a theory only with respect to *ultimate bearers* of truth: in *applying* "truth"

and "falsehood", it would be inconvenient if only sentences that are believed are true (or false). It would also be tricky to establish correspondence, if dealing with mental acts. But I gather that these issues are not directly relevant to Lebens's point. He wishes to resist the idea, attributed to Scott Soames (2014), that "truth and falsehood are properties of the *content* of the act, but not of the act itself", which falls into the "trap of thinking that you can peel off some abstract entity called a content that has the power to represent all by itself" (267). It could be objected that, in Lebens's case, judging as an act seems to obliterate belief as an attitude. If believing is seen as an attitude, then, in an act of belief, content will seem distinct from the attitude, just because we can hope to find something that verifies the content but won't expect anything to correspond to the attitude.

In closing, I want to mention an area of possible disquiet. In this book, Lebens is doing philosophy of language. Since philosophers of language use the work, or an image of the work, of past philosophers as inspiration for their own ideas, criticisms of historical accuracy brought to bear against them may be off the point. Yet he is also doing history of philosophy, and the doctrines of acquaintance, universals, etc., that he assumes are part of what led to the theory's downfall. To be fair, Lebens does *not* expect the reader to accept a revived theory of judgment that assumes universals and object relations: he offers a choice of theories. Moreover, he is not obliged to think that these issues are debunked, because they were for Russell. But a reader may express a wish that Lebens *had* addressed these issues as well as how we understand sentences. Speaking for myself, I would like him to bring in *more* of the history, and I would like him to talk about understanding *language*. Because I would like to know what he has to say.

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