

# The Coherence Theory of Truth: Russell's Worst Invention?

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Ralph Walker once attributed to Wittgenstein a coherence theory of truth, according to which the truth of a proposition is a matter of its relations, not to an extra-propositional reality, but to other propositions (Walker 1989). Of course, Wittgenstein is not so easily pinned down. We believe, though, that *none* of the philosophers usually labelled 'coherence theorists' actually held the view just described (which is how the coherence theory is nowadays thought of, with coherence understood as something stronger than consistency but weaker than entailment). Here, however, we will argue for a more modest conclusion. Our goal is to show that the coherence theory was the invention of Bertrand Russell and that those he accused of holding the view, now normally thought of as paradigm coherence theorists—the British Idealists—held instead an identity theory of truth. But the fact that prime candidates for coherence theorists are no such thing is more than a mere historical curiosity. Instead, as we shall argue in the final section, it's a sign of something significant, namely, that the coherence theory, when thought through, inevitably emerges as but a subspecies of the identity theory of truth.

## **1. The British Idealists' Theory of Truth**

Whenever the coherence theory is attributed to any real philosopher, this is typically to the British Monistic Idealists Bradley and Joachim, and their American follower Blanshard. Yet, as we will argue, none of these philosophers actually held this view. How, then, did they come to be referred to as coherence theorists, and what did they in fact say about truth?

The *label*, ‘the coherence theory of truth’, seems to have come from Russell. In 1907 he published a seminal article, ‘On the Nature of Truth’<sup>1</sup> which criticized the views expressed in Harold Joachim’s 1906 book, *The Nature of Truth*. In that book Joachim defended metaphysical monism, attacked the correspondence theory of truth and argued that the essence of truth is ‘coherence’. He did not, however, use the label the ‘coherence theory of truth’. In contrast, Russell, although he starts out by designating Joachim’s account as the ‘monistic theory’ soon starts referring to it as a ‘coherence-theory’. One year later G. F. Stout (1908) also used the term ‘coherence’ of monistic idealist views of truth and F. H. Bradley (1908), responding to Stout, then dropped his own vocabulary of ‘system’ and adopted the term ‘coherence’. From that point on, the theory of truth held by the British Idealists came to be referred to as the coherence theory of truth. But it is very important to see that their real theory of truth is not at all what is these days thought of as the coherence theory. We can see this by retracing their arguments.<sup>2</sup>

Take Bradley as an example, since his views inspired those of the others. His thoughts on truth originate in his metaphysics: for him, reality itself is a coherent system. The label ‘coherence’ carries no special weight here; it is just a way of marking the refusal to give even everyday common-sense pluralism any metaphysical significance, while drawing back from a Parmenidean conception of the world as an undifferentiated whole. That is, in Bradley’s view, both everyday thought and extreme pluralist ontologies like Hume’s or Russell’s involve the abstraction of objects and facts from the situations in which they are embedded. His hostility to this abstraction is far-reaching enough to ensure that, according to his philosophical logic, at most one judgment can be true—that which encapsulates

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in the 1906/07 volume of *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. In 1910 he re-published, under the title ‘The Monistic Theory of Truth’, and with only trivial variations, the first two of its original three sections in his much-reprinted collection, *Philosophical Essays*, with the last part dropped and a new essay (Russell 1910c) put in its place. He chose to reprint a large slab of this 1907 essay in his widely read book of 1959, *My Philosophical Development*.

<sup>2</sup> Ayer (1952) also argued that the British Idealists did not hold a coherence theory of truth. Instead, he claimed, the ‘coherence’ label was actually applied to them in virtue of their theory of meaning.

reality in its entirety. He can account for falsehood as a falling short of this vast judgment and hence as an abstraction of part of reality from the whole. That judgment is the least true which is the most distant from the whole of reality.

But the consequences of his ontology are more extreme even than this. The one comprehensive judgment, even if possible, would still fall short. All judgments, in Bradley's view, distort reality by cutting it up into illusory fragments, tearing apart in their expression that which in experience is a unified whole. Accordingly, even this one gigantic all-encompassing judgment, for the very reason that it involves description, will be infected by falsehood unless it ceases altogether to be a judgment, abandoning the predicative and relational machinery of thought. The only way in which it can be adequate in its expression is by taking on the very nature of the reality it is meant to be about; and the only way to do that is by *becoming* that reality. This apparently bizarre claim becomes intelligible if seen as both the most extreme expression of his hostility to abstraction and a reaction to the most fundamental of his objections to the correspondence theory, which is the same as Frege's (1918, 3): that for there to be correspondence rather than identity between judgment and reality, the judgment must differ from reality and to the extent that it differs must distort and so falsify it. In a thoroughgoing monism, thought itself can't stand outside the all-encompassing whole.

Primarily, then, the monistic idealists had a metaphysics that forced them to adopt an *identity theory of truth*; that a truth-bearer can be true only by being identical with reality. And it's important to see that their view is an identity theory, and incompatible with what's standardly understood as a coherence theory. For the latter, as now understood, maintains that truth is a certain sort of relation that holds between truth-bearers (instead of between truth-bearers and reality) and that a truth-bearer is true if and only if it belongs to some specifiably coherent set of truth-bearers. This whole apparatus of terms in relation was anathema to the idealists, so that even in the final coherent system we can't talk of individual truth-bearers making up the system and each bearer being true. Furthermore, since truth is identity with reality, and it is possible to hold this view even if one does not think that reality is a coherent whole (as some pluralists might by, e.g., refusing to draw a distinction between true propositions and

facts), truth is only derivatively a matter of coherence. For the monistic idealists, coherence is part of the nature of truth because on their view truth is identity with reality and reality is coherent. It is this fact that explains why Joachim, and later Blanshard in *The Nature of Thought*, slip into saying that the nature of truth is coherence.

## 2. Russell and ‘The Coherence Theory’

We have seen how the British Idealists’ identity theory came to be labelled the ‘coherence theory’ of truth. But how did we come to identify their position with what we now think of as the coherence theory of truth? The answer, again, lies with Russell.

In Part I of his 1907 paper, Russell sets out the coherence theory and argues against it. The most influential aspect of Russell’s attack has been his objection that “it may be perfectly possible to construct a coherent whole of *false* propositions in which ‘Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder’ would find a place”<sup>3</sup>. Russell concludes that, from what the coherence theory tells us, this proposition would be true. In raising this as an objection to the ‘coherence theory of truth’, Russell implies that on this view the truth of a proposition consists in its being a member of some ‘coherent’ set of propositions. Thus, with this objection he, in effect, created the coherence theory as we now understand it. Moreover, since he held himself out to be criticizing the view of the British Idealists, he also implied that they were committed to this absurd view. The influence of his paper can be seen 20 years later in Ramsey’s discussion of the coherence theory, in which he says of it that “it is very easy to reduce to absurdity and after Mr Russell’s amusing essay on ‘The Monistic Theory of Truth’ it is difficult to see how anyone can still cling to it”<sup>4</sup>.

Russell’s 1907 paper is interesting in this context not only because it invents the coherence theory of truth and its now standard ‘refutation’, but also because it contains the first, tentative, version of Russell’s famous multiple relation theory of judgment. (We may call this the 1907 version,

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<sup>3</sup> Russell 1907, 136. It would have been well known to Russell’s audience that Bishop Stubbs was a highly respectable Anglican divine.

<sup>4</sup> Ramsey 1927, 25. Ramsey was referring to the 1910 version of Russell’s original paper.

to distinguish it from the second and non-tentative version of 1910, and from Russell's 1912 and 1913 versions, both of them modifications of the 1910 theory in response to objections.) This co-incidence isn't mere coincidence, as we can see by looking at the dialectic of Russell's argument.

Having attacked the coherence theory in Part I, he argues in Part II against a certain view of relations, namely "that relations are always grounded in the nature of their terms" (28), and alleges that this view is "an axiom", "the axiom of internal relations", upon which is based the metaphysics in which the coherence theory is embedded. In Part III, he sketches "the kind of theory, as to the nature of truth, which results from rejection of the axiom" (loc. cit.).

The way in which he introduces this new theory is striking. His rejection of the view that "experiencing makes a difference to the facts" (44) is, he says, a consequence of the rejection of the axiom of internal relations. He goes on:

But from the point of view of the theory of truth, it is a very important consequence, since it sets facts and our knowledge of them in two different spheres, and leaves the facts completely independent of our knowledge. (45)

He assumes that this new theory of truth is going to require a theory of judgment—indeed, his writings in this period typically treat the two topics side-by-side—and he begins with the account of judgment that he had embraced in *The Principles of Mathematics*: judgment is a binary relation between one object, a mind, and one other, a proposition, understood as a unified entity not dependent on any mind for its existence. And he adds to that theory of judgment a variant of the theory of truth from the same work, what is now often called 'primitivism'; this variant moves the primitive property of truth from facts, where it had resided in 1903, to beliefs: "Truth, then, we might suppose, is the quality of beliefs which have facts for their objects, and falsehood is the quality of other beliefs" (45).

This variant is an anticipation of Russell's 1912 defense of the multiple relation theory of judgment against an objection from Stout, moving the property of relations he called 'sense' from the judged relation to the relation of judging. Although we might think of this account of truth as a form of primitivism, Russell himself thought it "a form of the correspondence theory" (loc. cit.). But he is uneasy about it, as the phrase "we might

suppose” indicates, because of a worry he had expressed as early as 1904 and which he immediately goes on to explain here (*loc. cit.*), that it is hard to confine falsehood merely to beliefs, so that the variant risks collapsing into the original account, which he now finds problematic:

But this simple view is rather difficult to defend against objections of various kinds, tending to show that there are not only mistaken beliefs, but also non-facts, which are the objectively false objects of mistaken beliefs.

And in this context, as a provisional solution, he comes up with the initial version of the multiple relation theory of judgment, which he thinks may enable him to retain the correspondence theory of truth while evading the implausibility of objective falsehoods. But, he says: “As between the above two views of truth, I do not at present see how to decide” (49).

To sum up, then: what we see emerging here, all at once, are the following. 1) The coherence theory of truth, pinned on the British Idealists and presented as readily refutable. 2) The correspondence theory of truth, seemingly thought of as essential to the idea that “facts [are] completely independent of our knowledge” (45). 3) The multiple relation theory of judgment, whose role at this stage is to preserve the correspondence theory of truth from problems about falsehood.

### **3. From Coherence to Identity**

We have seen that the ‘coherence theory’ label was first provided by Russell in attempting to respond to the position held by the British Idealists, and Russell’s labelling and redescription of their position helped contribute to the construction of the coherence theory straw man which then took on a life of its own. But if Russell is to blame for creating the coherence theory of truth, his paper also contains the resources for removing that theory from its place of prominence. For if we follow through one of the more insightful criticisms he made of the theory he described, we can begin to see why the coherence theory leads inevitably to the identity theory of truth, and is in fact merely a subspecies of it.

However unfair it was to its intended targets, Joachim and Bradley, the following observation from Russell is acute:

And the objection to the coherence-theory lies in this, that it presupposes a more usual meaning of truth and falsehood in constructing its coherent whole, and that this more usual meaning, though indispensable to the theory, cannot be explained by means of the theory. (Russell 1907, 33; 1910b, 136.)

The acuteness of this observation lies in the fact that behind much discussion of the coherence theory seems to be the thought that, for the coherentist, there is something beyond the realm of judgment that we should like to talk about, but (perhaps because of epistemic problems), we can't manage it, or at least can't get it to function in a truth-making role, so we'll ignore it and instead confine ourselves to the realm of what we judge. But this coherentist rhetoric betrays a double-mindedness, since it wants to both keep the world beyond the realm of judgment *and* ignore it as irrelevant to truth. That is, coherentists seem to want to adopt what Putnam has called the internalist perspective, and yet the images of confinement suggest that there is, after all, a world beyond the coherent set of propositions.

This double-mindedness is hardly surprising. For consider the following *correspondence intuition* (sometimes, the *correspondence platitude*).

*Correspondence Intuition:* If something is true, it's true *because* of the way the world is.

Unlike the coherence theory, this thesis seems to survive a form of Moore's Open Question argument, which might be put like this: "I know that what you say corresponds to reality, but is it true?"—as opposed to, "I know that what you say belongs to the preferred set of judgments, but is it (or any of them) true?" What are would-be coherence theorists to say about this deeply embedded intuition? Should they accept or reject it? While it may seem odd to suppose that anyone opposed to the correspondence theory would accept the correspondence intuition, even as a surface platitude, historically it has been quite common. In fact, it is because they accepted the correspondence intuition that Bradley and Bosanquet have been mistaken for correspondence theorists—Bosanquet complained about this (1911, 263), as did Bradley.<sup>5</sup> But both acceptance and rejection pose awkward consequences for those inclined to coherentism but not idealism: ac-

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<sup>5</sup> Deflationists, too, sometimes accept the correspondence intuition—see Horwich 1998, 104-5, for example.

cepting it seems to lead them directly to a form of idealism; rejecting it can look like a *reductio*.

The correspondence intuition displays a binary picture underlying much of the discussion of truth. If we put on one side complicating considerations arising from epistemological concerns, the picture involves a distinction between what we talk about, on the one hand, and what we say about it on the other. It appears time and again in different guises: the distinction between the realm of reference and the realm of sense; between facts and propositions; between truth-makers and truth-bearers; and so on. This picture sits very naturally with the correspondence theory of truth, but it's still influencing even those who have indulged in coherentist talk. Hence their double-mindedness.

And of course once one exposes this kind of double-mindedness, and instead takes the coherence theory completely seriously by insisting that our truth-makers belong in the realm of sense, then the other side of the binary divide really does drop out as irrelevant. All we are left with is the world of judgments: it is some preferred set in this world that we are *really* talking about, and which constitutes reality. Thus similarly acute, even though Russell himself underestimates its significance, is his observation from earlier in the same paper:

The view that truth is one may be called "logical monism"; it is, of course, closely connected with ontological monism, *i.e.*, the doctrine that Reality is one. (Russell 1907, 28; 1910b, 131.)

And now it's clear that coherence is neither here nor there. For a judgment to be true is just for it to belong to the set. That is the minimal sense in which Reality is one. And that is an identity theory of truth, available (on different grounds) to monists and pluralists alike.

So, when thought through, the coherence theory is but one special case of the identity theory of truth: it is not, therefore, the main rival to the correspondence theory that it is usually taken to be.<sup>6</sup> But, as a species of identity theory, the coherence theory, with its idealist and monist metaphysics, is particularly hard even to comprehend. And it carries with it the

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<sup>6</sup> One can see this at work in McDowell 1994, who is sympathetic to the internalist perspective but wary of the double-mindedness we have spoken of. As a result, he too comes to rest with an identity theory of truth.



problem that led Russell to abandon his 1903 binary relation theory of judgment for the multiple relation theory. That problem is, giving a sensible account of falsehood. Such a view seems unlikely to have attracted many good philosophers in twentieth-century analytic philosophy. As we mentioned at the beginning, we think it in fact attracted none. But that is an argument for another paper.

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