Bertrand Russell’s Analysis - Solving the Problematic Proposition

Bertrand Russell’s ‘transformative method of analysis’ has been presented as a change from linguistic to a logical form. This useful notion of transformative analysis neglects some aspects of Russellian transformation. However, in Russell’s article “On Denoting” (1905) and in his manuscript “On Fundamentals” (1905) the definition of transformation should be seen as translating of paradoxes, contradictions and other problematic propositions.

Peter Hacker and Michael Beaney have presented the distinctions between different stages of the analysis. According to Beaney, in the beginning of the twentieth century we can make a distinction between three modes of analysis: decompositional, transformative and regressive. Decomposition means to split the whole into parts. This whole can be either a sentence or a proposition. Regressive analysis is going backwards to the more fundamental level of the premises behind the conclusion.

Transformative method of analysis is the focus of this paper, because its role is important in the development of analytic philosophy. Beaney suggests, that “... it is the role played by interpretive or transformative analysis that is distinctive of analytic philosophy, or at least of one central strand in analytic philosophy, and that it was the interpretive mode of analysis that came of age in early twentieth century philosophy.” If we take this stand, we have to emphasize the historical features that characterize the transformation in the case of each philosopher. The Russellian transformation goes with the general definition of transformative analysis: the starting point is changed to something different.

I prefer to deal with one type of analysis, the transformative analysis. I will concentrate in one philosopher from the beginning of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell, and two texts of Russell from 1905 that are “On Denoting” (OD) and “On fundamentals” (OF). Firstly, I note how in the process of transformation a philosopher solves problematic propositions or sentences. Secondly, I use some quotations from OD and OF, which show different kinds of problematic propositions that Russell was dealing with.

Transformation of the paradoxical proposition

The distinction between different modes of analysis gives a more detailed position for researching different philosophers in the beginning of the twentieth century. Transformative or interpretive analysis especially captures the idea that the starting point of analysis is translated to a different form. To answer the question of analysis in 1905 we have to see Russell’s larger project in 1903-1910.

Bertrand Russell was trying to solve different types of paradoxes, or more broadly, problematic propositions or sentences between 1903 and 1910. The idea that analysis is solving the paradox comes to the center of Russell’s philosophy in

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1 Russell himself did not speak about “transformation”. See for example Beaney 2007, 199-200. See also: Hylton 2005, 205.
4 Beaney 2007, 198.
5 Beaney 2007, 198-199.


*Principia Mathematica* (1910). Gregory Landini has discussed more in depth the different types of paradoxes that Russell had between this period. Also Russell’s “Appendix B” paradox was known since 1901, and is presented in *Principles of Mathematics*. In 1905, in OF Russell is considering the “liar paradox” that lead to the contradiction. Solving the paradox was the main line of Russell’s philosophy for a long period. In 1905, Russell was developing his tools and concepts for dealing with problematic propositions. I understand these problematic propositions as different ways to start the process of analysis.

**Starting point of analysis**

In most of Russell’s examples in OD and in OF, the starting point of analysis is something that is somehow unclear, puzzling, or paradoxical - or it seems to be so. When presenting the problems for the theory of denoting in OD, Russell explicitly emphasizes how a logical theory needs to deal with “as many puzzles as possible”.

According to Russell, this kind of philosophical testing has as important part of philosophy as experiments in physical science. The question of solving the paradox can already here be seen broadening to a question of analysis that deals with something problematic. Analysis as “interpretation”, “elimination”, or “transformation” is needed whenever something puzzling is presented. In the same way Peter Hylton considers the cases in which we have to apply Russellian analysis of definite - or indefinite - descriptions. Hylton thinks that we have to apply the theory of definite description in all cases, when we doubt the rightness of the propositions we have. I say that Russell’s transformative analysis is applied always when the proposition is problematic in different ways. For Russell’s logical theory, the paradoxical propositions are the crucial aim of analysis. In the case of his linguistic notions, the more broadly linguistic or semantic confusions are brought to the stage of analysis.

Not all the starting points of analysis are exactly paradoxical for Russell, but also propositions of other kinds. In 1905, Russell deals with least the three kinds of problematic propositions: 1) Contradictory proposition: definite description ‘The King of France is bald’ and “The King of France is not bald” (OD). 2) Paradoxical proposition: liar paradox (OF). 3) Ambiguous proposition: indefinite description “x is a man” (OD).

I separate the starting point of analysis in four different categories. First of these starting points is the logical problem of Russell’s analysis in the period between 1903 and 1910: the paradoxical proposition. The paradox is a claim that leads to a contradiction. Here paradox and contradiction differ from each other: in contradiction we have two propositions that contradict with each other. The liar paradox can be presented as the sentence: (S) This sentence is false. If S is true, then S is false. The liar paradox is not explicitly true or false, it leads to a circular situation. In OD, Russell refers to the liar paradox of Epimedes as “the statement I am now making is false”.

Three other of these distinctions are based on the different kinds of starting points of analysis. Three of them are listed in the beginning of the “On Denoting”. There are

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6 Beaney 2007, 197.
8 Hylton 2005, 207.
9 OD, 403.
three different cases of denoting phrases. They are classified by their form. 1) A phrase may be denoting, and at the same time not denoting anything. 2) A phrase may be denoting to one definite object, for example “the present president of Italy”. 3) A phrase may denote ambiguously; “a man” denotes not many men, but an ambiguous man.

This way we have two problematic phrases 1 and 3 that can be analyzed. In OF, the role of paradoxical expression is on the stage in form of the liar paradox: In this case, Russell is dealing with paradoxical proposition that leads to a contradiction. If the sentence “the statement I am now making is false” is true, it is false. In some cases he just presents a contradictory proposition or an unclear linguistic example. On the basis of these starting points of analysis, there usually is a problematic proposition, or a couple of propositions, which can be of the following kinds:

1) Paradoxical proposition that leads to a contradiction.
2) Two contradictory propositions: “The king of France is bald” and “The king of France is not bald”.
3) Univocal proposition: “The new president of USA in 2009 studied in Harvard”.
4) Ambiguous proposition: a woman.

In OD, the importance of puzzles and paradoxes is presented by Russell several times by mentioning contradictions, puzzles, and the law of contradiction. First, when he says: “This is in itself a difficult view; but the chief objection is that such objects, admittedly, are apt to infringe the law of contradiction. It is contended, for example, that the existent present King of France exists, and also does not exist; that the round square is round and also not round; etc. But this is intolerable; and if any theory can be found to avoid this result, it is surely to be preferred.”. Here, Russell gives line for his theory: a phrase must be either true or false. In Russell’s analysis the interpretation or translation obeys “the law of contradiction”. Russell is trying to solve or present the phrase without contradiction.

**Conclusion**

My claim was the following: Russell’s analysis is a method for solving the problematic propositions, or sentences. The core of these propositions is the paradox that leads to a contradiction. The paradox is a proposition, or propositions, that lead to a contradiction.

Russell was trying to solve different types of paradoxes, and when he invented techniques for this in 1905, he also developed model of analysis that was meant to deal with different kinds of paradoxes. Russell himself speaks about paradoxes explicitly in OF. The other starting points of analysis appear in OD and OF.

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10 OD, 415.
11 OD, 415.
12 OF 401/75.
13 OD 418.
Literature:


