

**Early Russell on Being**  
**or**  
**“Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus”**

1. **Bertrand Russell:** Russell **did everything**. He was a philosopher, logician, mathematician, and public advocate for reform. He received the Nobel Prize for literature, and came up with the peace symbol. Russell is considered a founding figure in mathematical logic, and of what we call “analytic philosophy”, the sort of philosophy done in most English-speaking universities today.

Despite his fame, Russell was **constantly changing his mind**. The piece you have read is from Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics*, (1903).

2. **Being vs. existence:** We have two different ways in English to say approximately the same thing:

- (1) There is no Santa Claus.
- (2) Santa Claus does not exist.

One might think that (1) and (2) say more or less the same thing, or at least that they are equivalent: (1) is true if and only if (2) is true. But Russell thinks there are two ideas here:

- (a) **Being:** conveyed by “there is”.
- (b) **Existence:** conveyed by “exists”.

He thinks (1) is false, but (2) is true. According to Russell, the correct answer to “Is there a Santa Claus?” is, “Yes, Virginia, there *is* a Santa Claus.”

More generally, Russell thinks that:

- (i) Some things have being and exist. (*e.g.* Joe Biden);
- (ii) Some things have being and do not exist. (*e.g.* Santa Claus);
- (iii) There is no third category. [**BLACKBOARD**]: two-by-two table.

3. **Technical Terminology:**

- (a) **proposition:** a *proposition* is just a claim. See, *e.g.* the Gettysburg Address.

- (b) **term:** a *term* is an individual that can be spoken of. For instance, Santa Claus is a term, because Santa Claus can be spoken of using the name ‘Santa Claus’.  
 (We need to distinguish here between the *word*, and the thing which the word is used to speak of.) [BLACKBOARD]:  
 ‘Joe Biden’ vs. Joe Biden. (Pile up differences, *e.g.*, “The word just came out of my mouth, but the president did not.”)

4. **Russell’s two claims:**

5. “‘A is not’ must be either false or meaningless”: That is, you can’t truly say that a particular individual lacks being. Here’s the entirety of Russell’s argument:

“A is not” must always be either false or meaningless. For if *A* were nothing, it could not be said not to be; “A is not” implies that there is a term *A* whose being is denied, and hence that *A* is. Thus, unless “A is not” be an empty sound, it must be false – whatever *A* may be, it certainly is.

Russell’s “*A*” here is a stand-in for any expression that can be used to talk about an individual. For example: “Santa Claus”, “that thing”, “The Queen of England”, “The present King of France”, “My mother”, *etc.*

Russell’s argument seems to be something like the following, using (1) instead of “A is not”

**The Semantic Argument:**

- (a) If (1) is meaningful, then it is true only if there is an individual that “Santa Claus” is used to talk about that does not have being.
- (b) “Santa Claus” is used to talk about Santa Claus.
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- (c) If (1) is meaningful, then it is true only if there is an individual that is Santa Claus and that does not have being.
- (d) Santa Claus has being if and only if there is an individual that is Santa Claus.
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- (e) if (1) is meaningful, then it is false.

### The Semantic Argument and Ontology:

If the Semantic Argument is any good, then our ontology is going to be as **liberal** as one could imagine it being: the universe is just **chock full** of things. The answer to any ontological question is always “Yes! Yes!”

It’s easy to see this for ontological questions regarding individuals. Russell’s semantic argument implies, for instance

(3) God cannot be said not to be.

So much for thousands of years of theological dispute!

### Problems for the Semantic Argument:

We have plenty of reasons for thinking that there is a problem with the Semantic Argument and arguments just like it:

1. For “**Santa Claus**”: We **know** that the conclusion is false: there is no such thing as Santa Claus.
2. For “**the greatest prime number**”: Not only do we know that the conclusion is false, we can **prove** it.
3. For “**the round square**”: The truth of
  - (4) There is such a thing as the round square implies
  - (5) Something is both round and square.But this is a **contradiction**!

Russell might respond to the objection (a) by saying that though (1) is, strictly speaking, false, it is easily confused with (2), which is perfectly true.

Similarly, he might respond to the objection (b) by arguing that the mathematical principles we think proves that there is no greatest prime show only that there is no **existent** greatest prime.

But the putative distinction between existence and Being doesn’t help with objection (c), since no contradictions can be true.

Note: This shows that there is something wrong with the Semantic Argument. It does not show **exactly where** the flaw in the argument is.