

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). The next thing we will read is an eloquent rebuttal of Russell, penned in 1919. The author of the rebuttal is Russell.

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.* Barack Obama);
- (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]: ‘Barack Obama’ vs. Barack Obama. (Pile up differences, *e.g.*, “The word just came out of my mouth, but the president did not.”)

4. Russell’s two claims:

- (a) **“Being belongs to whatever can be counted.”**: There-is-a claims like (1), claims that impute being, answer a how-many question, and any positive answer to a how-many question implies a there-is-a (or “there-are”) claim.
SLOGAN: Ontology is counting.

“Is there?”	“How many?”
There is a planet larger than Jupiter	The number of planets larger than Jupiter is greater than 0
There are infinitely many primes	The number of primes is infinite
There is no Zeus	The number of things that are Zeus is 0.

Notice also that “some” and “no” can be used to answer how-many questions. Thus, (1) seems to be equivalent to both:

- (3) Nothing is Santa Claus
 (4) The number of things that are Santa Claus is 0
 and
 (5) There is an even prime number
 (6) Some number is both even and prime
 (7) The number of even primes is greater than 0

seem to be more or less equivalent. This, I think explains the inference from *being something* to having being that Russell is working with in this passage:

If *A* be any term that can be counted as one, it is plain that *A* is something, and therefore that *A* is.

Indeed, the most natural way to answer a how-many question in a complete sentence is to use a there-is-a (or a there-are) claim:

- (8) How many branches of the U.S. government are there?
- (9) There are 3 branches of the U.S. government.

This provides one argument for there being a Santa Claus

Consider the claim

- (10) Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny are two mythical creatures.

(10) is true. This gives us:

The Counting Argument:

- i. Santa Claus can be counted (by the fact that (10) is true).
- ii. Being belongs to whatever can be counted.

iii. Being belongs to Santa Claus. (In English: There is a Santa Claus.)

(The same goes for the Easter Bunny!)

INTERLUDE: A Problem for the Counting Argument:

(10) seems to be true. But suppose God took a census of every individual in the entire universe. Every atom, every artifact, every fingernail clipping, every sparrow, and every number would appear on His list. But neither Santa Claus nor the Easter Bunny would appear on his list. After all, *they're mythical*. Since God has a complete inventory of all the things in the world, his census would reveal:

- (11) The number of individuals in the universe who are Santa Claus is 0.

On Russell's views regarding the equivalence between there-is claims and counting claims, this implies

- (12) There is no Santa Claus.

Thus, the Counting Argument has a false conclusion. Further, we can see **why** it fails: the first premise, that Santa Claus can be counted, turns out to be false.

A Puzzle:

This leaves us with a **residual puzzle**: Both (10) and

(11) seem to be true. And yet they seem to contradict one another. What gives?

This happens all over the place. You learned in your social studies class that there are many Greek gods. You learned in your science classes that there are no Greek gods (lightning and the motions of the sun and moon have natural explanations). It seems as if your social studies and science teachers cannot both be right. So what's the truth of the matter? How many Greek gods are there?

- (b) **“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:

- i. 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.
- ii. “Santa Claus” is used to talk about Santa Claus.

iii. If (1) is meaningful, then it is true only if there is an individual that is Santa Claus and that does not have being.

iv. Santa Claus has being if and only if there is an individual that is Santa Claus.

v. if (1) is meaningful, then it is false.

5. **So Much for Being, What's Existence?** I'm not going to try to gloss Russell's theory of existence; and I'm not going to

try to say what his interpretation of (2) would be. You can imagine several different alternatives, *e.g.*:

- (a) *To exist is to be located in space or time.*
- (b) *To exist is to be able to cause things to happen and to be affected by them.*
- (c) *To exist is to be made of matter.*

You could extend the list, presumably. Notice that Santa Claus would not exist under any of these proposals. Notice also that they don't come to the same thing. For example:

- The equator is located in space but can't cause anything to happen.
- Gravitational fields cause things to happen, but they're not made of matter. (As far as I know.)

But I want to keep our focus on Being, since that's what ontology is concerned with.

6. 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

(13) God cannot be said not to be.

So much for thousands of years of theological dispute!

But it also works for general questions. [**Pick a volunteer/victim**].

Here's a general question about a certain category of things, rather than a question about whether any particular thing "has being".

(14) Are there any felony convictions in your past?

A "Yes" answer follows from

(15) *Your most recent felony conviction* cannot be said not to be

together with the fact that, if there is any such thing as your most recent felony conviction, then there is a felony conviction in your past.

More generally, Russell's Semantic Argument suggests a method for ontology: To find out what there is, find out what linguistic expressions might be used to talk about something. Those linguistic expressions cannot fail to refer to something. **You can lift your ontology straight off the forms of language.**

7. 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:

- (a) For “**Santa Claus**”: We **know** that the conclusion is false: there is no such thing as Santa Claus.
- (b) For “**the greatest prime number**”: Not only do we know that the conclusion is false, we can **prove** it.
- (c) For “**the round square**”: The truth of
 - (16) There is such a thing as the round squareimplies
 - (17) 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.

HOMEWORK: Try in about 100 words to say exactly what the flaw in Russell's Semantic Argument is: Which premise(s) and/or step(s) in the reasoning are incorrect, and why?