Phil 445 Session 2 — Six Confusing Quirks in Russell

1. Russell sometimes says “ambiguous descriptions” for what we (and he in other places) call “indefinite descriptions.” These descriptions needn’t be (and nor does he think they are) what contemporary theorists mean by “ambiguous.”

2. Russell sometimes uses “name/proper name” in a very specific way. In this sense, names have a syntax and semantics like constants or unbound variables in a (traditional, non-free) logic, and their meaning is whatever object they stand for. Here is what Russell says:
    - “a name is a simple symbol whose meaning is [an individual or particular]” (IMP p. 173)
    - “it directly designat[es] an individual which is its meaning, and [has] this meaning in its own right, independently of the meaning of all other words” (IMP p. 174)
    - proper names are “words which do not assign a property to an object, but merely and solely name it” (KAKD p. 121)
    - he speaks of names “being used…*as* names,” or “directly, merely to indicate what we are speaking about” (IMP p. 175)
    - this is “the direct use which [a proper name] always wishes to have, as simply standing for a certain object” (KAKD p. 114)

    Let’s call names in the sense described here **logically proper names** (this is a label Russell uses elsewhere; in our texts he at one point calls them “strictly proper names,” KAKD p. 212).

    Russell’s official view is that there are very few examples of these. What we ordinarily call “names/proper names” in English are mostly *not* logically proper names (IMP pp. 174-5, 178; KAKD pp. 114, 123). Russell says the only clear examples of logically proper names are “I” and “this/that [sense-datum]” (IMP p. 178; KAKD p. 121). At one point he also allows that Bismarck may have used “Bismarck” as a logically proper name for himself (KAKD p. 114).

    But obscuring this is Russell’s practice of often using “name/proper name” not in that strict sense, but instead in a more relaxed sense, that includes **everything we’d ordinarily call a proper name**. For example, this would include our own use of “Bismarck” to refer to the historic statesman. Since Russell thinks that these ordinary proper names are not really logically proper names, it sure would have helped if he had been more explicit about when he was using “name” in its stricter vs ordinary senses.

3. Adding more smoke to the fire is that Russell sometimes *pretends*, for expository purposes, that names like “Jones,” “Socrates,” and “Scott” are logically proper names (IMP pp. 168, 172-5; KAKD p. 123), even though his official view is that they are not.

    Arrgh. Thanks Russell.

4. Russell uses quotation in a non-modern way. When contemporary theorists are being careful (which is not always), they'd say that "Snow is white" is always a sentence, not the content of an utterance or judgment. The latter might be written as *Snow is white* or just, that snow is white. Russell on the other hand writes like this:

   > A judgment such as "this is before that"… Thus we must suppose that we are acquainted with the meaning of "before," and not merely with instances of it. (KAKD p. 112)

   The first quoted expression here designates not a sentence but instead the content of a judgment; while the second quote does designate a linguistic expression, the word "before," the kind of thing that has meaning.

5. Russell often uses "proposition" to refer to what we'd call a declarative sentence. For example:
   - "We mean by a 'proposition' primarily a form of words which expresses what is either true or false" (IMP p. 155)
   - he talks of "descriptive phrases occurring in a proposition" (KAKD p. 128)

   But he also has a notion of proposition that he employs when talking about mental relations like judging and supposing. Propositions in this sense are the kinds of things that we sometimes know. See for example:
   - "the proposition 'the author of Waverley was a novelist' was known to people who did not know that 'the author of Waverley' denoted Scott" (KAKD p. 122; this also illustrates Russell's shifting use of quotes)
   - he talks of "a proposition in whose verbal expression [a] word occurs" (KAKD p. 126); that is, propositions aren't themselves words but are what's expressed by words

   I'll aim never to use "proposition" to designate sentences, but only for the non-linguistic contents that are expressed by sentences, and are what can we judge, suppose, and know.

6. How is Russell thinking of these non-linguistic propositions? Here there's a bit of awkwardness, in that in these texts Russell describes a theory of judging (and supposing) he holds, and argued for elsewhere, that make it unclear whether there's anything he officially recognizes that *would be* a non-linguistic proposition.

   Russell does talk about being aware of "complexes," such as my seeing the sun or being acquainted with something (KAKD p. 110), or one thing's being before something else (pp. 111-12). These sound something like non-linguistic propositions. But actually, they correspond to what contemporaries would call *facts* or *existing states of affairs*. Propositions should also be capable of being false. Russell doesn't think there can be any complex corresponding to a false judgment.

   Instead, Russell thinks of judging and supposing as "many-term relations" between a mind and several other relata. If you judge that a loves b, that's a relation between (i) a subject, (ii) a, (iii) the loving relation, and (iv) b (see KAKD pp. 117-18). Russell *doesn't*

think there's any complex consisting just of a, loving, and b which is *part of* your judging. Instead, he interprets "understanding the proposition that a loves b" as meaning standing in the supposing relation to a, loving, and b.

Some contemporary views of propositions, on the other hand, *do* think of judging and supposing as relations to a structured complex consisting of a, loving, and b. What's more, they call these complexes "Russellian propositions." I don't know whether Russell goes in for such things elsewhere in his work; but he doesn't do so in these texts.

Regarding logically proper names, then, the way Russell should officially state his view is that the object named is a constituent of one's *judging* or *supposing*. The judging and supposing are fact-complexes that really exist and in which the subject is related to various objects and properties/relations. This is the way Russell mostly does talk. A contemporary who believes in structured Russellian propositions, on the other hand, would say instead that the object named is a constituent of *the proposition that* one judges or supposes. Russell also sometimes talks of (non-linguistic) propositions having objects named as constituents (KAKD pp. 117, 121, 125-6; IMP pp. 168, 170-71). But he'll have to regard that as loose talk. Officially, his view of judging and supposing doesn't work that way.

For our purposes we can ignore all this. We're not going to engage with the debate between contemporaries who think there's a structured complex containing just a, loving, and b, that your judging relates you to, even when a doesn't love b; and Russell who thinks there isn't.