

B. Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918) ¹

5. GENERAL PROPOSITIONS AND EXISTENCE

I am going to speak today about general propositions and existence. The two subjects really belong together; they are the same topic, although it might not have seemed so at the first glance. The propositions and facts that I have been talking about hitherto have all been such as involved only perfectly definite particulars, or relations, or qualities, or things of that sort, never involved the sort of indefinite things one alludes to by such

words as “all”, “some”, “a”, “any”, and it is propositions and facts of that sort that I am coming on to today.

Really all the propositions of that sort that I mean to talk of today collect themselves into two groups—the first that are about “all”, and the second that are about “some”. These two sorts belong together; they are each other’s negations. If you say, for instance, “All men are mortal”, that is the negative of “Some men are not mortal”. In regard to general propositions, the distinction of affirmative and negative is arbitrary. Whether you are going to regard the propositions about “all” as the affirmative ones and the propositions about “some” as the negative ones, or vice versa, is purely a matter of taste. For example, if I say “I met no one as I came along”, that, on the face of it, you would think is a negative proposition. Of course, that is really a proposition about “all”, i.e. “All men are among those whom I did not meet”. If, on the other hand, I say “I met a man as I came along”, that would strike you as affirmative, whereas it is the negative of “All men are among those I did not meet as I came along”. If you consider such propositions as “All men are mortal” and “Some men are not mortal”, you might say it was more natural to take the general propositions as the affirmative and the existence-propositions as the negative, but, simply because it is quite arbitrary which one is to choose, it is better to forget these words and to speak only of general propositions and propositions asserting existence. All general propositions deny the existence of something or other. If you say “All men are mortal”, that denies the existence of an immortal man, and so on.

I want to say emphatically that general propositions are to be interpreted as not involving existence. When I say, for instance, “All Greeks are men”, I do not want you to suppose that that implies that there are Greeks. It is to be considered emphatically as not implying that. That would have to be added as a separate proposition. If you want to interpret it in that sense,

you will have to add the further statement “and there are Greeks”. That is for purposes of practical convenience. If you include the fact that there are Greeks, you are rolling two propositions into one, and it causes unnecessary confusion in your logic, because the sorts of propositions that you want are those that do assert the existence of something and general propositions which do not assert existence. If it happened that there were no Greeks, both the proposition that “All Greeks are men” and the proposition that “No Greeks are men” would be true. The proposition “No Greeks are men” is, of course, the proposition “All Greeks are not-men”. Both propositions will be true simultaneously if it happens that there are no Greeks. All statements about all the members of a class that has no members are true, because the contradictory of any general statement does assert existence and is therefore false in this case. This notion, of course, of general propositions not involving existence is one which is not in the traditional doctrine of the syllogism. In the traditional doctrine of the syllogism, it was assumed that when you have such a statement as “All Greeks are men”, that implies that there are Greeks, and this produced fallacies. For instance, “All chimeras are animals, and all chimeras breathe flame, therefore some animals breathe flame.” This is a syllogism in Darapti, but that mood of the syllogism is fallacious, as this instance shows. That was a point, by the way, which had a certain historical interest, because it impeded Leibniz in his attempts to construct a mathematical logic. He was always engaged in trying to construct such a mathematical logic as we have now, or rather such a one as Boole constructed, and he was always failing because of his respect for Aristotle. Whenever he invented a really good system, as he did several times, it always brought out that such moods as Darapti are fallacious. If you say “All A is B and all A is C, therefore some B is C”—if you say this you incur a fallacy, but he could not bring himself to believe that it was fallacious, so

he began again. That shows you that you should not have too much respect for distinguished men.⁶

⁶ Cf. Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz*.