

## Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting”

-Arguably, the most historically important phil language paper (vs. Quine’s “Two Dogs”)

### Part I: Intro Material

Denoting Phrases: defined by their *form* (because all involve quantification in LF?)

- (1) Empty phrases, e.g., ‘the present King of France’.
- (2) Singular term phrases: ‘the current U.S. President’
- (3) Ambiguous ones: ‘a man’ denotes not men but an “ambiguous” (arbitrary) man.

### Acquaintance vs. Knowledge About

-*Acquaintance* is when we know “things we have presentations of,” i.e., objects of perception and “in thought, ... objects of a more abstract logical character” (p. 230).

-*Knowledge About* (a.k.a. “knowledge by description”) is when we know things that “we only reach by denoting phrases,” e.g., the center of mass of the solar system (p. 230).

### Russell’s Theory of Denoting Phrases

The Case of Definite Descriptions: (Denoting phrases beginning with ‘the’)

‘ $x$  is the father of Charles II’ means “It is not always false of  $x$  that ‘ $x$  begat Charles II & if  $y$  begat Charles II,  $y = x$ ’ is always true of  $y$ .”

*Result for Empty Definite Descriptions*: If there is no  $x = y$  which meets the description, then the sentence is always false. Thus, ‘The present king of France is bald’ is false.

### Part II: Other Views Suck

#### Critique of Meinong

“[Meinongian] 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” (p. 232)

#### Critique of Frege:

For Russell’s Frege: “ ‘the center of mass of the solar system at the beginning of the twentieth century’ has the solar system itself as a constituent of its *meaning*; yet since its *denotation* is a single point, the denotation has no constituents.

*Dumb Objection*: ‘the King of France is bald’ has a meaning but no denotation. “Hence one would suppose that ‘the King of France is bald’ ought to be nonsense; but it is not nonsense, since it is plainly false” (ibid.)

*Faulty but Not Dumb Objection*: ‘If  $u$  is a unit class, the  $u$  is a  $u$ .’ This is necessarily true, yet “ ‘the  $u$ ’ is a denoting phrase, and it is the denotation, not the meaning, that is said to be a  $u$ . Now if  $u$  is not a unit class, ‘the  $u$ ’ seems to denote nothing; hence our proposition would seem to become nonsense” (ibid.)

*Legitimate though Not Knock-Down Objection*: Russell’s Frege: ‘the King of France’ denotes the null class. Russell “this procedure, though it may not lead to actual logical error, is plainly artificial, and does not give an exact analysis of the matter” (p. 233)

**The Data to Accommodate:**

- (1) *The Substitution Puzzle*: It is possible for (i) to be true yet (ii) false:
  - (i) George wants to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverly*.
  - (ii) George wants to know whether Scott was Scott.
- (2) *Semantic Presupposition [sic]*: Either ‘the PKF is bald’ or ‘the PKF is not bald’ is true. But the PKF doesn’t occur in the list of bald things, nor of non-bald things.
- (3) *Negative Existentials*: If  $A = B$ , then ‘the difference between A and B does not exist’ is true. But the denoting phrase is empty, so it is false on Russell’s view.

Other issues:

“there must be a logical relation involved [between meaning and denotation], which we express by saying that the meaning denotes the denotation. But...we cannot succeed in both preserving the connection of meaning and denotation and preventing them from being one and the same” (p. 234)

*The Infamous “Gray’s Elegy” Passage* (p. 234, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1<sup>st</sup> column and onward)  
Ted’s guess: Russell wants to talk of the meaning of ‘Cicero’ when he uses that term, but using that term results in talk about the denotation, *Cicero*, the guy. Moreover, ‘the meaning of Cicero’ is no good, since Cicero (the guy) doesn’t have a linguistic meaning. So it seems to talk of the meaning, we must use the denoting phrase ‘the meaning of ‘Cicero’’, yet that’s also problematic for Russell, since the relation between ‘Cicero’ and Cicero “remains wholly mysterious” (ibid.) Furthermore: Cicero is a constituent of some propositions, but the meaning of ‘Cicero’ is also relevant to individuating those propositions. For when (i) is true and (ii) is false, that means two different propositions are involved; “hence, the meaning of ‘the author of *Waverly* must be relevant as well as the denotation” (p. 235).

**Russell’s Theory to the Rescue**

Say that ‘C’ mentions an expression (apart from its meaning), and C is its denotation. Russell’s view is that a definite description ‘the author of *Waverly*’ *doesn’t have its own meaning*, though it occurs in meaningful sentences. In particular: ‘Scott is the author of *Waverly*’ means “one and only one  $x$  is an author of *Waverly*, and that  $x = \text{Scott}$ .”

The Substitutivity Puzzle is resolved by noting that since ‘the author of *Waverly*’ doesn’t have its own meaning and ‘Scott’ does, so they can’t be intersubstituted. Relatedly, existential generalization does not license the inference from (i) to:

(iii) There is an  $x = \text{Scott}$  such that George wished to know whether  $x = \text{Scott}$ .

After all, existential generalization is defined only on meaningful terms. It’s a good thing too, since if (i) did entail (iii), (i) would also entail (iv) (since (iii) entails (iv)):

(iv) Scott is such that George wished to know whether  $\text{Scott} = \text{Scott}$ .

Yet (i) does not entail (iv). For (a) and (iv) relate George to different propositions.

*Primary and Secondary Uses*

In the preceding, we read (i) as expressing (a):

- (a) George wants to know whether there is one and only one author of *Waverley* & whether he is Scott.

However, there’s another way of reading (i):

- (b) One and only one guy wrote *Waverley* and George wants to know whether Scott is *that guy*.

And (b) indeed entails (iv). But Russell is ok with that since (b) does not have George related to a *proposition*, but rather to a *guy*. For (b) says there's this guy who authored *Waverley*, and George wants to know whether *that guy* = Scott. And here it *does* follow that George wants to know whether *Scott* = Scott, if *that guy* happens to be Scott.

Semantic Presupposition [sic]

'The PKF is bald' is false, since there isn't a PKF. Whereas, 'The PKF is not bald' is ambiguous. It could mean either (I), which is false, or (II), which is true:

- (I) One and only one  $x$  is a PKF and is not bald.
- (II) It is false that one and only one  $x$  is a PKF and is bald.

Russell says that 'the PKF' is "primary" when the sentence is read as (I), and "secondary" if it is read as (II).

Negative Existentials:

Suppose 'the difference between A and B does not exist' is true. It's true for Russell b/c it means "It's not the case that one and only one  $x$  is a difference between A and B." We account for 'Apollo does not exist' by reading 'Apollo' as "the Sun God." Thus we escape Meinong's Jungle.

## Russell, “Descriptions”

### Indefinite Descriptions

Suppose ‘I met a man’ is true, and suppose the man was Jones. Still, ‘I met a man’ is not equivalent to ‘I met Jones’, since ‘I met a man but it wasn’t Jones’ is consistent.

With empty indefinites as in ‘I met a unicorn’, no unicorn is a constituent of the proposition; in its place is a *concept*.

*On Meinong* “there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn that zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology” (p. 240).

“What exists in heraldry is not an animal, made of flesh and blood... What exists is a picture, or a description in words” (ibid.)

*Negative Existentials*: “when ‘x’ is a description, ‘x is unreal’ or ‘x does not exist’ is not nonsense, but is always significant and sometimes true.”

*Applying the lesson to Indefinites*: ‘I met a man’ is analyzed so that ‘a man’ is not a denoting phrase, but rather as ‘There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is a man & I met  $x$ .’”

### ‘Is’ of identity vs. of predication:

‘Socrates is human’ uses ‘is’ as a copula; ‘Socrates is a man’ uses ‘is’ to mean ‘=’.

“It is a disgrace to the human race that it has chosen to employ the same word ‘is’ for these two entirely different ideas” (p. 241)

### Definite descriptions:

Indefinites cannot be defined in isolation (since ‘a man’ doesn’t denote). But the same holds of definite descriptions. Also, contrast with names: “A name is a simple symbol whose meaning is something that can only occur as subject, i.e., something of the kind that we defined as an ‘individual’ or a ‘particular.’ And a ‘simple’ symbol is one which has no parts that are symbols” (p. 242)

*Qualifier*: “If...whatever *seems* to be an ‘individual’ is really capable of further analysis, we shall have to content ourselves with what may be called ‘relative individuals’” (ibid.)

### Substitution:

In talking of a proposition, we cannot substitute co-referring terms and still be talking of the same proposition. E.g., ‘Scott is the author of *Waverley*’, ‘Scott is Scott’

*Objection*: Yet ‘Scott is Scott’ is of the same form as ‘Scott is Sir Walter’.

*Reply*: If ‘Scott is Sir Walter’ means “the person named ‘Scott’ = the person named ‘Sir Walter’,” then the names are descriptive. But if the latter description isn’t implied in ‘Scott = Scott’, we have distinct propositions. However: “so long as we are using names *as* names, whether we say ‘Scott’ or whether we say ‘Sir Walter’ is as irrelevant to what

we are asserting as whether we speak English or French. Thus so long as names are used as names, ‘Scott is Sir Walter’ is the same trivial proposition as ‘Scott is Scott’” (p. 243)

*Claim:* You cannot infer that ‘the author of *Waverley* = the author of *Waverley*’ without further premises, unlike ‘Scott = Scott’.

*Argument No. 1:* For “if we substitute a name for ‘the author of *Waverley*’ in a proposition, the proposition we obtain is a different one... Thus from the fact that all propositions of the form ‘ $x = x$ ’ are true, we cannot infer...” (ibid.)  
[Ted asks: By parity of reasoning, wouldn’t this also show that ‘Scott = Scott’ is false?]

*Argument No. 2:* “propositions of the form ‘the so-and-so is the so-and-so’ are not always true: it is necessary that the so-and-so should *exist*” Thus it’s false that the PKF = the PKF, or that the round square = the round square. [Ted asks the same question.]

*Finally Russell Remembers his Real Argument:* “when we substitute a description the result is not a value of the propositional function” (ibid.)

#### Defining Definite Descriptions:

“The only thing that distinguishes ‘the so-and-so’ from ‘a so-and-so’ is the implication of uniqueness” (ibid.) ‘The author of *Waverley* was Scotch’ is analyzed into three claims:

- (1) At least one person wrote *Waverley*,
- (2) At most one person wrote *Waverley*,
- (3) Whoever wrote *Waverley* was Scotch.

*Equivalently?* “There is a term  $c$  such that ‘ $x$  wrote *Waverley*’ is true when  $x$  is  $c$  and is false when  $x$  is not  $c$ .” Also, “There is a term  $c$  such that ‘ $c$  wrote *Waverley*’ is always equivalent to ‘ $x$  is  $c$ ’” (p. 244)

‘The author of *Waverley* exists’ is true iff:

- (a) ‘ $x$  wrote *Waverley*’ and ‘ $x$  is  $c$ ’ are equivalent for all values of  $x$ , and
- (b) ‘ $x$  is  $c$ ’ is sometimes true.

*Equivalently:* “ ‘The term satisfying the function  $\Phi x$  exists’ means: ‘There is a term  $c$  such that  $\Phi x$  is always equivalent to ‘ $x$  is  $c$ ’ ” (ibid.)

#### Epistemic Matters:

We can have lots of knowledge concerning the so-and-so without knowing any proposition of the form “ $x$  is the so-and-so,” where “ $x$ ” is a proper name, as with the perpetrator of a crime.

‘Homer’ isn’t a name but a description. Otherwise, we couldn’t significantly inquire into whether Homer existed (since if it were a name, the question would already be settled).

*WTF?:* “The proposition ‘the so-and-so exists’ is significant, whether true or false, but if  $a$  is the so-and-so (where “ $a$ ” is a name), the words ‘ $a$  exists’ are meaningless. For if ‘ $a$ ’ is a name, it *must* name something: what does not name anything is not a name, and therefore, if intended to be a name, is a symbol devoid of meaning” (ibid.)