

Russell and Strawson on the Nature of Reference

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Russell "On Denoting"

For Russell, a denoting phrase is any phrase (other than a proper name) that can stand as the grammatical subject of a sentence – e.g., "the author of *Waverley*," "the King of France," "a man," "some man," "every man," "the center of mass of the solar system at the first instant of the twentieth century," "the revolution of the earth round the sun," "the revolution of the sun round the earth," etc. (93). Russell distinguishes three types of denoting phrases: (1) a denoting phrase that does not denote anything ("the present King of France"); (2) a denoting phrase that denotes one definite object ("the present Queen of England"); and (3) a denoting phrase that denotes ambiguously ("a man") (93). The first two types of denoting phrases come in for special attention in Russell's essay.

Throughout "On Denoting" (1905), Russell's analysis of sentences containing denoting phrases is guided by the general principle "that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning" (94). Thus, sentences containing denoting phrases are not themselves propositions, but "verbal expressions" of complex propositions that are either true or false. (A meaningful proposition, for Russell, is one that is either true or false.)

Russell introduces a method for reducing statements containing denoting phrases to proposition forms in which the denoting phrases do not occur. Hence, "I met a man" is interpreted to mean "'I met x, and x is human' is not always false;" "All men are mortal" is an expression for the conditional proposition "'If x is human, then x is mortal' is always true;" and so on (95).

Russell is particularly interested in statements that contain *definite descriptions* as denoting phrases, i.e., denoting phrases beginning with "the" and that indicate uniqueness. He considers the statement "The father of Charles II was executed." Since "the" indicates uniqueness, there must be one and only one "father of Charles II." Thus, the statement "The father of Charles II was executed" is an expression of the following complex proposition:

1. Charles II had a father;
2. Charles II had one and only one father;
3. Charles II's father was executed.

In Russell's terms, "It is not always false of x that x beget Charles II and that x was executed and that 'if y beget Charles II, y is identical with x' is always true of y" (96). This proposition may be symbolized as follows:

$$\exists x[(Fx \ \& \ \forall y(Fy \rightarrow y = x)) \ \& \ Ex]$$

If there is one and only one "father of Charles II," and if he was executed, then the proposition is true; if either there is no father of Charles II or there is more than one, then the proposition is false (following the rule of conjunction) since "the" dictates a unique denotation. Whether x was executed is a further question to be determined after the first two conditions are satisfied.

Russell presents this approach to denoting as an improvement over the theories of Meinong and Frege, neither of which can be easily and sensibly applied to denoting phrases that do not denote anything (e.g., "The King of France is bald"). Meinong regards such phrases as objects which do not subsist. This view, according to Russell, violates the law of non-contradiction. It requires us to say that "the existent King of France exists, and also does not exist" (96). Frege establishes artificial conventions according to which "'the King of France,' is to denote the null-class; 'the only son of Mr. So-and-so' (who has a fine family of ten), is to denote the class of all his sons; and so on" (98). Russell rejects Frege's approach, not because it ends in logical error, but because it "is plainly artificial, and does not give an exact analysis" of denoting phrases that do not denote (98).

Russell's Puzzles

"A logical theory," Russell write, "may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science" (98). He formulates three puzzles by which his theory of denotation might be tested. Russell's general strategy in approaching these puzzles is based on the method for reducing statements containing denoting phrases that was outlined above: he analyzes sentences containing (sometimes troublesome) denoting phrases into more complex but more explicit sentences in which the (sometimes troublesome) phrases do not occur.

(1) Russell's first puzzle is the following: "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" seems to be a statement of identity; i.e., "whatever is true of one is true of the other" (98). However, the statement seems to inform us concerning both "Scott" and "the author of *Waverley*." The statement does not appear to be a mere tautology. How can this be explained?

Russell attempts to solve this puzzle by showing that "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" is not really a statement of identity. He interprets the statement as follows: "It is not always false of x that x wrote *Waverley*, that it is always true of y that if y wrote *Waverley* y is identical with x, and that Scott is identical with x" (101); i.e.,

$$\exists x[(Wx \ \& \ \forall y(Wy \rightarrow y = x)) \ \& \ Sx]$$

Thus, Russell reduces an apparent statement of identity to a proposition which is not a statement of identity. Russell's restatement of "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" "does

not contain any constituent 'the author of *Waverley*' for which we could substitute 'Scott' (101). Therefore, "Scott is the author of *Waverley*," when interpreted in the context of the full proposition that it expresses, is seen to be an informative statement rather than a statement of identity.

(2) Russell states the second puzzle as follows: According to the law of excluded middle, either "The King of France is bald" or "The King of France is not bald" must be true. "Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list" (98). What's happening here?

Russell solves this puzzle via his distinction between *primary and secondary occurrences* of denoting phrases. The puzzle involves the requirement (based on the law of excluded middle) that either "The King of France is bald" or "The King of France is not bald" must be true. Russell interprets the first statement to mean "There is one and only one King of France and he is bald." Here, the denoting phrase, "The King of France," has primary occurrence since it is asserted that there is "an entity which is now King of France," i.e., the assertion commits one to the existential implication of the denoting phrase. Since there is in fact no King of France, it follows that there is no King of France who has the property baldness or any other property. This is the case because the proposition in question,

$$\exists x[(Kx \ \& \ \forall y(Ky \rightarrow y = x)) \ \& \ Bx],$$

is a conjunction of three statements at least one of which is false. Thus, "The King of France is bald" is false.

It is also the case that "The King of France is not bald" is false if the denoting phrase is interpreted as having primary occurrence: "There exists one and only one King of France and he is not bald," i.e.,

$$\exists x[(Kx \ \& \ \forall y(Ky \rightarrow y = x)) \ \& \ \sim Bx]$$

Once again, existential commitment is made to a denoting phrase that denotes nothing.

However, we have not yet escaped the difficulty posed by Russell's second puzzle. To do so, we must show that "The King of France is not bald" can be interpreted in such a way as to express a true proposition. "The King of France is not bald" must be restated so as to present the secondary occurrence of the denoting phrase. Thus: "It is not the case there is one and only one King of France who is bald," i.e.,

$$\sim \exists x[(Kx \ \& \ \forall y(Ky \rightarrow y = x)) \ \& \ Bx]$$

This proposition is true, and our problem is solved (102-103).

Russell summarizes this analysis as follows:

That is, "the King of France is not bald" is false if the occurrence of "the King of France" is *primary*, and true if it is *secondary*. Thus, all propositions in which "the King of France" has a primary occurrence are false; the denials of such propositions are true, but in them "the King of France" has a secondary occurrence. Thus we escape the [Hegelian] conclusion that the King of France has a wig. (103)

(3) The third puzzle arises from the question, "...how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?" (99). For example, we can say "A differs from B," and if this is the case, then the statement is true and denotes a difference between A and B. But how is it possible to say "A is not different from B" when the difference in question is admittedly a non-entity? To make this clear, Russell restates the latter proposition as follows: "the difference between A and B does not subsist" (98). This proposition seems to reify a non-entity; denial of being becomes an affirmation of non-being – a denoting phrase without denotation (98-99).

Once again, the primary-secondary occurrence distinction rescues us from difficulty. If a denoting phrase without denotation "has a primary occurrence, the proposition containing the occurrence is false; if the occurrence is secondary, the proposition may be true" (103). Thus, where A and B do not differ, the proposition "There is one and only one entity which is the difference between A and B and which does not subsist" is false (primary occurrence); but the proposition "It is not the case that there is one and only one entity which is the difference between A and B and which subsists" is true (secondary occurrence).

Russell Sustained?

If it is true that a logical theory's validity may be tested by the theory's capacity for solving puzzles, as Russell suggests, then it would appear that Russell's theory of denoting has been confirmed in the above analysis of logical difficulties. But let us see what Peter Strawson has to say about Russell's approach

Strawson "On Referring"

In "On Referring" (1957), Strawson is most interested in denoting expressions that have "uniquely referring use" – i.e., uses of expressions that refer to particular persons, places, things, and so forth (105-106). This class of expressions includes the type of referring phrase discussed by Russell, namely, definite descriptions. It is Strawson's intention to show that Russell's Theory of Descriptions (one application of which is contained in "On Denoting") contains "some functional mistakes" (106).

Strawson begins by examining Russell's treatment of sentences containing references that refer to nothing. How, in Russell's terms, can such sentences be significant (or meaningful)? Since, for Russell, significance and meaning are properties of propositions that can be shown to be either true or false, sentences containing non-referring

references must be reducible to true or false propositions. In Russell's approach to denotation, sentences of the form "The King of France is wise, bald, or whatever" appear grammatically to be subject-predicate sentences. However, there is a difference between grammatical and logical subject-predicate sentences; and sentences containing references that refer to nothing are "not logically...subject-predicate sentence[s] at all" (Strawson 108). Actually, according to Russell, such sentences are expressions of complex existential propositions. Thus, these sentences must be restated "in a logically appropriate grammatical form" so as to eliminate their "deceptive similarity" to sentences that express subject-predicate propositions (Strawson 108).

The implications of Russell's approach to sentences containing non-referring references are, according to Strawson, as follows: (1) Such sentences are not really subject-predicate sentences. (2) If "there are any sentences which are genuinely of the subject-predicate form," then "there is something referred to by the logical (and grammatical) subject." (3) There are genuine subject-predicate sentences (Strawson 108). Strawson disagrees with all three of these implications of Russell's theory.

The third implication listed above involves, says Strawson, Russell's notion of "logically proper names." These names are the only genuine subjects of genuine subject-predicate sentences, and they designate "some single object." The meaning of a logically proper name "just is the individual object which the expression designates" (Strawson 108). The notion of the logically proper name is, in Strawson's view, mythical. There are no logically proper names since all referring expressions (including such expressions as "this" or "that") can be used by different people at different times to refer to different things (the problem of egocentricity). Thus, if we were to accept Russell's definition of a genuine subject-predicate sentence, then we would have to deny the possibility of such sentences; for Russell's definition of a genuine sentence is based on his myth of the logically proper name (Strawson 108-109).

Strawson also denies Russell's contention that a genuine subject-predicate sentence must refer to some object and consequently rejects the idea that statements of the form "The King of France is wise" are not actually subject-predicate sentences. Strawson draws the following distinctions which, he argues, Russell does not recognize:

Sentences		Expressions
Transcends use and utterance; a type that may be used in different contexts	Type	Transcends use and utterance; a type that may be used in different contexts
Application of type to particular situations to make true or false assertions	Use	Application of type to particular situations for purpose of referring
May be written or spoken; may be many utterances of single use.	Utterance	May be written or spoken; may be many utterances of single use.

Thus, if the sentence-type "The King of France is wise" were used in the 16th century (whether uttered by one or many persons), then it would be either true or false. However, if the same sentence-type, and the expression-type it contains, were used in

the 20th century, then the assertion would be neither true nor false and the expression-use would not refer (Strawson 110-112).

But is the latter usage meaningless? For Russell, it is not meaningless since, on his theory, it may be reduced to a complex proposition that is either true or false. For Strawson, it makes no sense to ask whether "The King of France is wise" is meaningless or not. Why does he take this position? Meaning, according to Strawson, is not the function of a particular use of a sentence or expression but of the sentence or expression as such.

To give the meaning of an expression...is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to...particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions (112).

Thus, "The King of France is wise" is neither meaningful nor meaningless; it is a usage that violates the general directions for the use of the sentence-type and expression-type in question.

Strawson goes on to argue that Russell "confused meaning with mentioning" (i.e., referring) and consequently "thought that if there were any expressions having a uniquely referring use, which were what they seemed (i.e., logical subjects) and not something else in disguise, their meaning must *be* the particular object which they were used to refer to" (113). According to Strawson, Russell was unable to see the real nature of the meaning of uniquely referring uses of expressions. The "meaning of an expression," Strawson writes, "is not the set of things or the single thing it may correctly be used to refer to; the meaning is the set of rules, habits, conventions for its use in referring" (113). The question of the significance (or meaning) of a sentence or expression has nothing to do with particular *uses* (which may be true or false, or which may refer or not refer); the meaning of a sentence- or expression-type is to be found in the rules for using the type in question.

In Strawson's view, then, Russell has made two true and two false statements about sentences containing references that refer to nothing (e.g., "The King of France is wise"). The true statements are:

1. The sentence is significant.
2. The uttering of the sentence would be "a true assertion only if there in fact at present existed one and only one King of France, and if he were wise" (Strawson 114).

Russell's false statements are:

1. The present utterance of the sentence must be either true or false.
2. Such an utterance would be the assertion of the present existence of one and only one King of France.

Let us look at Strawson's analysis of what he calls Russell's false statements concerning sentences of the form "The King of France is wise." According to Strawson, the question of the truth or falsity of such a sentence-use "does not arise" (115). The statement is neither true nor false. This is not to say that the sentence (as distinguished from its use) is meaningless or insignificant; for the rules for using a sentence-type are not touched by incorrect, or "secondary," applications of the type. (Strawson characterizes intentional misuses of a sentence- or expression-type, e.g., as in a play, as "secondary" uses.) We should not call the sentence in question false but should point out that the particular use of the sentence is either incorrect or "secondary" (114-116).

Strawson also attacks Russell's contention that such sentences as "The King of France is wise" constitute assertions of the existence of the object, person, or place referred to (in this case, "The King of France"). Strawson attempts to distinguish *implication* from both *assertion* and *entailment*. The statement in question, "The King of France is wise," may *imply* (in some special sense which Strawson does not make explicit) the fulfillment of Russell's existential conditions, namely, that there is one and only one "King of France who is wise;" but the statement does not *assert* "that those conditions are fulfilled." Nor does the utterance of the sentence in question *entail* "a uniquely existential assertion" (116). "It is," writes Strawson,

a part of the significance of expressions of the kind I am discussing that they can be used, in an immense variety of contexts, to make unique references. It is not part of their significance to assert that they are being so used or that the conditions of their being so used are fulfilled (117-118).

And again: "We do not, and we cannot, while referring, attain the point of complete explicitness at which the referring function is no longer performed" (118).

The point of this criticism is difficult to ascertain. It is, on the one hand, certainly the case that in using a sentence such as "The King of France is wise" we do not explicitly assert the existence of one and only one King of France. On the other hand, I do not see how this is a devastating criticism of Russell's approach to such sentences. The whole point of Russell's method of reduction, it would appear, is to make explicit that which is implicit in a statement such as "The King of France is wise." Russell, I think, has appreciated the fact that such expressions merely imply the fulfillment of the relevant existential conditions; and he has attempted to elucidate (perhaps too explicitly for Strawson's tastes) the nature of the implication(s) in question. Further, Russell would agree with Strawson's argument that "We do not, and we cannot, *while referring* [my italics], attain the point of complete explicitness at which the referring function is no longer performed;" but we can, according to Russell's theory, attain such explicitness through interpretation of referring expressions *after* they have been uttered. That which is made explicit is what Strawson would call an "implication" (or perhaps "presupposition") but what, for Russell, is an *implicit assertion*. There seems to be no contradiction between implication and assertion, although there is, as Strawson points out, a distinction; and that distinction is one that Russell notices.

Conclusion

Now where do we stand? Strawson's criticism of Russell's doctrine of logically proper names is well taken, and Russell himself admits that the problem of egocentricity remains a problem for his Theory of Descriptions (see "Mr. Strawson on Referring" [1957] 127-129). I am also in agreement with Strawson's argument that "The King of France is wise" is a genuine subject-predicate sentence-type and that the sentence-type does not lose its meaning when used incorrectly. Russell's insistence that such statements must be reducible to propositions that are either true or false is logical Puritanism and does not take into account what Strawson has called "secondary uses" (aesthetic uses) of sentences. Meaning, e.g., aesthetic meaning, may be defined in terms other than truth and falsity (aesthetic function, poetic contest, dramatic theme, etc.), and Strawson's concept of meaning allows greater flexibility of definition than does Russell's.

However, Strawson's attack on Russell is not entirely adequate. It is conceivable that there are instances in which the statement "The King of France is wise" might be made seriously, i.e., the speaker might really *believe* what he says. We could, as Strawson suggests, point out to him that he is violating the rules for the usage of the sentence in question; but we would not convince him of our point unless we could prove to him that the King of France does not exist. This suggests that there is indeed an implicit assertion of the existence of the King of France in the statement "The King of France is wise" when that statement is offered seriously as a statement of fact (see above on implicit assertion). Under such circumstances, Russell's method of reduction might be *apropos*.