

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*

[Handout #14]

Bertrand Russell: On Denoting/Descriptions

Professor JeeLoo Liu

§ Main Goals:

1. **To show that both Frege's and Meinong's theories are inadequate.**
2. **To defend Russell's own theory:**
 - (i) We must abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases.
 - (ii) Denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in which they occur has a meaning. [Meaning should be assigned to the whole sentence, not to the denoting phrases themselves.]
3. **To explain the philosophical consequences of his theory.**

___ Existence was his main concern. He wants to avoid making ontological commitment to non-existent things.

On Hamlet:

There is only one world, the "real" world: Shakespeare's imagination is part of it, and the thoughts that he had in writing Hamlet are real. So are the thoughts that we have in reading the play. But it is of the very essence of fiction that only the thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers are real, and that there is not, in addition to them, an objective Hamlet.

The sense of reality is vital in logic, and whoever juggles with it by pretending that Hamlet has another kind of reality is doing a disservice to thought. A robust sense of reality is necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects.

§ I. Terminology

[denoting phrase]:

___ a phrase is denoting solely in virtue of its form.

(1) a phrase may be denoting, and yet not denote anything

___ e.g. 'the present King of France'

(2) a phrase may denote one definite object

___ e.g. 'the present King of England'

(3) a phrase may denote ambiguously

___ e.g. 'a man' denotes not many men, but an ambiguous man

[Knowledge by acquaintance] and [knowledge by descriptions]:

___ the distinction between the things we have direct presentations of (not based on reasoning from knowledge of other truths), and the things we only reach by denoting phrases. In the former knowledge, object's existence is guaranteed, while in the latter, it is not.

§ II. Russell's theory on Denoting

___ I use 'C(x)' to mean a proposition in which x is a constituent, where x, the variable, is essentially and wholly undetermined.

C(everything) means 'C(x) is always true';

C (nothing) means "'C(x) is false" is always true';

C (something) means 'It is false that "C(x) is false" is always true'.

§ III. The Problem of Empty Denotation

Q: What happens when the thing denoted does not exist?

___ e.g. 'the present King of France', 'the round square'

(1) Meinong's Theory:

___ Any grammatically correct denoting phrase is standing for an object. Such objects do not subsist, but they are supposed to be objects.

*** Russell's Criticisms:**

___ **Violating the law of contradiction:** The chief objection is that such objects 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. **But this is intolerable;** and if any theory can be found to avoid this result, it is surely to be preferred.

___ **Our robust sense of reality** prevents us from making ontological commitment to nonexistent things (unicorns, golden mountains, round squares...) when we translate natural language to logic.

(2) Frege's Theory:

___ There are two elements in a denoting phrase: meaning (sense) and denotation (reference).

___ A sentence expresses a proposition and the proposition is about the denotation (reference). Different sentences (different senses) express the same proposition if the reference is the same.

___ An empty denoting phrase simply has null-class as its denotation.

___ Now we can assert an identity of denotation with a difference of meaning (sense) → solving the puzzle of identity

*** Russell's criticisms:**

___ The first difficulty is when the denoting phrase has no denotation. E.g. ‘the present king of France’ 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. Frege’s “null-class” denotation solution is arbitrary.

___ The second difficulty is that we cannot succeed in both preserving the connection of meaning and denotation, and preventing them from collapsing into the same thing. Thus, the whole distinction between meaning and denotation has been wrongly conceived.

(3) Russell’s own proposal:

1. Meinong says there is denotation while Frege says the denotation is null-class. Both theories have difficulties.
2. We must abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases.
3. It is *meaning*, not *denotation*, that is relevant when a denoting phrase occurs in a proposition.

§ IV. Russell’s Three Puzzles

[Puzzle One]: Substitutivity

- (i) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of Waverley.
- (ii) In fact, Scott was the author of Waverley.
- (iii) By Leibniz’ Law, we may substitute Scott for the author of ‘Waverley’.
- (iv) Therefore, George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott.
- (v) Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe.

[Puzzle Two]: The Law of Excluded Middle

- (i) By the law of excluded middle, either ‘A is B’ or ‘A is not B’ must be true.
- (ii) Hence, either ‘the present King of France is bald’ or ‘the present King of France is not bald’ must be true.
- (iii) But, ‘The present king of France is bald’ is false.
- (iv) Therefore, the present king of France is not bald.
(Is he wearing a wig?)

[Puzzle Three]: Negative Existentials

- (i) If the proposition ‘A differs from B’ is true, then there is a difference between A and B, which fact may be expressed in the form ‘the difference between A and B subsists’.
- (ii) But if it is false that A differs from B, then there is no difference between A and B, which fact may be expressed in the form ‘the difference between A and B does not subsist’.
- (iii) But how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?

- (iv) Thus, if A and B do not differ, to suppose either that there is, or that there is not, such an object as ‘the difference between A and B’ seems equally impossible.

* Another example: “The Golden Mountain does not exist.” → True or false?

§ V. Russell’s Solutions

___ A denoting phrase is essentially part of a sentence, and does not, like most single words, have any significance on its own account.

___ We can rephrase the proposition so that the denoting phrase does not appear, since it has been broken up. The denoting phrase per se has no meaning, because in any proposition in which it occurs, the proposition, fully expressed, does not contain the phrase.

___ We should analyze the occurrence of denoting phrases in two ways:

* [Primary occurrence] and [secondary occurrence]:

___ A definite description occurs in a proposition in a *primary way* when it is placed outside the whole proposition.

___ A definite description occurs in a proposition in a *secondary way* when it is placed within the whole proposition.

___ Substitution is only acceptable in primary occurrences.

[Solution 1]

The grammatical structure of a sentence does not correctly capture the logical structure of a proposition. When the proposition ‘Scott was the author of Waverley’ is written out, it does not contain any constituent ‘the author of Waverley’ for which we could substitute ‘Scott.’

George IV wishes to know whether Scott was the author of Waverley.

Primary occurrence: **[False]**

___ One and only one man wrote Waverley and George IV wishes to know whether Scott was that man.

Or:

___ Concerning the man who in fact wrote Waverley, George IV wished to know whether he was Scott.

Secondary occurrence: **[True]**

___ George IV wishes to know whether one and only one man wrote Waverley and Scott was that man.

[Solution 2]

Primary occurrence: **[Both readings would be false.]**

___ There is a present king of France ($\exists x$)Fx and nothing else is the present king of France ($\forall y$)(Fy \rightarrow y=x), and x is bald.

___ There is a present king of France ($\exists x$)Fx and nothing else is the present king of France ($\forall y$)(Fy \rightarrow y=x), and x is not bald.

Secondary occurrence: **[True]**

___ It is not the case that there is a present king of France ($\exists x$)Fx and nothing else is the present king of France ($\forall y$)(Fy \rightarrow y=x), and x is bald.

[Solution 3]

Primary occurrence: **[False]**

___ There is one and only one entity x such that 'x is the difference between A and B', and x does not exist.

Secondary occurrence: **[True]**

___ It is not the case that there is one and only one entity x such that 'x is the difference between A and B'.

§ Conclusion:

1. The whole realm of non-entities, such as 'the round square', 'Apollo', 'Hamlet,' etc. can now be satisfactorily dealt with: If 'Apollo' has a primary occurrence, the proposition containing the occurrence is false; if the occurrence is secondary, the proposition may be true.
2. When there is anything with which we do not have immediate acquaintance, but only definition by denoting phrases, then the propositions in which this thing is introduced by means of a denoting phrase do not really contain this thing as a constituent, but contain instead the constituents expressed by the several words of the denoting phrase.

§ Russell's Theory of Description (Descriptivism)

- Genuine proper names are like what Mill says: they stand for objects they denote and nothing else. Therefore, they will never denote nonexistent things.
- Other denoting phrases, including definite descriptions, could be associated with nonexistent things.
- Therefore, we should give them a proper logical analysis.
- Descriptions derive meanings from the role they play in the whole sentence. We can analyze their occurrence in a sentence in two ways: primary and secondary.
- Ordinary proper names are like descriptions in that they could denote nonexistent things. Hence, ordinary proper names are not genuine proper names. They are disguised descriptions.

- The only genuine proper names which guarantee existence turn out to be “this”, “that”, “I”, and our sense data.

* [Genuine Proper Name] (Logical Proper Name) vs. [Ordinary Proper Name]

(1) a name

___ A simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words;

(2) a description

___ consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the “meaning” of the description.

But:

For Russell, ordinary proper names are not genuine names, which he calls “logical proper names.” Only such terms as ‘this,’ ‘that’ and ‘I’ qualify as genuine proper names. Ordinary proper names are *disguised* descriptions.

Russell’s argument:

1. If “a” is a name, it *must* name something: what does not name anything is not a name and is devoid of meaning.
2. With descriptions, on the other hand, the meaning of which is derived from the meanings of its constituent parts.
3. But with ordinary proper names like ‘Homer’, we could ask whether the named person existed.
4. Therefore, all ordinary proper names are not really [genuine] names.
5. Therefore, **all ordinary proper names are abbreviated descriptions.**

§ How Russell’s Descriptivism differs from Frege’s Descriptivism

1. Frege thinks that all singular terms are like “names,” while Russell thinks that ordinary proper names are “abbreviated descriptions” in disguise.
2. Frege’s descriptivism has two levels of semantic significance: sense and reference, and sense is primary. Russell’s descriptivism only allows one level of semantic significance of proper names – the abbreviated definite description disguised as proper names.
3. Russell thinks that the whole distinction between sense and reference is “wrongly conceived.” He criticizes Frege for not fully developing a theory of description.
4. For Frege, *sense* is a mode of presentation; for Russell, the descriptions will involve some more or less vague mass of historical knowledge in some cases, or some descriptive information in others.
5. For Frege, the sense of a name *fixes (determines) the reference* of the name; for Russell, the description seems to *give the meaning* of the name.
6. For Frege, sense is public in that it is sharable. For Russell, speaker associated descriptions will vary for different people, and even for the same person at different times.

7. Under Frege's view, a name could have no "bearer" – it could be an empty name. In this case, the name has a sense without having a reference. Under Russell's view, when a definite description has no bearer, we need to give the proposition in which it appears a different logical analysis.

Frege	Russell
All denoting phrases are names.	(Almost) all denoting phrases are disguised descriptions, not genuine proper names.
A name ___ expresses sense ___ denotes reference	(i) A genuine proper name (logical proper name) stands for object only. → Mill (ii) Descriptions do not denote; they only have meanings.
The principle of composition: ___ The meaning of a sentence is derived from the meanings of its parts.	The Holistic principle: ___ The meaning of sentence-components (such as a denoting phrase) is determined by the meaning of the whole sentence.
When a name has a nonexistent object as denotation, it denotes a null-class.	Descriptions do not denote nonexistent beings. They can be analyzed as having primary or secondary occurrence, and the sentence has a truth-value.