

Phil 435: Philosophy of Language

[Handout 9]

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Bertrand Russell: On Denoting

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.

[Note]:

___ For Russell, knowledge by acquaintance only applies to our sense data; we do not have direct acquaintance with physical objects themselves. Our knowledge of objects comes from our knowledge of their denoting phrases composed of words with whose meaning we are acquainted. (This theory is not a popular view nowadays.)

§ Genuine Proper Name (Logical Proper Name) vs. Ordinary Proper Name

[From Russell's 'Descriptions']:

(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.

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'.

[Denoting phrases with indefinite descriptions]

- ❖ “I met a man” → “‘I met x, and x is human’ is not always false.”
- ❖ “All men are mortal” → “‘If x is human, x is mortal’ is always true.”
- ❖ “C (all men)” means “‘If x is human, then C(x) is true’ is always true.”
- ❖ “C (no men)” means “‘If x is human, then C(x) is false’ is always true.”
- ❖ “C (some men)” will mean the same as “C (a man)” and
- ❖ “C (a man)” means “‘It is false that ‘C(x) and x is human’ is always false.’”
- ❖ “C (every man)” will mean the same as “C (all men).”

[Denoting phrases with definite descriptions]:

e.g. 'the father of Charles II was executed'

___ There was an x who was the father of Charles II and was executed.

* **'the,' when it is strictly used, involves uniqueness.**

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.

(2) Russell's Criticisms:

___ 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. (Existence was his main concern.)

*** Russell's proposal: We must abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases.**

III. 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) Hence, 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.

[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?

IV. 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 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: 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. [The real proper names – Logical Proper Names – on the other hand, are not disguised description.]
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, the sense (mode of presentation) is a constituent of the proposition; the object (the referent) is not. For Russell, propositions have real objects as their constituents – with one exception: denoting phrases.
7. 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.
8. 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 a sentence-components 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.

Focus Questions for Essay #9: [Optional – Answer one question)

- 1. Explain the novelty in Strawson's proposal. How does Strawson's proposal solve the puzzle about "the present king of France is wise"?**
- 2. How does Donnellan analyze the difference between the *attributive* use and the *referential* use of descriptions? Use his example "Smith murderer is insane" to illustrate this difference.**