

## 24.400

## Proseminar in philosophy I

Fall 2003

The Principles of Mathematics theory of “denoting concepts”

A *term* is any entity whatsoever. *Things* are “the terms indicated by proper names” and *concepts* are the terms “indicated by all other words” (44).

The *terms of* a proposition are those terms that the proposition is *about* and that *occur in* (are constituents of) a proposition. Things occur in propositions only as terms of them, concepts can sometimes occur in propositions as terms of them, and sometimes not.

Example. Socrates and humanity *occur in* the proposition that Socrates is human, and in the proposition that humanity belongs to Socrates, and Socrates is a *term of* both, but humanity is only a *term of* the latter – the proposition that Socrates is human is not *about* humanity (45). (In Frege’s terminology, Russell is in effect claiming that a concept is sometimes an object.)

Among the constituents of propositions are *denoting concepts*.

A concept *denotes* when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept. If I say “I met a man,” the proposition is not about [the denoting concept] *a man*: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank account or a public-house and a drunken

wife. Again the proposition “any finite number is odd or even” is plainly true; yet the concept “any finite number” is neither odd nor even. (53)

And similarly with definite descriptions: the proposition that I met the present Pope is not about the denoting concept *the present Pope*, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept.

This “peculiar way” is the denoting relation. In the case of definite descriptions:

The denoting concept *the present Pope* denotes the present Pope.

And:

If John Paul II is the present Pope, then *the present Pope* denotes John Paul II.

In the case of, say, the denoting concept *some man*, “what is denoted is essentially not each separate man, but a kind of combination of all men” (62). “Peculiar” doesn’t quite do it justice.

### The Gray’s Elegy Argument

The dominant contemporary interpretation seems to be that the argument’s principal target is the theory of denoting concepts, not Frege’s theory.

See:

John Searle, “Russell’s Objections to Frege’s Theory of Sense and Reference”, *Analysis* 1957-8, and in Klemke, *Essays on Frege*.

Simon Blackburn and Alan Code, "The Power of Russell's Criticism of Frege: 'On Denoting' pp. 48-50", *Analysis* 1978.

Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 249-52.

Harold Noonan, "The 'Gray's Elegy' Argument—and Others", in Monk and Palmer, *Bertrand Russell and the Origin of Analytical Philosophy*.

Michael Kremer, "The Argument of 'On Denoting'", *Philosophical Review* 1994.

Related helpful material:

Richard Cartwright, "On the Origin of Russell's Theory of Descriptions", in *Philosophical Essays*.

James Levine, "Acquaintance, Denoting Concepts and Sense", *Philosophical Review* 1998.