

MIT Student

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24.251: Philosophy of Language

### Comprehension Exercise 1: Russell, "On Denoting"

In "On Denoting", Bertrand Russell describes three problems involving the use of definite descriptions which he claims any good theory of how denotative phrases involving "the" should explain. Russell argues that Frege's denotation-meaning (or referent-sense) theory fails to explain these three puzzles, but then, more importantly, offers how his own theory of definite descriptions solves them. We first repeat these problems as Russell gives them, then review Russell's theory of definite descriptions, and finally, summarize the solutions that Russell gives. We then give a brief critique of the theory.

1. *Informativeness of identity*: The puzzle lies in the seeming relevance of such a proposition as "The author of *Waverley* was Scott." If we take the definite description "the author of *Waverley*" to be a reference to the author of *Waverley*, then since it is in fact Scott, we can simply perform a substitution and obtain a useless identity such as "Scott was Scott." Clearly, there is significance to the definite description that is separate from its apparent referent.
2. *Non-denoting terms*: A definite description such as "the King of France" can fail to find a referent if there is, in fact no King of France. Thus a statement such as "The King of France is bald" is provided by Russell to exemplify the problem of non-referring terms. Russell in fact brings up the law of excluded middle in order to make the point: if we were to list all things which are bald, and then list all things which are not, we do not find the King of France in either, which prevents us from making sense of the statement.
3. *Nonexistence claims*: Any claims that a certain thing does not exist is problematic. Russell gives the example of how we proceed to say that "A and B do not differ"—it appears we have to say "The difference of A and B does not subsist," which would require us to make a nonexistence claim. Or, to take a more transparent example used in discussion, consider the proposition "The golden mountain does not exist."

Suppose we have a statement involving the definite description  $F$  that takes the form "The  $F$  is  $G$ ," for some proposition  $G$ . Then in his theory of definite descriptions, Russell interprets this to mean "There exists a unique  $x$  such that  $F x$ , and  $G x$ ." Thus, "The King of England is curious about a book" means "There exists a unique  $x$  such that  $x$  is king of England, and  $x$  is curious about a book." Thus, each proposition involving a definite description is first a statement that there exists a unique referent for which the definite description subsists, in conjunction with the actual proposition about that referent.

We proceed to summarize how Russell proposes to solve the three above problems using this theory of definite descriptions. Instead of looking at a general solution to the problem, Russell only gives a case for how each of the examples can be resolved.

1. *Informativeness of identity*: If we interpret the identity statement to mean “There exists a unique  $x$  such that  $x$  wrote *Waverley*, and  $x$  is Scott,” then, as Russell notes, the problem of why such an identity statement is meaningful immediately goes away. The statement in fact asserts two facts rather than one—in the first place, that there is exactly one author of *Waverley*, and in the second, that this is in fact Scott. This, according to Russell, successfully captures the meaning in this statement of identity that is not present in the trivial one of “Scott was Scott.”
2. *Non-denoting terms*: This is perhaps the clearest example of the utility of the theory of definite descriptions. We rephrase the problematic statement in its logical form of “There exists a unique  $x$  such that  $x$  is king of France, and  $x$  is bald. But clearly, since the description does not denote, it immediately fails the first implicit proposition of unique existence. This resolves the sentence and, in this case, it evaluates to false.
3. *Nonexistence claims*: This one a bit trickier, because we have to worry about scope, or what Russell calls “occurrences”. We should interpret a sentence such as “The golden mountain does not exist,” as saying “There does not exist a unique  $x$  such that  $x$  is golden and a mountain.” This does not take the general form of the above described procedure, but in fact, all we have done is move the occurrence of “denial propositions” to the front of the statement and then removed the useless remaining “ $x$  exists” proposition. (In fact, if we include denial propositions in the previous cases, we see that we also encounter the issue of how to deal with the scope—Russell discusses this first for the example of “The King of France is not bald.”)

Perhaps the most impressive argument we have heard against Russell’s theory of definite descriptions up to this point is Strawson’s argument against the truth value assigned by Russell to the case of non-denoting terms. That is, although Russell’s theory clearly resolves “The King of France is bald,” to a false statement, it is not immediately clear that it is what we actually *want*. It would appear that the proposition of baldness itself—and not the background assumption that France has a king—is the matter of primary importance. Thus Strawson argues, and to some extent rightly so, that the sentence is not false, just in need of further clarification. Apparently, whereas Russell views statements involving definite descriptions as linguistic shorthand for the full logical form of the sentence, it is not clear that the process of abbreviation does not have a meaning in and of itself. This might suggest an issue with basing the meaning of all sentences in their truth values, which would represent a severe obstacle to Russell’s theory.

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