

Class 6 - Russell's Description Theory

I. A different approach to Frege's puzzle

Frege's puzzle was that

1. $a=b$

has different cognitive content from

2. $a=a$

even when 'a' refers to the same thing as 'b'.

He assumes that, since 'a' and 'b' are names, there must be an element of the sentences other than their references.

Thus, Frege concludes that names have both sense and reference.

Russell argues that if we drop Frege's assumption that 'a' and 'b' are names, then we do not need to posit senses in addition to references.

We can thus avoid multiplying entities.

Russell agrees that 1 and 2 should have the same cognitive significance, if a and b are names and if all there are to names are their referents.

But, he has a narrower view of what names are.

For Russell, real names are only used for things with which we have acquaintance.

Further, we are only really acquainted with our sense data, or our selves.

For our own sense data 'a' and 'b', ' $a=b$ ' has the same cognitive significance as ' $a=a$ '.

But other terms which seem like names are just disguised descriptions.

Truly proper names are absolutely simple.

(Compare with Wittgenstein's treatment of atomic facts in the *Tractatus*.)

Russell allows for "relative names," names which we take to be simple and unanalyzed, even if they are analyzable.

In the end, though, statements with ordinary proper names are disguised descriptions.

And, descriptions, used as denoting phrases, are disguised existential statements.

II. Denoting phrases

Consider

3. The king of France is wise.

Russell calls terms like 'the king of America' denoting phrases.

They denote solely in virtue of their form.

Such phrases may denote nothing, one thing uniquely, or not any one thing.

Proper names are one kind of denoting phrase, but there are not many of these.

The terms we ordinarily consider names (e.g. 'Hesperus', 'Superman', 'Aristotle') are really just

disguised descriptions of an object, just shorthand denoting phrases.

In order to reveal the true logical form of a sentence which contains a denoting phrase, we have to translate that sentence into one which refers only to things with which we are directly acquainted: our selves or our sense data.

Thus, grammatical form is no guide to logical form, p 240.

III. Russell's rejection of the sense/reference distinction

Plato had worried about empty reference; recall the suspect Parmenidean argument in *Sophist*, that one can not say anything about not-being.

Meinong took all denoting phrases to stand for objects.

Thus, Meinong had to distinguish types of being: actual being (subsistence) and mere objecthood.

Quine says that Meinong ruined the good, old-fashioned term 'being'; see "On What There Is".

Russell says that Meinong lacks a robust sense of reality, p 240.

Frege and Russell have different analyses of 3, but they agree that the Meinongian analysis is wrong.

Frege argued that the meaning of 3 is a structured proposition consisting in part of the individual concept instantiated by the king of France.

Since there is no king of France, that concept cannot be instantiated.

If the concept were instantiated, then the statement would be true or false depending on whether or not the instantiation of the concept had the property instantiated by the concept of being wise.

Frege's distinction between sense and reference allows him to treat:

4. Johnny believes that the king of France is wise.

For Frege, 4 can be a true statement, even though there is no king of France.

The term in the that-clause refers to its own sense, to the mode of presentation which Johnny apprehends, and not to any object.

Johnny, and the rest of us, can grasp the sense of 3, even if it has no truth value.

Still, 3, as it stands, is problematic for Frege.

It is meaningful, but it has no truth value.

Frege must reject classical logic's principle of bivalence, that every sentence is either true or false.

This problem of empty reference leads to what is called Frege's truth value gap.

Russell accuses Frege's analysis of calling 3 nonsense, since the denoting phrase 'the king of France' lacks a denotation.

Frege says such sentences denote the null class, but Russell says this is artificial.

Russell is also unhappy with Frege's analysis of opaque contexts and indirect reference; see 'On Denoting', p 222.

And, as we saw, Frege does not provide a safe way to determine the sense of a name.

So Russell rejects Frege's sense/reference distinction.

IV. Russell's theory of descriptions and empty reference

Notice that 'the king of France' is not a proper name, not a name of a sense datum, but a denoting phrase.

Thus, in our proper analysis of 3, we should not regiment it as an object.
Russell analyzes 3 as:

$$5. (\exists x)[Kx \cdot (y)(Ky \supset y=x) \cdot Wx]$$

Because ‘ $(\exists x)Kx$ ’ is false, the conjunction, and thus the existential generalization is false.
Similarly,

$$6. \text{The king of France is not wise.}$$

becomes

$$7. (\exists x)[Kx \cdot (y)(Ky \supset y=x) \cdot \sim Wx]$$

Again, ‘ $(\exists x)Kx$ ’ is false, and so the whole sentence is false.
Russell thus retains classical logic, with no contradiction.

The retention of classical logic in and of itself is not the main reason why Russell thinks that his treatment of sentences that include names without bearers is better than Frege’s.
Russell believes that 3 and 6 are both clearly false.
If we take ‘the king of France’ to be a name, 3 and 6 look like contradictories, independently of Frege’s analysis.

V. Russell’s theory of descriptions and identity statements

Russell’s analysis solves the problems of identity statements, as well as the problem of empty reference.
And, Russell solves the problem of identity statements without introducing senses.
Russell’s claim is that ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ and ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ would have no difference in cognitive content if ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ were logically proper names.
The difference in cognitive content arises only from the fact that both terms are really disguised descriptions.

So long as names are used as names, “Scott is Sir Walter” is the same trivial proposition as
“Scott is Scott” (243)

The main difference between Frege and Russell is over the issue of bivalence, over whether 6 is false, just as 3 is, or whether both sentences lack denotation.
This difference manifests itself in a difference over whether the constituents of a proposition are senses, as they are for Frege, or individuals and functions, as they are for Russell.

VI. Russellian propositions and opaque contexts

For Russell, a singular proposition, one of grammatical subject-predicate form, contains the object itself, and a propositional function, or what Russell calls a concept, p 239.
Assuming that ‘Superman’ is a logically proper name (which it is not), the sentence

8. Superman flies

contains Superman himself and the property of flying.

For Frege, remember, the proposition contains the sense of Superman, and the sense of the property of flying, both under a mode of presentation.

Senses allowed Frege to treat opaque contexts, like

9. Lois Lane believes that Superman flies.

If Lois Lane and Superman were proper names, a Russellian would analyze it as containing Superman, not a mode of representation of Superman.

The reference of the related that-clause in

10. Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies

would contain the same man and the same property.

Thus, Russellian propositions seem to run into the problem that Frege seemed to solve.

The two that-clauses have the same reference.

But the sentences containing the two that-clauses have different truth conditions.

For Frege, the different truth conditions showed that the that-clauses had different senses.

For Russell, rejecting senses, the different truth conditions show that neither sentence really contains a proper name.

Propositions verbally about “a so-and-so” are found to contain no constituent represented by this phrase. And that is why such propositions can be significant even when there is no such thing as a so-and-so. (241)

The denoting phrase is essentially part of a sentence, so does not have meaning on its own, according to Russell’s proposal.

Furthermore, when the proposition in which a denoting phrase occurs is “fully expressed” the denoting phrase disappears.

Since denoting phrases are paraphrased away, there is no problem of substituting a co-referential phrase and getting a tautologous statement.

The paraphrase dissolves the problem.

VII. Russell v Frege

Frege and Russell agree, in a sense, that names are not just Millian denotations.

Frege thinks that names have connotation, too.

The sense of ‘Dartmouth’ may not be the city at the mouth of the Dart River.

Instead, it is whatever determines the reference of that term.

Each object has different senses associated with it.

Different people can grasp the object under different modes of presentation.

For Russell, the description which Frege associates with the sense of a name are actually what the name abbreviates.

Frege sees sense and reference; Russell sees hidden logical form.

But both Frege and Russell are what come to be known as description theorists.

Kent Bach (see link on website) calls Frege a sense descriptivist and Russell an abbreviational descriptivist.

Descriptivism is opposed to Mill's theory of non-connotative names, which is sometimes called the 'Fido'-Fido theory.

Description theory defeated the 'Fido'-Fido theory for sixty-to-seventy years, until some research in modal logic, metaphysics, and essences by Saul Kripke revived the dead position.

Now, the Fregean view is more or less dead.

VIII. Just for kicks, check out Russell on the ontological argument:

“As a proof, [the ontological argument] fails for want of a proof of the premise ‘there is one and only one entity x which is most perfect’.” (“On Denoting”, p 236)

That is, the problem is dissolved by the paraphrase because the presupposition fails.