

LOGIC AND LANGUAGE

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Abstract. This study thoroughly analyzes the famous theory of descriptions elaborated by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. We shall hereby talk about the context of this theory, the technique that Russell applies in analyzing the language and its utility, which fully justifies the importance of this innovating theory in the philosophy from the beginning of the 20th century.

Beside the famous theory of types, there is another important contribution that the British philosopher Bertrand Russell brings to philosophy, which is also one of the pillars of logical analysis: it is the theory of definite descriptions. Why is the theory of descriptions so important and how may one explain its success, generating a profound change in philosophizing? We may say, with no risk of exaggeration, that, in philosophy (at least in most of it), nothing is the same after Russell, as the working method that he establishes in philosophy (by means of the theory of descriptions too) is to completely modify the existing outlook, not only regarding the philosophic language, but, even more, regarding the philosophic knowledge in general.

In his paper *Bertrand Russell. The Passionate Skeptic*, Allan Wood minutely describes the impact that the philosophic environment experiences due to Russell's theory that we are going to analyze hereinafter. First of all, by means of this theory, Russell makes essential innovations in philosophy, and it may be rightfully considered as "the most important contribution that Russell brings in philosophy, in the field of detail."¹ Moore, one of Russell's most qualified critics admits this as well: "The theory of descriptions – says Moore – was something completely new. It was Russell's greatest philosophic discovery, influencing everything that he would subsequently say. It was his personal masterpiece and it bore no other influence."²

Apparently, it brings nothing new within the existing philosophic context: it gives a reply to Meinong's philosophy, which has established an entire kingdom of inexistent things, but which had a special existence, somewhere, in the world of the "Being". The analysis that Russell elaborates regarding the statements and claims of Meinong's theory is to throw to kingdom of "Non-being" all the things that would make up Meinong's universe of "Being". But it is not the first time when a philosopher replies to another philosopher, imposing restrictions on a certain theory: "a philosopher tells another philosopher that there is no need for him to say

¹ Allan Wood, *Bertrand Russell. Le Sceptique Passionné*, Payot, Paris, 1965, trad. Elisabeth Gille, p. 69.

² Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 69.

absurdities about things that do not exist.”³ What new aspects does Russell’s theory bring in philosophy?

Within the same context, we may also speak about another paradoxical situation: if Russell’s theory is so important, why is it accepted with such difficulty at the beginning? As Russell himself speaks, in *My Philosophical Development*, how it is received by the editor⁴ of the *Mind* magazine (the main English periodical at the time), where he first publishes the article *On Denoting*: “the editor-in-chief at that time thought that this theory was so absurd that he begged me to reconsider my decision of publishing it, and not to ask him to publish it as it was at that moment.”⁵ Moreover, Moore himself says that, after it is published, “no one understood a word” of Russell’s article and that, in order to understand the theory of descriptions, he had to wait too until Russell gave him a clearer explanation in the introduction to *Principia Mathematica*⁶. Indeed, what is Russell talking about in that article and what could he find so important in his theory? Because, apparently, Russell is playing with words in *On Denoting*.

The reaction of surprise, even stupefaction and opposition is explained by Allan Wood as follows: “the reason why the greatest intellectual progresses generate, most of the time, a violent opposition, and prove to be obvious afterwards, consists in the fact that they do not talk about what everyone *thinks* at that time. They talk about ideas that people believe in *unconsciously*, without even knowing what they believe in. It is extremely difficult to bring this subconscious faith to the conscious level. (...) A great thinker is he who may doubt about something so obvious that everyone thinks it is a given fact.”⁷ Russell is an important philosopher because he knows how to do this: he knows how to demonstrate that an issue, which no one could doubt, and which seems to be obviously true, *is obviously false*. And this is an issue of a generally spread belief, within the philosophic environment, according to which the grammar structure of a statement perfectly overlaps the logic structure of that particular statement. Russell proves that this belief is not founded in *On Denoting*. Let us follow his arguments against this false belief.

THEORY OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

Although, at first glance, as we have previously said, Russell seems to play with words, we should have reservations throughout the entire presentation

³ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁴ We should not ignore the fact that he was a famous professor of philosophy himself: we are talking about G.F. Stout.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Histoire de mes idées philosophiques*, Gallimard, Paris, 1961, pp. 103–104

⁶ Cf. Allan Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 71–72.

hereinafter, trying to see together how something that seems to be a simple word game may become “the starting point for a complete revolution of how we regard the nature of the entire universe.”⁸

In the article *On Denoting*, Russell talks about what he designates as *denoting phrases*. In order to define a *denoting phrase*, Russell prefers a definition based on simple enumeration. Thus, for him, a denoting phrase refers to phrases such as: “a man, some man, any man, every man, all men, the current King of England, the assumed King of France, the center of mass of the solar system at the first second of the 20th century, the revolution of the Earth around the Sun, the revolution of the Sun around the Earth.” As we may notice, these phrases are descriptive and articulated, they are linguistic constructions that denote something, *only by virtue of their form; they never have a meaning by themselves*.

Russell establishes three cases:

- 1) a phrase may be denoting without denoting anything (for instance, “the current King of France”)
- 2) a phrase may denote a concrete object (for example: “the current King of England” denotes a particular person) and
- 3) a phrase may render a vague denotation (for example, “a man” does not denote several people, but a non-defined man).

And he bravely announces the fact that, although the interpretation of such phrases is an extremely difficult issue, his theory is capable of facing such interpreting difficulties.

Russell announces the reason why he believes that this theory is useful: *it is necessary due to the nature of the topic that it regulates*: denotation is of maximum importance not only in logic and mathematics, but also in the theory of knowledge. This is where he introduces, for the first time, and without theoretising it too much, the famous distinction between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description* (although here, the term for the latter type of knowledge is *knowledge about*). The theory is important first of all for the latter type of knowledge: for instance, when we talk about the center of mass of the solar system at a particular moment. We know that this center is, at a particular moment, in a particular spot, but we cannot have *direct contact* with this spot, therefore, we do not have *direct, unmediated knowledge* about it: thus, we come to know that the center of mass of the solar system at a particular moment is a certain point only at a particular moment is a certain point only *by description*. The distinction that Russell postulates, between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge about*, implies the distinction between the things that we know directly and the things that we know only by means of the descriptions provided by *denoting phrases*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

It is interesting to notice here the fact that Russell admits that, although “thinking must begin by direct knowledge, it manages to reason *about* many things that we do not have a direct interaction with”⁹, such as, for instance, other people’s minds. There is no reason for us to assume that we could ever have direct knowledge regarding them, since they may not be perceived directly; but we may have knowledge *about* the fact that they exist, *by denotation* (description).

At the beginning, Russell enunciates his theory, which, at first glance, is extremely complicated and hard to follow. He is aware of this himself; and this is why, at the end of the text, he asks his readers “not to reject it – as they may be tempted to, based on its apparent excessive difficulty.”¹⁰

Assuming as a fundamental element of the theory the notion of *variable*, in fact, Russell introduces us in the logic of predicates. How does he manage to do this? Starting from the notion of variable, he associates it to a *function* C; thus, C(x) will be a sentence where x, as a constituent, is expressed by a variable, which is “essentially and totally undetermined”. He afterwards analyzes the most primitive denoting phrases, including *anything*, *nothing* or *something*, expressing them in the language referring to the logic of predicates. Thus:

C(anything) means “C(x) is always true” – (we put it as “Whatever x, x is true”
($\forall x Cx$) – n.n., C.R.)

C(nothing) means “«C(x) is false» is true” – (“There is no x, for which C(x) is true” $\sim \exists x Cx$ ” – n.n., C.R.)

C(something) means “It is false that «C(x) is false» is always true” – (“There is at least one x for which it is false that «C(x) is false»” $\exists x \sim Cx$ – n.n., C.R.).

In all these examples, the notion “C(x) is true” is considered to be *final* and *undefinable*, and all the other phrases are defined based on it, and, in all these transformations of the symbolic logic language, the denoting phrases *anything*, *nothing*, *something* are supposed *not to have any meaning taken individually*, but the meaning is given to *each sentence* that they belong to individually. Russell thus provides arguments for the basic principle of his theory: “the one according to which denoting phrases do not have a meaning by themselves, but the sentence, which has a verbal phrase that includes them, has a meaning.”¹¹

Philosophers have not noticed this before him, says Russell (not even him, up to a point, n.n., C.R.), which led to the unfortunate situation with postulation of inexistent entities. According to Russell, “difficulties related to denotation are (...), all of them, the result of a mistaken analysis of sentences with verbal phrases that contain denoting phrases.”¹²

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *On Denoting*, in vol. *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901–1950*, Robert Ch. Marsh Publishing House, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1956, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

¹² *Ibidem*.

What Russell does here is to draw attention to the fact that *not all sentences are of the subject-copula-predicate form*, as in classic logic, of terms. He wants to “translate” this kind of sentences into the language of symbolic logic in order to show, where it may be necessary, how we may eliminate those phrases that *seem to be subjects, but are not*¹³.

Indeed, modern logic allows a gradual reconstruction of all sentences starting from elementary sentences, in sentence calculation. Analytic philosophy will widely use this logic – both at the level of sentence calculation and at the level of predicate calculation – in order to proceed to a new form of philosophy – for which “Bertrand Russell’s theory of descriptions represents the most famous and most important example.”¹⁴

In this assessment of definite descriptions, Russell actually extends a procedure implied by the translation of the classical judgments from Boethius’ square into the formalism of symbolic logic. The problem of this translation has generated an entire debate in the contemporary philosophy of logic, but the decisive step is represented by the assimilation of the universal affirmative sentence to the formal implication, an assimilation that has been designated as the “Fregean dogma”, a term proposed by F. Sommers at the *International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science* from London, 1965, in a communication entitled *On a Fregean Dogma*. Until the 50’s, therefore, for more than half a century, the Fregean dogma is accepted by most modern logicians; we may therefore talk about it as of something that is specific to modern logic. It has been formulated independently from other logicians contemporary to Frege, such as Peano, in 1889, and Peirce in 1896. However, Frege provides it, before Russell, with a more elaborated conceptual explanation in his work *Über Begriff und Gegenstand*.

The sentence “All S are P” may also be read, according to Frege, as “If something is S, then it is P”, and it is symbolically rendered by the phrase “(x) (Sx → Px)”. Based on this phrase, general sentences have a specific structure, which is expressed by the *relation of subordination* – according to Frege’s terminology – or by the *formal implication* – according to Russell’s terminology.

The Fregean dogma is specific to eliminative theories, which means to those theories that operate with sentence contexts *with no logic subject*. The formal implication is such a context. *These theories are eliminative not because they*

¹³ We should also add here the fact that, as previously noticed, due to the unfortunate “immixture” of metaphysics into logic, the sentences of the subject-copula-predicate type were thought based on the pattern of Leibnizian logic, as expressing, at the ontological level, the substance-attribute relation. Thus, we should not be surprised when the subject of such a sentence is interpreted as expressing an “object” which has to “subsist” one way or another. The surprising thing is that, although he rejects, as we have seen it in *Principles*, the doctrine of the S-P type, Russell remains, in the same *Principles*, tributary to the ontology of this type. The “shadow” of traditional metaphysics is not completely cast away...

¹⁴ Jean-Gerard Rossi, *La philosophie analytique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989, p. 18.

operate with such contexts, but because they reduce categorical sentences to such contexts. Indeed, as far as the sentence “All men are mortal” is concerned, Russell believes that “in fact, it is hypothetical, and it enunciates that *if* something is a man, then that thing is mortal. In other words, it enunciates that, if x is a man, x is mortal, no matter what x .”¹⁵

According to the translation based on the Fregean dogma, we may speak about a *contextual dissolution*¹⁶ or about a *predicativization* of subject-phrases. This leads to an operation that implies the passage from nominal terms (for example “man”) to functional phrases (for example “is a man”). Compared to the sentence “All S are P”, the corresponding formal implication no longer has S as its subject, but as a predicative (sentence) function, as a predicate. The phrase “is S” appears, in the case of formal implication, instead of the term S from the non-predicative phrase “all S”.

The contextual dissolution of definite descriptions is accomplished in two stages. The two following interpretations are possible when reading the formula “ $(x) (Sx \rightarrow Px)$ ”:

1. Those x which are S are P, and
2. For any x , if x is S, then x is P.

But these two interpretations are fundamentally different. If the universal affirmative sentence (A) is reduced to the first formulation, one may speak about a *relative* (partial) *dissolution* of the subject-term at most; an *absolute* (total) *dissolution* is actually achieved by means of the latter formulation.

The phrase “those x which are S” is not actually predicativized, as the relative pronoun hinders the fulfillment of the predicate role. This phrase maintains its *subject ability*, and it is synonymous to the plural articulated phrase “the x 's that are S”, in other words, synonymous to what could be designated as a *plural description*. It corresponds to phrases used for classes, in Russell's theory (within which plural descriptions are not acknowledged with a categorematical, self-sufficient statute).

The passage from the sentence “All S are P” to the sentence “Those x which are S are P” is almost obvious. Therefore, the first interpretation better corresponds with the universal affirmative sentence than with formal implication.

The second interpretation, which trustworthily renders the structure of the formal implication in natural language, we run into a propositional form (“ x is S”) as an antecedent instead of the subject-phrase. Moreover, this propositional form cannot be detached from the context, as it is correlated to the sequent form and simultaneously quantified with the latter. If there is a claim that, in the second

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁶ The contextual dissolution of definite descriptions is subject to an ample study made by Călin Candiescu. See *Considerații semantice privind logica termenilor* (Semantic Consideration on Logic of Terms), in the volume *Probleme de logică VIII* (Problems of Logic), Editura RSR, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 13–53.

interpretation, the formal implication translates a universally affirmative categorical sentence, then an absolute contextual dissolution of the subject phrase is achieved, or its predication.

“The contextual dissolution or predication procedure is nothing but the passage from the former interpretation to the latter one, from the subject-predicate contexts of the ‘those x who are S are P’ type to the corresponding two-predicate contexts of the ‘for any x, if x is S, then x is P’ type.”¹⁷

By his theory of definite descriptions, Russell actually extends the Fregean method of contextual dissolution from universal sentences to the singular ones. It is well known that, in formal logic, singular categorical sentences are regarded as universal sentences. Therefore, is “all” is a pseudo-referential particle, why wouldn’t the singular definite article have the same role?

The previously presented predication procedure is explicitly used in the analysis of definite descriptions. One may admit that a context with a definite description, symbolized by: “P(x) (Sx) refers to “the x that is S is P” or “that x that is S is P”. This represents a relative dissolution; thus the subject has not been eliminated, but merely transformed. But, the equal mark between this interpretation and “something and only that thing is S and that thing is also P” means an eliminating interpretation. We go from the first interpretation to the second one by predication.

The definite description is a self-sufficient phrase, with a nominal structure that is clearly rendered by the non-sentence phrase “the x that is S”, or “that x that is S”. It implies, at most, the sentence form “x is S”, but it does not include it. Therefore, the predication of definite descriptions has been construed as a forced interpretation, to a certain extent. But Russell accepts the predication of definite descriptions, at least as a convention, as it has applications in symbolic logic and it provides a high degree of harshness to formulas obtained from contextual definitions.

The contextual dissolution applied to categorical sentences leads to the negation of the subject role of general terms, as well as of their denoting capacity, and it allows Russell to reject the traditional theory of object, which claims that any grammatically correct denoting phrase “stands for” an object: “Thus, ‘the current king of France’, ‘the round square’, etc., are claimed to be authentic objects. One may accept that such objects do not *subsist*, but it is certainly presumed that they are objects. This is indeed a difficult approach; but the main objection is that one may accept that such objects are capable of breaking the principle of non-contradiction. For instance, it is presumed that the current king of France exists, but also that he does not exist; that the round square is round, but also that it is not round, etc. However, this is intolerable; and, if one may find a theory in order to avoid this result, then this theory is definitely preferable.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Călin Candiescu, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

One of the theories that seem to avoid Meinong's results¹⁹ is the one of Frege, but Russell does not consider it as satisfactory. And this is because he maintains certain reminiscences of Meinong's theory, introducing, by definition certain "purely conventional denotations" for cases when there would be no denotation otherwise. Thus, according to Frege's theory, "the king of France" would denote the null set, for example; but, although this procedure may not lead to logic errors, Russell considers it as extremely artificial and, moreover, it does not provide an exact analysis of the envisaged issue.

According to Russell, the force and utility of a logic theory comes from its capacity of solving dilemmas, enigmas, and, when we want to put logic, as a whole, to a test, we may find it useful to "crowd" our mind with as many "enigmas" as possible, since they serve the same purpose as experiments do in natural sciences. Our philosopher suggests three enigmas to be solved for his current theory:

1) *The enigma of King George IV*. Briefly, the enigma may be enounced as follows: George IV wanted to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*. In this enigma, Russell makes use of the law of identity, and he wants to see of it is operational in such cases, since it could help us solve the enigma. Formally enounced, the enigma sounds as follows: if *a* is identical with *b*, anything that is true about *a* is true about *b* too, and the two variables may replace one another in any sentence, without changing the value of truth for the sentence that includes them. As George IV wanted to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*, and since Scott was indeed the author of *Waverley*, we may very well substitute *Waverley's* author with Scott, and then we may say that George IV wanted to know whether Scott was Scott. "But we may hardly attribute a particular interest in the law of identity to the first gentleman of Europe", says Russell with obvious irony. Therefore, we may draw the conclusion that the law of identity does not help us.

2) *The enigma of the King of France*. Russell tries to solve this one by the law of the excluded third. According to this logic principle, "Either 'a is b', or 'a is not b'" is a true sentence. Our enigma may be enounced as follows: "*Either the current King of France is bald, or the current King of France is not bald*" is a true sentence. If we make an inventory of all the things in this world that are hairless, and then all the things in this world that do have hair, no current king of France may be found among them. Therefore, the law of the excluded third is of no help. According to Russell's ironical opinion, idealists would have solved this enigma by a *synthesis of contraries*, eventually saying that *the King of France wears a wig*.

3) *Meinong's enigma* (and Russell's enigma from *Principles*), or *the Enigma of the Difference*. Let us consider the following sentence: "A is different from B". If our sentence is true, there is a difference between A and B, which may be expressed by "the difference between A and B exists and it is real, therefore *subsists*". But, if it is false that A is different from B, then this means that there is no difference between A

¹⁹ Although, surprisingly enough, Russell *exclusively* attributes this theory to Meinong, as if his entire ontology from *Principles* had not even existed!

and B. Meinong would have said this as follows: “the difference between A and B does not subsist”. But how can a non-entity be subject in a sentence? Russell wonders. Thus, if A and B are not different, to suppose either that a certain object named “the difference between A and B” exists or that it does not exist seems impossible.

The theory of definite descriptions offers a solution (the same one) for all these three enigmas, and for other similar ones, by, as previously mentioned, the contextual dissolution of incomplete symbols, that is the assimilation of the contexts where they appear as logic subjects with contexts including only propositional or variable functions. According to this theory, a denoting phrase is an incomplete symbol, a part of a statement, and it has no meaning if taken individually: “they are aggregates provided with meaning only in use, as they have no meaning by themselves”²⁰, says Russell, a few years later, in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. At the same time, their maximum utility comes from the very fact that they are incomplete symbols, and “if we want to understand the analysis of the world, or the analysis of facts, or if we want to have a clue about how the world really is, it is important for us to realize how much of our language is related to incomplete symbols.”²¹ We thus pass from the logic of terms (which was an inappropriate context to solve such enigmas) to the logic of sentences (which proves to be, as hereby proven, the land where such enigmas disappear).

When taken individually, our enigmas (Russell’s enigmas too) find their solutions in the logic of sentences:

1) THE ENIGMA OF KING GEORGE IV

The statement *Scott is the author of Waverley* turns into a *conjunction of sentences*, three sentences, as follows:

1. At least one person wrote Waverley;
2. At most one person wrote Waverley;
3. The person who wrote Waverley is Scott.

If translated into the language of modern, propositional logic, the three sentences may be stated as follows:

1. “x wrote Waverley” is always true – $(\exists x)(Fx)$;
2. “If x and y wrote Waverley, x and y are identical”, is always true – $(\exists x)(y)(Fy \rightarrow y=x)$;
3. “If x wrote Waverley, x was Scott” is always true – $(\exists x)(Fx \& Gx)$.

²⁰ Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, in vol. *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901–1950*, Ed. Robert Ch. Marsh, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1956 p. 253.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

If we apply the truth-table method from the logic of sentences, in order to find whether our sentence is true or false, we shall see that the statement is true, as it is, in fact, a conjunction of three true sentences. Even if the law of identity has not been of any help, the matrix technique testing the truth of complex sentences has proven to be useful.

The established distinction also helps us in another direction: to draw the distinction between *name* and *definite description*. In the sentence “Scott is the author of Waverley”, “Scott” is a name, which means of simple symbol, which may have an individually-taken. On the other hand, “the author of Waverley”, a definite description, is no longer a simple symbol, as its parts – the words composing it – are symbols themselves. Another important distinction between *name* and *definite description* is represented by the fact that a name cannot have a meaning in a sentence unless the object that it refers to really exists, while a definite description is not subject to this limitation. In other words, we may just as well have definite descriptions that do not denote any existing object.

This distinction is one of capital importance, as it actually reveals the essence of Russell’s criticism to Meinong’s theory: “Meinong, whose works I have deeply respected, was not able to notice this difference.”²² Meinong thinks it is perfectly possible to make sentences where a definite description, for instance, “the mountain of gold” is used as the subject, no matter if there were or not a mountain of gold that really corresponds to the subject of the sentence: “If you say that the mountain of gold does not exist, then it is obvious that there is something about which you say that it does not exist, that is the mountain of gold: therefore, the mountain of gold must exist in some sort of Plato’s world of being, otherwise your reasoning according to which the mountain of gold does not exist, would have no meaning.”²³ Russell avoids this unfortunate result by means of his theory: in other words, although “the mountain of gold” may be, from a grammatical perspective, the subject of a meaningful sentence, if this sentence is correctly analyzed *from a logical perspective*, it no longer has this subject.

This is also the moment when the “existence” issue is minutely explained. Russell himself admits that he was preoccupied, under Meinong’s influence, by the latter’s distinction between “being” and “existence”, and he believes that “What *is* signifies, is and therefore differs from *is*, as ‘*is is*’ would be absurd”²⁴. This particular type of difficulty, that could have never been a trap of common sense, is solved by the theory of descriptions: by the statement “The author of Waverley exists”, the actual statement is that there is a certain value of the variable for which the propositional function is true ($\exists xFx$). This is the only way one may state the existence, in the case of a definite description; thus we may simply speak about

²² Bertrand Russell, *Histoire de mes idées philosophiques*, Gallimard, Paris, 1961, p. 105.

²³ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 105.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

“the author of Waverley” in an existential context within symbolic logic. *This way of talking about the existence of the definite description must not necessarily have an implication in the ontological plan. In logic, we may only say “the author of Waverley exists”, or “Scott is the author of Waverley”. Mistaking the grammatical structure with the logic one, and saying “Scott exists” is a mistaking, which is generated, as Russell says, “by an erroneous grammar”*²⁵. We may say at most “the person named Scott exists”; but this statement is essentially different, as it becomes a definite description, it is no longer a name: “every time a name is used as a name, saying ‘that one exists’ is related to an erroneous grammar.”²⁶

The description is therefore a complex symbol, and it does not directly designate an individual, it is an “incomplete symbol”, a symbol that has no meaning if isolated, but which is granted a meaning in the context of the other symbols: “the central point of the theory of descriptions is that a phrase may contribute to the meaning of a statement without having any meaning if taken individually.”²⁷

2) THE ENIGMA OF THE KING OF FRANCE

Following the same pattern, the statement *The current king of France is bald* will be translated as a conjunction of three distinct sentences:

1. There is someone who is the king of France (at this moment).
2. There is no more than one king of France (at this moment).
3. There is no one (at this moment) who is king of France and is not bald.

Translating, at this moment, into the logic of sentences, the three sentences, which, in conjunction, equal our description, we obtain the following phrase, with a logic explanation:

$$(\exists x) [Fx \ \& \ y(Fy \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Gx]$$

The truth of this phrase is conditioned by the existence of one and only one individual, who accepts the predicate F. If there is no one individual that is F, or if there are several individuals (which thus violates the singleness condition), the entire phrase is false, regardless of the interpretation of G. Or, if the first two are not true: $\sim(\exists x)Fx$ or $\sim(\exists x)(y)(Fy \rightarrow y=x)$, their conjunction will not be true either; their triadic conjunction will be even less true than that.

Two conclusions may derive from the first two enigmas:

- 1) The sentence that contains a description is not identical to the sentence that results when substituting the description by the name exercised to the same

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

signified object. If “Scott is the author of Waverley” is a fact from the literary history, the sentence “Scott is Scott” is a truism. It is true that “George IV wanted to find out whether Scott was the author Waverley”, but it is false that “George IV wanted to know whether Scott was Scott.”

2) When we substitute a description by a name, the propositional functions which are always true (tautologies) may become false, if the description does not describe anything. It is false that “the current king of France is the current king of France” or that “the round square is the round square.”

These conclusions help us to analyze the third enigma of Russell now.

3) MEINONG'S ENIGMA OF THE DIFFERENCE ENIGMA

If A and B are not different, then we may say: “there is a single x and only one”, so that “x is the difference between A and B” is a true sentence; if A and B are not different, there is no entity x. Thus, based on everything mentioned above, “the difference between A and B” has a meaning when A and B are different, but only in this case. Thus, any denoting phrase, makes the statement expressing it be true, if there is an entity which corresponds to the phrase. If there is no such entity, the statement is necessarily false: “it is true that the Earth goes round the Sun, and it is false that the Sun goes round the Earth; as ‘the resolution movement of the Earth around the Sun’ denotes an entity, while ‘the resolution movement of the Sun around the Earth’ does not denote any entity at all.”²⁸

We now possess a strong instrument, which will help us “get rid” of the ontological chimeras. The matrix technique, according to which the truth of compound sentences is established based on the simple sentences, serves to translate common language statements into a more rigorous, logical, language, which allows us to notice errors more easily. Russell therefore suggests a reformulation procedure, which, eliminating the denoting phrase and simultaneously removing any risk of ontological reification, allows the entire sentence to be attributed the value of truth. The philosophic meaning of this mechanism is extremely important for Russell, taking into account the fact that he is convinced that this type of logical analysis is meant to lead us to the basic structure of cognitive experience.

As far as the consequences of this theory are concerned, Russell refuses any approach of this issue in *On Denoting*²⁹. But we shall dare do this nonetheless. And this is because its influence is admitted by all commentators, whether criticizing or praising the theory. P.F. Ramsey, the one who suggests an alternative outlook of the theory of definite descriptions³⁰, characterizes it as a “paradigm of philosophy”,

²⁸ Bertrand Russell, *On Denoting*, quoted edition, p. 54.

²⁹ According to *Ibidem*, p. 56.

³⁰ For instance, in his paper *On Referring*, P.F. Strawson claims that an appropriate understanding of the nature of singular descriptions implies the distinction between a *phrase*, its *use*

while Moore dedicates an entire article in the reverential volume *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, in sign of appreciation³¹. Speaking about this theory, Ronald Jager says that “a big part of Wittgenstein’s work, as far as both its acceptance and rejection are concerned, was inspired by the theory of descriptions, as he sincerely admits it”³²; most commentators admit that it represents a hallmark for the beginning of analytical philosophy, and Russell himself, in *The History of Western Philosophy*, says that his theory “clarifies two millennia of blurry thinking about ‘existence’.”³³ Professor John Wisdom says that “although the theory of definite descriptions does not solve everything, it opens a new era in metaphysics”³⁴.

We shall also say that the theory of definite descriptions opens the path towards a pluralist philosophy; it may be regarded as a paradigm for logical atomism: the complex statement is separated into elementary statements, which are verified in observation, establishing their correspondence with the elementary facts from reality.

What Russell seems to say here is *Let us not allow grammar impose its rules onto ontology*, let us not allow it to make us think that what does not exist exists. In order to be sure that something really exists, Russell considers that we should trust less in the grammatical analysis and more in the logic analysis. We have seen how a mistaken use of words may generate severe errors in our manner of thinking. It may seem strange, but we should not ignore the fact that almost all our ideas are communicated in language, by means of words: if we use these in an erroneous manner, then our own ideas are susceptible of being erroneous, in no accordance with reality.

Russell *identifies a way of consolidating our conviction in the existence of things in the world*: he suggests that we should reduce, by logic reasoning, everything that we want to say about insecure entities that we doubt less, or not at all. Its approach is of major importance from two perspectives: 1) *the epistemological*

and *utterance*. Phrases in general and sentences in particular, as they cannot have a meaning that is independent from their use in one situation or another, the *reference*, therefore their *truth* or *falsity* must not refer to phrases as such, but to their particular utilization. According to Strawson, the meaning of the phrase or of the sentence engages neither their value of truth, nor the exigency for them to refer to *something*. Sometimes, meaningful phrases may be deprived of meaning, just as they may be deprived of truth. In this case, Russell’s sentence is quoted “the king of France is bald”, because this sentence is considered meaningful (provided with meaning) but with no value of truth, as long as we do not mention anyone in the phrase “the king of France” (according to Russell, as we have previously seen, the sentence was false). See F.P. Ramsey, *On Referring*, in the volume *Essays on Bertrand Russell*, Ed. E.D. Klemke, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago and London, 1970, pp. 147–172.

³¹ See G.E. Moore, *Bertrand Russell’s Theory of Descriptions*, in P.A. Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, Tudor Publishing Company, 1955.

³² Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell’s Philosophy*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1972, p. 226.

³³ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy: Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, London, Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1945, p. 860.

³⁴ According to Ronald Jager, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

perspective: by the logic analysis of our common language, we underline the justification, if it does exist, that we have in order to state the existence of the entities that we know, and 2) *the ontological perspective*: performing the same logic analysis of language, we shall see if our statements about entities that we do not know directly may be reduced, with no loss of meaning, to statements referring to entities that we have direct knowledge of; if this may be achieved, then the entities that we directly know are *the fundamental elements of the universe*.

Therefore, the theory of descriptions proposes a method for the elimination of useless entities. This is the origin of the reference to “Ockham’s razor” and to the famous saying of the reviving nominalism: “entities must not be multiplied unless needed”. The logical analysis is thus displayed as underlining the atomic constituents of complex sentences (which may sometimes seem as being simple), but also as a clarification of thoughts and as an elimination of useless entities. Therefore, the theory of descriptions proposes a reformulation of statements belonging to common language in the language of the new logic elaborated by Russell as a method aiming to solve philosophic problems. Thus, it inaugurates a new philosophizing manner based on a more or less systematic resort to the logic analysis of language; moreover, the theory of descriptions also supplies the paradigm of this logic analysis.

For certain philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell himself, this only means an appeal to the logic analysis construed as a useful tool in order to solve philosophic issues. For others, such as the philosophers belonging to the Circle of Vienna, this involves using this logic tool as a genuine “war machine” against metaphysics, or, even more general, against entire philosophy.

Hans Reichenbach eulogizes the method imposed by Russell, underlining the fact that his merit is indisputable: “Russell’s contribution proves that the logical analysis may become an instrument in order to solve major philosophic issues. Let us not forget that the development of logical symbolism is not an ideal of philosophy in itself. There are still unsolved issues; let us try to use logic technique to solve these issues. Let us see in Bertrand Russell the man who, by the precision of his methods and by his vast spirit, opened a philosophy approach that that is appropriate for our time.”³⁵

Russell himself, in *Our Knowledge of the External World*, beside firmly claiming (and even by entitling a chapter that would have echoes in the history of philosophy³⁶) that logic is *the essence of philosophy*, he also underlines the fact that it is the correct philosophic investigation method. Moreover, he believes that what

³⁵ Hans Reichenbach, *Bertrand Russell’s Logic*, in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, The Library of Living Philosophers, Volume V, Edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp, Open Court Publishing Company, La Salle, Illinois, 1989, p.54.

³⁶ See the second chapter of *Our Knowledge of the External World*, entitled *Logic, the essence of philosophy*, It. Translation, quoted edition, pp. 35–61.

is achieved by imposing logical analysis as a method is a radical change of vision, as well as an immeasurable progress. If we carefully analyze the complex facts in their simple components, we shall obtain a correct vision of reality: “*Old logic put thought to slavery, while new logic gives it wings* (s.n. – C.R.). In my opinion, it introduced the same progress in philosophy as Galilei introduced in physics, so that one may notice at least what kind of issues may be solved and what kind of issues may be left beside, as exceeding human capacities. And, when a solution is possible to be accomplished, new logic provides a method, which allows us to reach those results that do not include personal idiosyncrasies, but they have the consent of all those competent to formulate a general idea.”³⁷

As you can see, Russell endows philosophy with a modest role when he provides it with logical analysis as its main method: we must *limit our claims*, analyze *only what we may know*, since we do not possess, as humans, the necessary instruments to investigate others fields. *Real world must be the goal of our research, and logic is the appropriate instrument*. We should start from what common knowledge offers us; we shall notice that the data that it provides us are complex, rather vague and interdependent from a logical perspective. Logical analysis comes to clarify them: “by means of analysis we reduce them to simpler and more precise statements that we arrange in deductive series, where a certain number of initial statements establish a logic guarantee for the others.”³⁸

We acknowledge here the particularly important role of the theory that we have previously exposed. As we have hereby said, the theory of descriptions, as well as the theory of types, *do not represent simple technical artifices*; they are *instruments that we may successfully use in order to reach knowledge as appropriate as possible of what exists*. Russell’s idea is that philosophy must *justify* not *discover* our knowledge of what exists, revealing the *logic premises* that we start from, as well as the *fundamental elements* that we may find by means of knowledge. This analysis process decomposes the complex into the simple, thus eliminating its ambiguities and errors. Even if analysis is focused on language, Russell is not limited to claiming that logic exclusively reveals the structure of language, as many philosophers do after him; it is essential to notice and remember that, for Russell, *the method of logic analysis is the most appropriate instrument in order to analyze the structure of reality*.

We think we could say, without making any mistakes, that, when we analyze the logic form of a statement (as we have seen it can be done using the theory of definite descriptions), we actually understand how the world should be in order for that statement to be true. *The utility of the theory of descriptions is not reduced merely to its role in language, just as the utility of the theory of types is not reduced*

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 201.

only to the role it plays in mathematics. Both of them are logic theories, and Russell elaborates them because he wants a general clarification not just of common language or of mathematics, but because he firmly believes that they *are applicable to philosophy* and that they may help us know what exists; however, at the same time, they also help us realize which is the correct manner of knowing what exists. Therefore, the two theories are also important instruments from both *epistemological* and *ontological* perspectives. They help us understand both how we know and what we know.

The utility of the two theories in ontology is actually obvious, as least as far as Russell is concerned. From the ontology included in *Principles*, where any object that can be named is also endowed with an existence, Russell reaches, by means of these discoveries, a *new ontology*, which he remains faithful to for the rest of his life. The theory of descriptions, as he admits in *A History of Philosophy*, clarifies two millennia of ambiguities regarding what exists. From accepting an important role played by grammar in philosophy, as he does in *Principles*, where he says that the study of grammar is capable of revealing philosophic issues³⁹, Russell comes to claim, in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, that grammar, in general, has misled logicians who, by mistaking the grammatical form of a sentence with its logic form, erroneously consider that grammar is a guidebook for philosophic analysis. We could say that there is a rather big *distance* between the two opinions. But, at the same time, a change of attitude which is extremely useful.

The confusion, which philosophers operated before him between the logical form and the grammatical form of a sentence, could generate a more serious confusion, the one between concrete existence and abstract concepts, between the world of senses and the world of platonic ideas. The method of logic analysis helps Russell not only to correctly evaluate the theories of philosophers before him, but even the theories that he himself has elaborated, thus opening the path towards the philosophy of logic atomism.

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