

CHAPTER - 6

Strawson's Critique of Russell

CHAPTER – 6

Strawson's Critique of Russell

Section – I

Overview

The main contention of this chapter is to examine the Russellean analysis of the puzzles of reference. As suggested by the title of this chapter, I will primarily follow, in this respect, the views of another doyen in the field of analytic philosophy, Russell's famous successor, P.F. Strawson. However, I have also evaluated here few discrepancies of Russell's theory noticed by thinkers other than Strawson, who were working on the same subject. One of the puzzles, viz, the problem of substitutivity will be discussed in particular because Russell's answer to this problem seems to be inadequate. His theory fails to explain some questions satisfactorily when it faces the so-called "propositional attitudes" and "non-extensional" contexts. We will also follow how Russell's views changed between the publications of "On Denoting" in 1905, where the theory of description was first advocated and that of the first edition of *Principia Mathematica*.

The most serious, famous and sustained criticism to which Russell's theory has been subjected is to be found in Strawson's essay "On Referring". This article can be considered as the most challenging document, which has been directed against Russell's theory of description. Its vast importance lies in the fact that it shook the fundamentals of a theory that had been accepted by philosophers without much criticism for almost fifty years. Strawson has been universally acknowledged as the most vehement critic of Russell's theory. Strawson's attacks and Russell's counterattacks will be closely followed in this chapter while judging the merits and demerits of their arguments. Undoubtedly Strawson's theory is valuable, but the fact that Russell's theory has its own standing in the history of analytic philosophy is undeniable. In this perspective let us have a look into Strawson's philosophical background.

Section – II

Strawson: Philosophical Background

Peter Frederick Strawson is one of the best known Oxford philosophers of the younger generation. Born in 1919, he was educated at Christ's college, Finchley and St. Johns College, Oxford and is a Fellow of University College and British Academy. Strawson is one of the most discussed linguistic analysts. The kind of philosophy he followed is best known as ordinary language philosophy. He has

put forward that there is no real antithesis between linguistic analysis and a certain kind of metaphysics. In this connection he distinguishes between two kinds of metaphysics, descriptive metaphysics and revisionary metaphysics. This idea of Strawson is, in itself, a doctrine of great value and contemplation. Descriptive metaphysics is that which only attempts to describe the conceptual boundaries of our language and revisionary metaphysics is one, which attempts to revise them.

Not only was Strawson a metaphysician, his works on logical theory are also well known. In his first book *Introduction to Logical Theory*, (1952), Strawson wrote about the relation between ordinary language and formal logic. Strawson wrote this book with two complementary aims in his mind. First, he compared and contrasted between the behaviour of ordinary words and behaviour of logical symbols. This line of thinking was a novel idea in the field of logic and aroused much controversy. Secondly, he wanted to make clear the nature of formal logic itself. He opined that logical connectives like ' \vee ', ' \supset ' ' \equiv ' etc. cannot fully and accurately express the meanings of the logical features of ordinary language like "or" "if" and "if and only if". He categorically mentions that 'exists' is not a predicate and many misconceptions arise due to this mistaken assumption. While discussing predicate logic he also points out that certain orthodox criticisms of the traditional Aristotelian system are not tenable

because they are based on existential presuppositions. Considering this existential presupposition, therefore, traditional logic can be more consistently understood. Strawson also says that as there are mistakes underlying the conceptions of the relation between predicate calculus and ordinary language, in the same way there are mistakes underlying the theory of descriptions.

In the last part of *Logical Theory*, Strawson discusses inductive logic. Here he tries to settle that there is no need to justify induction. There is in fact no way to assess inductive standards, for there is no higher standard to appeal to. He also hints at the fact that whatever rational thinking we do actually are processes of induction.

In the mid 1950's, Strawson's interests shifted from ordinary language philosophy towards metaphysics, as a result of which his second book *Individuals* came out in 1959. This work on descriptive metaphysics was also highly acclaimed. In this book Strawson expresses a view, which opposes Wittgenstein's claim regarding metaphysics. Strawson said that certain general conclusions about the world could be gained from an analysis of how we speak.

The first part of the book *Individuals* is entitled "Particulars" and deals with the nature of and precondition for the identification of particular objects in speech.

Strawson raises two issues in this part of the book. The first thesis is that :

Material objects were the basic particulars which mean that material objects can be identified independently of the identification of particulars in other categories, but particulars in other categories cannot be identified without reference to material objects.¹

The second issue is regarding the traditional mind-body problem. Strawson rejects both the Cartesian view that mental substances are distinct but intimately connected to bodies and the modern "no-ownership" theory according to which states of consciousness are not ascribed to anything at all. Strawson's theory is that the concept of a person is a primitive concept. When we recognize this fact it becomes clear why states of consciousness are ascribed to any thing at all .We are able to see due to this primitive concept that both states of consciousness and physical properties are ascribed to one and the same thing – a person.

Part two of the book "Logical Subjects" is about the relation between particulars and universal, between reference and predication and between subjects and predicates. Observing the different criteria of distinguishing subject and predicate terms, Strawson concludes :

The crucial distinction between the way a subject expression introduces a particular into a proposition and the way a predicate expression introduces a universal into a proposition is that the identification of a particular involves the presentation of some empirical fact which is sufficient to identify the particular, but the introduction of the universal term by the predicate term does not in general involve any empirical fact.²

This thesis of Strawson enables us to look from a new angle into Frege's theory that objects are complete whereas concepts are incomplete. It also explains why Aristotle held that only universals and not particulars are predicable.

Section — III

Denoting and Referring

In a great deal of semantic literature, the term 'denotation' and 'reference' have been used interchangeably. But this is not very sensible since it means that we have to ignore certain considerations, which were central in the dispute between Russell's position in "On Denoting" and Strawson's replies in "On Referring". Russell had made a distinction between the two expressions by arguing that descriptions are not "referring" expressions but rather are denoting expressions.

G. Evans (*Varieties of Reference*, 1982) and S. Neale (*Descriptions*, 1990) have discussed this difference between referring and denoting in the context of Russell's theory of knowledge. In this connection Russell had distinguished between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description ("Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" in *Mysticism and Logic*, 1911). Russell held that to have knowledge of a certain object by acquaintance, one must be directly acquainted with the object, whereas to have knowledge of a certain object by description, one need not be acquainted with the object but to know the object as the unique satisfier of a certain description is sufficient.

This same point was the basis of Russell's distinction between denoting and referring expressions. When applied to the semantics of natural language the difference between sentences containing descriptions and sentences containing referring expressions can be understood.

The question is whether there is a semantic difference between a sentence containing a description that uniquely determines some individual (e.g. 'the third planet from the sun') and a sentence containing a referring expression (e.g. 'the Earth'). For Russell, descriptions are never referring expressions in the sense just outlined. Rather, indefinite descriptions are simply existential quantifiers; definite descriptions are somewhat more complex.³

Strawson differs in opinion from Russell on a number of points mainly regarding the uniqueness claim in Russell's analysis of descriptions. Russell thought that the sentence 'The present King of France is bald' is perfectly sensible though there is in fact no present King of France, because it is not about any unique individual. It is a general claim, which is false. Strawson argues that on the contrary this sentence has no determinate truth-value. Not only it is neither true nor false, it fails to express even a determinate proposition. According to Strawson the reason for this is that descriptions are referring expressions and when they fail to refer the statement is a kind of incomplete proposition. But before going into Strawson's objections I want to discuss few other problems regarding Russell's method of solving the puzzles of reference.

Section – IV

Problems with Russell's Theory

We have discussed in the previous chapter how Russell solves the problem of substitutivity. It seems that the solution does not hold true on close examination. For our convenience we will recapitulate the puzzle briefly:

- (1) Scott is the author of *Waverley*.
- (2) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*.
- (3) Therefore, George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott.

Russell had said that this puzzle was based on the principle of substitutivity, which runs thus :

If a is identical with b, whatever is true of the one is true of the other, and either may be substituted for the other in any proposition without altering the truth or falsehood of that proposition.⁴

Russell accepts this principle but at the same time holds that the said puzzle is only apparently of the form given out by the principle and that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. Linsky comments that, "the puzzle is caused by a logical mirage."⁵

Russell tried to solve the puzzle too easily. In his theory of description the rewritten version of this argument does not contain the definite description. So, there remains no expression to be replaced by Scott.

The puzzle about George IV's curiosity now seems to have a very simple solution. The proposition, "Scott was the author of *Waverley*" which was written out in its unabbreviated form in the preceding paragraph does not contain as any constituent "the author of *Waverley*" for which we could substitute "Scott".⁶

First of all, Linsky says, there is a mistake here on Russell's part. The conclusion does not follow by substituting "Scott" for "the author of *Waverley*" in (1). The substitutions should be made in (2). Then only the aforesaid conclusion arrives.

However he ignores Russell's mistake and tries to proceed with the solution, as it should be.

This solution, it has been objected, is unsatisfactory. It is true that after the Russellean analysis the definite description becomes eliminated from the premises. But this analysis does not in any way lead to the conclusion that the proposition (1), (2), and (3) do not constitute a valid argument. It is acceptable that sometimes proper names can be substituted for descriptions in propositions containing them. This kind of substitution has been previously established by a theorem of the *Principia*:

$$14.15 : \{(7x) (Qx) = b\} [U (7x) (Qx) \equiv U(b)]$$

Russell must have derived ideas from this theorem for, after offering the above 'solution' he comments:

This does not interfere with the truth of inferences resulting from making what is verbally the substitution of "Scott" for "the author of Waverley", so long as "the author of Waverley" had what I call primary occurrence in the proposition considered.⁷

Now, let us consider any argument such that its first premise is of the form of the antecedent of the theorem 14.15, its second premises of the form of the left hand side of the consequent and the conclusion of the form of the right hand side of the consequent. When analysed according to Russell's theory, this

argument contains no description and it is valid. The theorem 14.15 itself also contains no description when expanded in accordance with the contextual definition, which have introduced the notion of descriptions in *Principia*. So, is the view that the argument (1), (2), (3) is sanctioned by 14.15 wrong? The logical mirage account is not tenable as a probable answer. If it is true that (1), (2), (3) when analysed contains no descriptions, the same is true of 14.15.

According to Linsky, what is wrong with the view under consideration is that the description is required to have primary occurrence in both of the propositions in which it appears in 14.15; but it has primary occurrence only in the first premise of (1), (2), (3). In Russell's opinion any proposition in which "the author of *Waverley*" has a primary occurrence may validly be replaced by "Scott" (assumption from 1). However it appears that Russell has abandoned the logical mirage theory, no sooner than he presents it. This time we are told that the phrase "the author of *Waverley*" cannot be replaced by "Scott" in (2) on the basis of (1) because the description does not have a primary occurrence in (2).

There is another important objection to Russell's theory, which we must note. The objection and Russell's answer to it are as follows :

In the previous chapter where the puzzles were presented with the Russellean solutions, they were together called puzzles about 'singular terms'. Each of the puzzles were explained by using examples of definite descriptions and solved with the help of the theory of descriptions. But actually these puzzles are not only about descriptions but also about singular terms as a whole.

The first puzzle of negative existentials can pose a problem for proper names and pronouns in the same way because we can use proper names or even pronouns to make apparent reference to non-existents. For example, "Pegasus" is used to refer to a particular mythological character. Sometimes "you" is used to refer to ghosts also. Frege's puzzle of identity also arises for proper names as in the case of :

"Samuel Longhorne Clemens = Mark Twain"

Again, the puzzle of substitutivity also holds true of proper names for names do not substitute in belief contexts, for example, Albert may have beliefs about Mark Twain that he does not have about Clemens and vice versa. Same is the case with the problem of excluded middle. Just as "the King of France" (which was a definite description), "Pegasus" (a proper name) is also neither bald nor non bald. Whence, it seems that the problems are the same as that arose in the case of descriptions.

In this context an allegation was made against Russell that he has simply missed the boat because his theory of descriptions it seems, applies only to a special subclass of singular terms (definite descriptions) whereas, a solution to a problem ought to be adequate enough for general application.

Russell tried to solve the matter in a simple way, which led him to distinguish between surface appearance and underlying logical reality and to his claim that what we ordinarily call proper names are not really proper names at all, but rather they are abbreviations for definite descriptions. Russell would suggest (i) that the grammatical form of the proposition misleads us as to the logical form and (ii) that the proposition should be further analysed. This claim of Russell's was also severely criticised, but first of all let us see why Strawson objected to Russell's theory in the first place.

Section – V

Strawson's Criticisms

Strawson had examined Russell's theory very thoroughly. Strawson's outlook towards the study of language led him to object to Russell's theory as he did. There was a basic difference of opinion between Strawson and Russell. We may recall in this connection that Russell's article was typically called "On

Denoting". Here *denoting* meant a relation between an expression and the thing that was the expression's referent or denotation. Russell considered sentences in abstraction, as objects in themselves and discussed their logical properties in particular.

Strawson however primarily stressed on the use of expressions by humans. Strawson's position is that while meaning is a function of the sentence or expression, mentioning or referring and truth or falsity are functions of the *use* of the sentence or expression. He gave instances of concrete conversational situations and pointed out how the sentences were used and understood by human beings. Strawson purposefully named his article on this issue "On Referring" because by 'referring' he did not mean any abstract relation between an expression and a thing but as an act performed by a person at a particular time on a particular occasion. Strawson's main contention was that expressions do not refer at all. It is people who use expressions to refer.

This view of Strawson is somewhat like the motto of US National Rifle Association. Their slogan is, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people". Strawson explained that suppose someone writes down a sentence, "This is a fine red one";⁸ here "This" does not refer to any thing unless and until that person does something to make it refer. So, it follows that no determinate

statement is made and an expression does not refer to anything unless it is used in a suitable context, pointing out to a particular person or thing. So, there is a distinct difference between an expression (in abstraction) and the use of an expression. When an expression is being used, a person uses it. Hence the use of an expression by a person is all that matters, not the expression itself. Taking this stand on the reference of expressions led Strawson to object to Russell's way of solving the problems of reference.

The basic contention of Strawson against Russell is that Russell's theory of descriptions embodies a fundamental mistake — his allegiance to a denotative theory of meaning, that meaning is reference. Meinong too had a theory of reference for all expressions. Russell accepts the theory of reference for some expressions. To hold on to this theory that meaning is reference is a mistake according to Strawson. He says, "The source of Russell's mistake was that he thought that referring ... must be meaning. He confused meaning ... with referring."⁹ Further, it is not a sentence (sentence-token) or an utterance of a sentence, but the use of a sentence to make a statement (to say something serious, express a belief) that can be either true or false.

To prepare the ground for his criticisms of Russell's theory, Strawson introduced two parallel triplets of distinctions regarding sentences and

expressions. These distinctions were novel in idea and became very much renowned. By 'expression', Strawson meant an expression, which has a uniquely referring use, and by a 'sentence' he meant a sentence, which begins with such an expression. The distinctions were as follows:

- (A₁) a sentence,
- (A₂) a use of a sentence,
- (A₃) an utterance of a sentence,

And the second set of distinction, between:

- (B₁) an expression,
- (B₂) a use of an expression,
- (B₃) an utterance of an expression,

In order to understand the 1st set of distinctions, let us reconsider the sentence containing the definite description, 'The King of France is wise'. This sentence may have been spoken on various occasions from seventeenth century onwards. Here the word 'sentence' is being used in the sense of a sentence type, rather than sentence-token, since we have spoken of one and the same sentence being spoken on several occasions. Suppose one man had uttered the said sentence in the reign of Louis XIV and another man had uttered it in the reign of Louis XV, they would have been talking about different Kings. So, actually they had made different assertions, since it is possible that the first assertion was true and the second false. However, if two men had uttered these words,

both in the reign of Louis XIV, then either both men made a true assertion or both men made a false assertion. This is what is meant by (A₂). It can be said of the first two men that they made different uses of the same sentence, and we could say of the second two men that they made the same use of the sentence.

The second set of distinctions may be explained analogously. Just as the sentence 'The King of France is wise' can be used to make different assertions, or none at all, in the same way the expression 'The King of France' can be used to refer to different people on different occasions of use. Strawson comments,

Generally, as against Russell, I shall say this. Meaning (in at least one important sense) is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression (in the sense in which I am using the word) is to give general directions for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give general directions for its use in making true or false assertions.¹⁰

Strawson's main objection against Russell's theory may be summarized as follows:

Objection 1

Russell had said that a definite description like "The present King of France is bald" — (1) is false because there exists no such king. Strawson objects to this

verdict of Russell saying that the statement is not false but abortive. Strawson points out that if someone utters the statement — “The present King of France is bald” — his hearers will not react by saying that, “that’s false” or “I disagree”. Perhaps they will be puzzled and may say, “I am not following you; France does not have a King”. Actually the speaker has failed to refer to anything at all. “Rather, Strawson maintains, the speaker has produced only an ostensibly referring expression that has misfired.”¹¹

The sentence under discussion is not actually a complete statement. It is a defective statement but still it is different from other defective statements like “The present Queen of England has no children” — (2). (2) is a false statement, but (1) is neither true nor false because it is not a proper statement at all.

Strawson’s way of solving the problem of apparent reference to non- existents is this :

He says that (1) is meaningful in the sense that it is grammatically correct. But it is unable to say any thing true or false for it does not refer to any thing. The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used to refer to on a particular occasion. Russell, according to Strawson, committed the error of confusing meaning with referring; since the sentence has meaning, Russell

argued, it must be about something that *is*, and hence arose the problem, which he tried to solve by his theory of descriptions. The sentence "The present King of France is bald" is in any case meaningful; only its *use* by anyone now would be a spurious use whereas it could have been genuinely used by anyone living, let us say, in the seventeenth century.

In this connection Strawson also makes another distinction between a sentence and a statement. In Russell's view a meaningful sentence is a sentence that expresses a proposition. A proposition is the logical form of a sentence by which it is expressed. Propositions are sentences, which had to be either true or false. Strawson sets aside the talk of "propositions" and says that it is not the sentence, which can be true or false. Sentences become statements when they are uttered by someone and it is the statement, which can be true or false at all. It is to be noted here that not every act of utterance is successful in being true or false because not every meaningful sentence is used to make a statement.

Strawson thinks that by confusing statements with sentences and their uses, Russell made the mistake of thinking that anyone now uttering the sentence "The King of France is wise" would be making either a true or a false assertion. According to Strawson there is a third possibility that Russell overlooked, viz, that someone now uttering these words would be saying something which is

neither true nor false. Russell held his ground saying that he rejected this possibility because he thinks that what is neither true nor false has to be a nonsense. Strawson holds that this is a mistake on Russell's part because he fails to notice the above-mentioned distinction.

It is statements (or assertions) that are true or false, not sentences, and it is a sentence that is significant or meaningless, not a statement. Thus the sentence S can be significant though on a particular occasion of its use no statement (true or false) is made by the use of this sentence. This is Russell's principal error. He thinks that the only alternative to saying some thing true or false when we utter S is that S should not be significant at all. And he makes this mistake because he does not distinguish sentences from statements.¹²

Objection 2

Strawson's second objection is an attack on a claim that he thinks Russell had made regarding the sentence "the present King of France is bald". According to Strawson, Russell had claimed that when a person is uttering the said sentence, part of what he would be asserting is this: there existed at present one and only one King of France. Strawson objects upon this saying that such a claim is unacceptable. The speaker when uttering "the present King of France is bald" is certainly not asserting that there is one and only one King though he may be presupposing it. There is a distinct difference between presupposition and assertion.

Lycan points out that in this case Strawson has actually misunderstood Russell. Russell had never made any claim about the act of asserting. Strawson's objection is based on a false principle. He mistakenly assumes (and attributes the assumption on Russell) that whatever is logically implied by a sentence is necessarily asserted by a speaker who utters that sentence. To quote Lycan :

If I say "Fat Tommy can't run or climb a tree", I do not assert that Tommy is fat even though my sentence logically implies that he is; if I say "Tommy is five feet seven inches tall", I do not assert that Tommy is less than eighteen miles tall.¹³

Objection 3

Strawson criticizes Russell by saying that he (Russell) had not noticed that many descriptions are context bound. He takes the following sentence as instance :

"The table is covered with books."¹⁴ The subject term here is a definite description used in a standard way. When analysed in a Russellean manner it becomes: "At least one thing is a table and anything that is a table is covered with books." From which it follows that there is at most one table in the whole universe. Russell, Strawson says, has failed to take notice of the context of utterance.

Russell can however evade the situation in more than one way. First of all, when one says "the table", hearers are not generally sure what it means because depending on the context it may be the only table in sight, or the only table in a room, or the one we have just been talking about. Russell may give an ellipsis hypothesis here saying that there is an ellipsis in the said context. The table is actually short form of a very detailed and complicated description that is uniquely satisfied.

The ellipsis view, as it turns out, is not very satisfying and poses certain difficulties. Russell assumes that sentences really do have logical form. If that is so, then the question arises in this case that if the table is a short form for certain other descriptions, what material is being ellipsized? The answer to this question differs depending upon the material chosen, for every time the sentence, "The table is covered with books", will mean something different. Suppose if we say that "the table" means the table in this room, then we have a new concept here, namely, 'room' and the given sentence is to be interpreted as being literally about a room, the predicate term 'room' is understood as being hidden in the logical structure of the sentence.

Another way of tackling the problem would be by appealing to restricted quantifications. By restricted quantification what is meant is that, which

logicians call the domains. In these cases the range of the universal quantifiers need not be universal but are often particular classes roughly presupposed in the context. For example, when we say, "Everyone likes her", we do not mean that everybody in the universe likes the said person but everyone in a certain contextually indicated social circle likes her.

This principle may be applied to the Russellean analysis in order to evade the present problem. The Russellean analysis starts with a quantifier: "At least one thing is a table and at most one thing is a table ...". If we regard these quantifiers to be restricted in the appropriate way then they will not be implying that there is at most one table in the universe. The sentence, "The table is covered with books", will now only imply that there is at most one table of the contextually indicated sort.

This way of appealing to restricted quantification is different from the ellipsis hypothesis. According to the ellipsis view the explicit conceptual material has to be secretly mentioned in the short form. While the quantifier restriction is like a silent demonstrative pronoun. At most one table of "that" sort and the reference of "that" is fixed by the context.

This seems to be an adequate solution to objection no. 3, though some general problem in this matter remains. The questions arises: how do the quantifiers get restricted in context, or what factor determines the domains of the restricted quantifiers because it is almost always too vague and also how can it be always possible for hearers to identify the right domains. But all these problems are general and they do not pose any serious threat to Russell's theory.

It would not be inappropriate here to falsify one of Strawson's notions that people rather than expressions refer. Actually there is at least a secondary sense in which expressions do refer. Let us take the same example that was used before. The National Rifle Association's slogan is "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." In answer to this someone might justifiably say, "Yes, but they kill them much more easily and efficiently using guns". Sometimes it happens that in a sense the gun does kill the victim. So, it is perfectly all right to say in a particular context that the expression "the table" refers to a special kind of furniture. More over, there is also the notion of the "semantic referent" of a description. The semantic referent of a description in a context is whatever object in fact uniquely satisfies the description.

It has to be noted that Russell also has an objection when talking about the referent of a description. Russell insisted that descriptions are not really

referring expressions at all; a sentence containing a description is really an abbreviation of a mass of general quantificational material and does not refer to anyone in particular. Lycan comments :

But my notion of a semantic referent applies equally against Russell on this point. There is at least that secondary sense in which a description can have a referent. And it is perfectly harmless for a Russellian to grant that definite descriptions do refer, so long as s/he remembers that they do not do it directly, in the way we may have thought proper names do.¹⁵

Section — VI

Russell replies to Strawson

Russell formally replied to Strawson's criticisms in an article titled "Mr. Strawson on Referring" which was published in his book *My Philosophical Development*. Russell joins issue with Strawson in this paper where in the very beginning he says :

I may say, to begin with, that I am totally unable to see any validity whatever in any of Mr. Strawson's arguments.¹⁶

Russell first of all accuses Strawson of identifying two problems, which are actually quite distinct — namely, the problem of descriptions and the problem of egocentricity. This identification (according to Russell) leads Strawson to

believe that Russell had overlooked the problem of egocentricity, which in fact he had not; only that he had dealt with the problems separately.

While criticising Russell, Strawson, over and over used as an example, one of the two sentences Russell had initiated as instances during his presentation of the description theory. The example preferred by Strawson is, 'the present King of France is bald. The other example, viz, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*'; he simply chooses to ignore. Strawson's inclination is for this particular sentence, i.e., 'the present king of France is bald' as because his attack is mainly upon the egocentric word 'present'. Russell's view is that, Strawson has failed to notice that if for the word 'present', the words 'in 1905' are substituted, then his (Strawson's) argument does not stand at all. If perhaps we use as an example, some sentence like: 'the square-root of minus one is half the square - root of minus four', from which egocentricity is totally absent, Strawson's doctrine would not be applicable. In the later kind of sentences, Russell observes, egocentricity is absent but the problem of interpreting descriptive phrases remains as ever.

Russell however agrees to what Mr. Strawson has to say about egocentric words, but points out that there is nothing new to it because he (Russell)

himself had discussed in considerable detail the same theory much previous to Strawson. This fact, Russell says, Strawson has conveniently overlooked.

Strawson holds about egocentric words that what they refer to depends upon when and where they are used. Russell had said almost the same thing in his book *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* :

This 'denotes whatever, at the moment when the word is used, occupies the centre of attention. With words which are not egocentric, what is constant is something about the object indicated, but 'this' denotes a different object on each occasion of its use : what is constant is not the object denoted, but its relation to the particular use of the word. Whenever the word is used, the person using it is attending to something and the word indicates this something. When a word is not egocentric, there is no need to distinguish between different occasions when it is used, but we must make this distinction with egocentric words, since what they indicate is something having a given relation to the particular use of the word.¹⁷

Russell says that we should always try to reduce to a minimum the egocentric element in an assertion, but this is not always possible because the meanings of all empirical words depend upon ostensive definitions, which in turn are dependent upon experience and experience is egocentric. In using common language, however, we can describe with the help of egocentric words something, which are not egocentric.

Russell stresses that whatever is the problem of egocentric words, it has to be noted that it is not a theory, which Mr. Strawson has expounded or invented; in fact the said theory was set forth by him prior to Strawson. Russell leaves this argument on egocentricity at this point saying – “I shall say no more about egocentricity since, for the reasons I have already given, I think Mr. Strawson is completely mistaken in connecting it with the problem of descriptions.”¹⁸

After this Russell proceeds to counter attack Strawson on the subject of names. Writing in this context Strawson has said – “There are no logically proper names and there are no descriptions (in this sense).”¹⁹

What actually does Strawson mean by the words he put in brackets – ‘in this sense’? Perhaps what Strawson wants to deny is this: there are words, which are significant only because they mean something; if they are not meaningful then they would be simply empty noises, nothing else.

Russell says that if language is to have any relation to fact then there remains the necessity for such words, which are significant only because they mean something. Otherwise how can we ostensibly define something? How do we know what is meant by ‘red’ or ‘blue’? We cannot know the meanings of these words unless we have seen red or blue. So if certain basic words in an

individual's vocabulary had this kind of direct relation to fact, language in general would have no such relation. So, Strawson's point of view is not acceptable to Russell.

Strawson had accused Russell of expounding a 'logically disastrous theory of names'. But he does not elaborate as to why he considers this theory as logically disastrous. In this connection Russell goes on to explain that while such words as 'Red' are usually regarded as a predicate and as designating a universal, he wants to construct a language where 'red' is a subject. This, Russell says, would benefit the purpose of philosophical analysis. Russell opines that calling 'red' a universal is confusing and perhaps for this reason Strawson calls this theory "logically disastrous".

This is the basis of a fundamental disagreement between two sects of analytic philosophers. One group of philosophers, of whom Russell is one of the most prominent, thought that common language is void of distinctness and clarity, so an artificial language needs to be constructed in philosophy for accuracy and precision just as in the case of physical sciences. "In philosophy it is syntax, even more than vocabulary, that needs to be corrected."²⁰

For technical purposes, technical language, different from those of daily life is indispensable.

The other group, which includes Strawson, known as the ordinary language philosophers, thought that common speech was good enough for philosophical analysis. A careful refinement of ordinary language would suffice to see philosophical problems clearly.²¹

Russell had said that the problem of egocentricity and the problem of descriptions were two distinct ones. Having answered Strawson's accusations regarding the former, he now goes on to defend the latter. First of all Russell makes it clear that his theory of descriptions was never intended as an analysis of the state of mind of those who utter sentences containing descriptions. Strawson had said of Russell that he had arrived at the analysis of the sentence 'The King of France is wise' (S), with the presupposition that anyone who uttered the sentence S, was making a true assertion.

Russell denies this accusation saying that Strawson has misinterpreted him. He (Russell) was actually only trying to do an accurate analysis of some confused thoughts that people have in their minds.

Russell in his theory had held that 'S' is false if there is no King of France. Strawson objects to this. According to Strawson 'S' is significant and not true, but nor is it false. In Russell's opinion this is a mere question of verbal convenience. For Russell, the definition of the word 'false' is such that every significant sentence is either true or false; whereas Strawson does not think in this way. Neither does he state clearly what is the exact meaning of the word false. Being an Ordinary language philosopher, Strawson does not tolerate the alternation of the meanings of words however convenient it may be for the situation. Russell on the other hand says that it is preferable to use the alterations according to the purpose in view. As an instance Russell regards Universal Affirmative, i.e. sentences of the form 'All A is B'. Traditionally such sentences imply that there are A's; but in mathematical logic it is more convenient to consider that 'All A is B' is true if there are no A's. This view is acceptable to Russell.

Lastly, Russell sums up Strawson's arguments against the theory of descriptions and his reply to it in the last paragraph of his article, which I would like to quote is as follows :

There are two problems that of descriptions and that of egocentricity. Mr. Strawson thinks they are one and the same problem, but it is obvious from his discussions that he has not considered as many kinds of descriptive phrase as are relevant to the argument. Having confused the two problems, he asserts dogmatically that it is only the egocentric problem that needs to be solved, and he offers a solution of this problem, which he seems to believe to be new, but which in fact was familiar before he wrote. He then thinks that he has offered an adequate theory of descriptions and announces his supposed achievement with astonishing dogmatic certainty. Perhaps I am doing him an injustice, but I am unable to see in what respect this is the case.²²

Section – VII

Some Further Objections

I would like to discuss here briefly two other criticisms against Russell's theory, which have raised questions in the minds of many contemporary philosophers. I have placed them in the last section but they are not the least in importance. Though Strawson's criticism of Russell's theory is the most recognised one, these problems do not concern him. The first one originates rather with Wittgenstein's theory on proper names. I had discussed Wittgenstein's theory in my thesis earlier and do not wish to do so again. However, it would suffice to indicate that in his theory Wittgenstein had distinguished between real names and false names. Wittgenstein's famous dictum was, "Don't confuse the

meaning of a name with the bearer of the name."²³ If this dictum were followed, then Russell's description theory has to be rejected.

Russell had argued that if "the author of *Waverley*" was a name, then it would name something *c*, and hence "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" would mean, "Scott is *c*". But on analysis it becomes clear that this would be implied only if there was a presupposition that if "the author of *Waverley*" were a name for *c*, then it would mean the same thing as any other name for *c*, say "*c*".

It seems that Russell had assumed this because he did not differentiate between the meaning of a name and the bearer of a name. It follows then that, two names having the same bearer would have the same meaning, and Russell's argument would be valid.

Wittgenstein as well as Strawson has objections against this identification of the meaning of a name with its bearer. Strawson goes one step further and rejects Wittgenstein's dictum too. According to Strawson, it seems that Wittgenstein in his turn assumes that although the bearer of a name is not its meaning, something else is. Strawson holds that, in fact names do not in general have meanings at all. Strawson observes that if one does not know who George

Washington is, one does not ask what the name "George Washington" means.²⁴

Anaphora

The second objection against the Theory of Descriptions is that it cannot explain the 'anaphoric' uses of expressions. Russell, as we have noted, deals only with the central use of "the", and does not feel necessary to explain plural uses or generic uses. However, Russell's theory ought to have explained anaphoric uses because unlike plural or generic uses they are ostensibly singular referring expressions.

By anaphoric expressions are meant those expressions, which inherit their meaning from another expression usually occurring earlier in the sentence or in a previous sentence. For example :

Example : 1) The girl who is performing on stage is very pretty. She is wearing a blue dress.

Here, 'She' refers back to the girl performing on stage. Actually the second sentence is equivalent to, "The girl who is performing on stage is wearing a blue dress."

Geach suggested that 'She' is only abbreviating a repetition of the antecedent phrase and if this suggestion were accepted, then example 1. poses no problem for Russell because it could be analysed like other Russellean paraphrases. But Evans pointed out that problem arises when the antecedent is a quantifier phrase or an indefinite description.

Example : 2) A girl lived with her mother near the forest. She had a red hooded dress.

This, of course is not equivalent to

2') A girl had a red hooded dress,

Because it misses the fact that 'She' referred to the particular girl who lived with her mother near the forest.

Russell may defend himself saying that his theory was a theory of definite descriptions and example 2. does not contain definite description. However, against this it can be shown that definite descriptions can themselves be anaphoric.

Example : 3) A girl lived with her mother near the forest. The girl had a red hooded dress.

Example : 4) Just one student came for the class today. The student looked as if she is ill.

It is understood that "The student" in (4) is abbreviating "The student who came for class today." — This is in agreement with Russellean analysis. But the same does not hold true for (3). If "The girl" abbreviates "The girl who lived with her mother near the forest", then it could be paraphrased into — at most one girl lived with her mother near the forest. (3), however does not imply this. It is not logically inconsistent to say that more than one girl lived with her mother near the forest. Of course, it should be noted that someone uttering (3) suggests that there is only one girl. But it would not be contradictory to assume that there was more than one girl. So, it can be concluded that Russell's theory cannot satisfactorily explain the anaphora.

•••

Notes and References on Chapter – 6 :

1. J.R. Searle, "Strawson, P.F." in *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* P. Edwards (ed.), New York : Collier Macmillan, 1967, Vol. VIII, *op.cit.*, p. 27.
2. *Ibid*, p. 28.
3. In *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* P. Ludlow (ed.), The MIT Press, 1997, p. 320.
4. B. Russell, "On Denoting", *Logic and Knowledge*, R.C. Marsh (ed.), London : Routledge, 1994, p. 47.
5. L. Linsky, *Referring*, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, p. 67.
6. "On Denoting", *Logic and Knowledge*, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-52.
7. *Ibid* p. 52.
8. Example quoted from *Philosophy of Language : a Contemporary Introduction* by W.G. Lycan, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 22.
9. P. F. Strawson, "On Referring" in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, R.R. Ammerman (ed.), New York : Mcgraw-Hill Inc., 1965, p. 321.
10. *Ibid*.
11. *Philosophy of Language: a Contemporary Introduction*, *op.cit.*, p. 22.
12. "On Referring", *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, *op.cit.* p. 319.
13. *Philosophy of Language : a Contemporary Introduction*, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
14. "On Referring", *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 322.
15. *Philosophy of Language: a Contemporary Introduction*, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

16. B. Russell, "Mr. Strawson on Referring" in *My Philosophical Development*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 175.
17. Quoted in *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*, p. 240.
19. Quoted in "Mr. Strawson on Referring", in *My Philosophical Development op.cit.*, p. 177.
20. *Ibid*, pp. 178 -179.
21. Cf, Chapter 1 of this thesis.
22. "Mr. Strawson on Referring", *My Philosophical Development, op.cit.*, p.180.
23. L. Linsky, -"Referring" in *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, P. Edwards (ed.), Vol. VIII, *op.cit.*, p. 98.
24. *Ibid*, pp. 98-99.

•••