Chapter Two

Russell's theory of Proper Names

Russell's theory of proper name may be said to be a development of some of the basic ideas of J.S.Mill, because Mill was the first philosopher who ingrained the seed of proper name. From Mill's classification of names, Russell takes some clues in developing his theory of the concept of proper name. Although, Russell's interpretation of proper name is more logical than philosophical, he, however, aggress with Mill in maintaining that proper names are devoid of all connotation i.e., devoid of descriptive content or meaning. But Russell equally differs from Mill in maintaining that the expressions which Mill used as proper names in ordinary usage are not proper names at all, they are only abbreviated or 'disguised descriptions'.[31]

In comparison to other philosophers, we think Russell's philosophical understanding of proper name is more technical as well as logical. Of course, there is no question of doubt that Russell's understanding of proper name is a development of some of the basic ideas of J.S. Mill, but Russell differs from Mill on many accounts. However, before delving into this issue, let us, at first, define straightway what dose Russell actually mean by a proper name. The basic idea of Russell's theory of proper name is, we think, the contrast between name and what he calls's description. 'Scott' is a name, but 'the author of Waverly' is a description. 'Armstrong' is a name but 'the first man on the moon' is a description. According to Russell, 'a name in the strict sense of the term can never be a description and a description in the strict sense of the term can never be name.'[32]

---

[31] Russell, B. "Description" in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A.P. Martinich. P. 212-18.
[32] Ibid. p. 213.

Unlike other philosophers, Russell classifies names into two different types, such as, logical proper names and ordinary proper names. According to Russell a logical proper name is a name that can be known by acquaintance; whereas an ordinary proper name which apparently looks like a proper name, but in the true sensed of the term it is a disguised or abbreviated descriptions. Thus for Russell, ordinary proper names are not proper in the strict logical sense. Accordingly, we have two different approaches in Russell's philosophy of language. The theory that has been developed by Russell on the basis of logical proper name is known as *the realist theory of naming* and the theory that has been developed by Russell on the basis of ordinary proper names is called description theory of naming. Therefore, in the First Section of this sequel, we explain Russell's realist theory of naming and in the Second Section of this sequel; we analyse and examine Russell's description theory of naming.

First Section

Russell's Realist theory of Proper Names

From the above idea that there is an irreducible contrast between a name and a description, Russell seems to have picked up the difference in function between the subject and predicate of a categorical proposition, i.e., subject-predicate statement. Consider the statement: "Socrates is human". Here the subject 'Socrates' is a name because it mentions or refers to an individual, and the predicate 'human' describes the individual by ascribing some properties, namely, the humanly properties, to it. So Russell says that the function of the subject is that of naming and not one of describing, while the function of the predicate is that of describing and not one of naming. One may think that the subject of a categorical statement may look like to be descriptions but this appearance is illusory. Because such statements are not categorical rather they are general. For

example 'Man is a social animal'. Here the subject term 'man' looks like a particular name but it is not a particular rather it is a general name because it designates an indefinite number of individuals, hence it is not categorical statement but general statement. Again, Russell says that a general statement would be either universal or particular and it can show that no general statement is categorical in the strict logical sense of the term. Thus, the above statement can be reduced to the universal conditional: 'For all values of x, if x is a man then x is a social animal' wherein the word 'man' has been removed to the predicate position, to which alone it legitimately belongs. One consequence of the thesis that 'no general statement is categorical is indeed that all categorical statements are singular, and this consequence is accepted by Russell'[33]. Another consequence of this thesis is that all names are singular names, and that there are no general names. This consequence is also accepted by Russell, and by accepting it he rejects Mill's classification of names into singular and general. According to Russell, name means singular name but there are no general names. He says that a singular name always occupies the *subject position* of a categorical proposition and that a general name is not genuine name rather it is general description which occupies the *predicate position*. So, a general name is not really a genuine name in proper, description always inheres into this name.

Russell says that a genuine name does not have any descriptive function or it can not have any descriptive content either. According to him, if a name is not devoid of all descriptive content, then it cannot be a name in proper. Thus Russell arrives at the position very similar to the one which was taken earlier by Mill, namely that proper names are non-connotative, for what Mill calls 'connotation' is virtually the same as what Russell

[33] Ibid p. 214.

calls 'descriptive content or meaning'.[34] According to Russell a genuine name always non-connotative in the sense that it can always designates the single object or an attribute only. It does not have connotation nor have any meaning. For Mill a connotative term is that which designates the individual and its attributes only. For Russell if a proper name does not have any connotation or meaning or descriptive content then it designates the object directly. So for him, all proper names that do not have any connotation are genuine names which are directly acquainted with the object.

Mill's classification of name is fully rejected by Russell. Mill classifies name into singular and general. Singular names also divided into concrete and abstract and concrete names also divided into connotative and non-connotative. Again Mill says that general name can be divided into concrete and abstract. The whole of this classification is rejected by Russell, for there are no general names as all names are singular, and there are no connotative names as the so-called connotative names, being descriptions, are not names at all. It is not difficult to maintain that the terms which Mill calls 'general names' are not genuine names, for they can always be removed to predicate position in the manner explained above. But it seems more difficult to maintain that the terms which he calls 'singular connotative names' are not names at all. Take the term 'the present king of France'. Since it is connotative, it is not a name, says Russell. But if it is not a name then it should be a predicate. But it can not be a predicate for it applies, if at all, to only one individual, while all predicates are universal. So it seems that the term 'the present king of France' is a name after all, for if it to be used at all in a statement it should be used in the subject position, and what can be so used in the subject position should be regarded as a name. Russell solves this

[34] Ibid. p. 215.

difficulty by saying that this term is neither a predicate nor a name; it is an 'incomplete symbol'[35] which has an altogether different function in the statement in which it may happen to occur. The rule that the expression must occur either in the subject position or in the predicate position is valid only in the case of a statement which is genuinely categorical and thus admits of a clean subject-predicate analysis. But the statements in which the expression 'the present king of France' might occur are not genuine categorical statements, and they do not admit of a clean subject-predicate analysis. The expression 'The present king of France is bald' is equivalent with 'There is atleast one x, such that x is king of France, and for all y, y is king of France if and only if y is identical with x, and x is bald'; and consequently, it is not a categorical, but a general statement. It is also noteworthy that, after the analysis is made, the expression 'the present King of France' no longer occurs in the statement to trouble us.

Russell goes against Mill's view that 'Paul', 'Caesar', 'John'; 'Brown' etc. is all ordinary proper names. Here Russell says that these names are not really names but disguised descriptions. In fact, all the names which we , as well as the grammarians, should usually call 'proper names' would be regarded as *disguised descriptions or abbreviated descriptions* by Russell. So 'Socrates' is only an abbreviation of 'the Master of Plato' or 'the philosopher who drank hemlock', and 'Homer' is only an abbreviation of 'the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey'. The only expressions which can be regarded as proper names, in the strict logical sense of the term, are demonstratives, and, particularly, the demonstratives 'this', 'that', 'it' and the pronoun, such as 'I'. Russell says that only logically proper names are the genuine proper names. So, according to Russell names are divided into two types such as logically proper names and ordinary proper names.

---

[35] Ibid. p. 215.

Russell's division of proper names into logical proper names and ordinary proper names

Russell classifies name into two types such as logically proper name and ordinary proper name. Russell has two theories of name. One applies to what he calls 'logically proper names' and is associated with the realist theory of meaning and the principle of acquaintance. The other applies to what he calls 'ordinary proper names. For example Aristotle, Troy' Margaret, etc. are ordinary proper names. These are 'truncated or telescoped' descriptions."[36] Russell's over all account regarding proper names has two aspects. On the one hand, there is a body of doctrines which supposedly effect is contrast between two semantic functions, one ascribed to logically proper names, and the other ascribed to descriptions. We shall call these functions, respectively, naming and describing. Unlike many philosophers, Russell classifies name into two types, such as logically proper name and ordinary proper name. According to Russell, a logically proper name is a genuine name whereas an ordinary proper name is not a genuine proper name but an ***abbreviated description.*** Russell actual says that although an ordinary proper name apparently looks like a name, but it is a ***disguised description***. So Russell strictly rejects 'ordinary proper name as a genuine proper name.'[37]

Russell makes a distinction between ordinary proper name and logically proper name. Russell says that an ordinary proper name is known by *description*; whereas a logical proper name is known by *acquaintance.* Russell says that a logically proper name has some fundamental features which are as follows:

(a) A logically proper name, for Russell, is a singular name.

---

[36]Russell, B. 'Principle of Logical Atomism', in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements*, First Series, London and New York, 1924. p. 243.

[37] Ibid. p. 244.

(b) Since a logically proper name is singular, it is equally to be a particular.

(c) A logically proper name can take the subject position alone.

(d) A logically proper name, according to Russell, is devoid of any descriptive content.

(e) A logically proper name is known by acquaintance.

By understanding a logically proper name as singular as well as a particular, Russell thereby means the individual constant of formal logic. According to Russell, only demonstrative pronouns, such as-'this', 'that', 'it', etc. are used to refer to one's current ***sense data*** and the pronoun 'I'.[38] He held that ordinary proper names are really abbreviated or disguised definite descriptions. Definite descriptions, in turn, according to Russell's famous theory of description, function not as referring expressions but as *quantificational phrases*. So far we have discussed Russell's theory of logically proper names. Now we propose to discuss ordinary proper name as the theory of Description or definite description or disguise description.

Second Section

Russell's Description theory of Proper Names

Russell's theory of descriptions (RTD) can be appreciated against the background of Russell's view about the connections between language and the world, although this view is not itself a part of the theory. Russell held that one can infer things about the nature of the world by examining the language that truthfully describes the world. In his *Principles of Mathematics* (1903), [39]he held that every well formed denoting phrase

[38] Ibid. p. 245.

[39] .Russell, B. *Principles of Mathematics* , 2nd edn (London: George Allen and Unwine, 1937)

denotes, and that definite description, phrases of the form of "the-so-and-so", denotes the right things-things satisfying the descriptions. This view suggests that such definite descriptions as "The Golden Mountain", and "The Round Square", "The winged horse of Greek Mythology" do in fact, denote things that fit or satisfy them. RTD, originally set forth in Russell's, "On Denoting" (1905)[40] represents his attempt to account for the meaningfulness of sentences in which such expressions occur in a way that does not commit him to the existence of such entities.

Russell Theory of Description is used to analyze sentences in which definite descriptions occur in places in which proper names may occur. It is an early work in analytic philosophy and it represents one form of philosophical analysis. Such a sentence as,

(1) John is bald is a subject- predicate sentence containing an occurrence of the proper name "John".

The sentence,

(2) The tallest spy is bald, appears to be a subject-predicate sentence in which the definite description, "the tallest spy" occurs the place in which the proper name, 'john' occurs in (1). This theory entails that these two sentences should not be treated in the same way; definite description should not be treated as if they were proper names. Russell maintained that although sentences, like (2) , have the grammatical form of subject-predicate sentences, they do not have the logical form of subject-predicate sentences, and that the correct analysis of such a sentence as the (2), will not treat it as a subject-predicate sentence. He was led to this position by three 'motivating puzzles.'[41]

A. Scott and the author of Waverly.

---

[40] Russell. B. 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 14 (1905), pp. 479-93.
[41] Ibid. p. 480.

B. The king of France.

C. The difference between A and B.

(A) 'Scott and the author of Waverly.'

Russell observed that a sentence like,

(3) George IV wished to known if Scott is the author of Waverly,

Might well be true, even though

(4) George IV wished to know if Scott is Scott,

was false and

(5) Scott is the author of Waverly,

was true. If (3) is true, then it would appear that George IV was uncertain about the truth of (5) and if (4) were true, it would appear that George IV was uncertain about the true of

(6) Scott is Scott

Furthermore, if (5) is true, and the expression "the author of Waverley," functioned as a proper name in (5), then (5) would appear to say the same thing as (6). Yet, if (5) and (6) said the same thing, it is hard to see how (3) could be true while (4) is false.

B 'The present king of France.'

Russell observed that sentence,

(7) The present King of France is bald,

is not true. France is not a monarchy. He also maintained that

(8) The present king of France is not bald,

is not true. For the set of non-bald things does not contain a present king of France. The law of excluded middle,

LEM (Law of excluded middle) for any proposition p, either p is true or not-p, the negation or denial of p, is true,

It seems to imply that there is no middle ground-for any given sentence, either 'that sentence or its denial is true.'[42] Since (7) is not true and (8) is the apparent denial of (7), it would seem to follow that (8) is true. We have seen, however, that there are reasons for thinking that (8) is not true.

C. 'The difference between A and B.'[43]

Two quantities, A and B, are of the same magnitude: A-B=0. Hence, there is no numerical difference between A and B. We might then think that

(9) There is no difference between A and B,

is true; this, in turn, suggests that

(10) The difference between A and B does not exist,

is true.

(10), if true, would appear to attribute non-existence to the difference between A and B; that would seem to entail that the difference between A and B is such that it does not exist.

However, how can the difference between A and B be such that it does not exist, if, in fact, there is no such thing as the difference between A and B? Hence, it seems that there is no way to deny truthfully that a given thing exists.

Russellian solution of the puzzles

Russell's solution to these puzzles is to stop treating sentences containing definite descriptions as if the descriptions functioned as proper names. Russell had treated such expressions as, "The Present king of France," "the round square," and "the difference between A and B," as he treated proper names, and would treat sentences in which such expressions occur as grammatical subjects as if they were 'genuine subject-predicate

[42] Ibid. p. 483.
[43] Ibid. pp. 483-85.

sentences.'[44] Under RTD, such sentences would be regarded as existentially quantified general sentences.

Such a sentence as

(11) Some person is wise,

It is an existentially quantified sentence. Russell would analyze, or interpret, (11) as:

(12) There is an x such that x is a person and x is wise.

Russell maintained that despite their apparent grammatical form that of subject-predicate sentences-the sentence that gives rise to the puzzles are, in fact, *existentially quantified sentences*. They have the grammatical form of subject-predicate sentence but the logical form of existentially quantified sentences, and it is the logical form of sentences that should serve as our guide for drawing inferences from sentences.

On the analysis afforded by RTD,

(5) Scott is the author of Waverley is analyzed as

(5') There is an x such that x authored Waverley, x alone authored Waverley, and x is Scott.

Therefore, on this analysis,

3) George IV wished to know if Scott is the author of Waverley, which contains (5) as an embedded clause, is analyzed as

(3') George IV wished to know if there is an x such that x authored Waverly, x alone authored Waverley, and x is Scott.

It is generally recognized that (3') could be true even of (4) is false, and, hence that, as analyzed by the theory, that (3) can be true even if (4) is false.

Now the sentence

(7) The present King of France is bald,

is analyzed as:

---

[44] Ibid. p. 486.

(7') There is an x such that x is a present King of France, nothing else is a present king of France, and x is bald.

This sentence is false; France is not a monarchy. The theory yields two analyses of the sentence

(8) The present king of France is not bald.

One of the two analyses is,

(8w) There is an x such that: x is a present King of France, nothing else is a present king of France, and x is not bald.

The other of the two analyses is,

(8n) it is not the case that there is an x such that: x is a present King of France, nothing else is a present king of France, and x is not bald.

(8w), the interpretation of (8) on which the definite description gets "wide scope," is false; it falsely asserts that there is a present King of France, and then goes on to assert that there is just one such king, and that he is bald.

But since France is not a monarchy, there is no present king of France, (8n), the interpretation of (8) on which the definite description gets "narrow scope," is true; for it asserts the denial of (7'), and (7') is false. In this way, Russell satisfied the requirement that either (7) or its denial is true; for, strictly speaking, (8n), and not (8w) is the denial of (7') – and (7') is the theory's analysis of (7).

Finally,

(13) The difference between A and B exists.

It is analyzed as:

(13') there is an x such that x is a difference between A and B and x alone is a difference between A and B,

And (13') can be false in the case where there is no such thing as the difference between A and B. As a result, one can truthfully assert the existence of something. That is,

(14') It is not the case that there is an x such that x is a difference between A and B and x alone is a difference A and B.

RTD also analyzes sentences that contain indefinite descriptions. Such a sentence as:

(15) A man is running,

It contains the indefinite description, "a man". In a place that could be occupied by a proper name. Russell maintained that such expressions should not, however, be treated as proper names, and would have offered something like,

(15') :There is an x such that x is a man and x is running,

As an analysis of (15).

The Significance of Russell's Description theory of Names

The theory of description has already been discussed above. Let us now explicate the significance of Russell's description theory of naming. According to Russell, definite description is a disguise description, it is not an actual proper name but it has played an important role in philosophy. One major point here is summed up in the slogan: "definite descriptions are incomplete symbols". What does Russell mean by an incomplete symbol? Here he says, "a symbol which is not supposed to have any meaning in isolation, but is only defined in certain contexts".[45] Why should we think that, according to the theory of descriptions, a definite description has no meaning in isolation? Russell's fundamental idea of meaning is referential: a symbol has a meaning if it stands for something, and the thing for which it stands is its meaning. There is a certain sense in which a definite description may stand for some thing- "The President of the USA in 1999" we may say, stands for a certain

[45] Russell, B. "Principia Mathematica", *Mind.* vol. 1, 1913. p. 66.

man. But according to the theory of descriptions, a definite description does not function referentially. In a proposition expressed by a sentence using a definite description, that is to say, 'there is no entity for which the definite description stands.'[46] The proposition expressed by "The President of the USA in 1999" does not contain Bill Clinton. Nor does it contain a denoting concept which denotes him. There is no entity in that proposition for which the definite description stands. That is what Russell means by saying that 'definite descriptions have no meaning in isolation.'[47] Sentences in which definite descriptions occur, however, often succeed in expressing propositions: the sentences as a whole are meaningful. This is what Russell means by saying that definite descriptions, like other incomplete symbols, are "defined in certain contexts". An incomplete symbol makes a systematic contribution to a sentence in which it occurs; only it does not do so by indicating an entity which is contained in the proposition.

The idea of an incomplete symbol made an immense difference to Russell's thought. Before "On Denoting"[48] he had generally taken the unit of analysis to be subsentential. A referring term, or a predicate, is analyzed to see exactly what entity it stands for. A paradigm here is the analysis of numbers in terms of classes: we understand a number word by seeing that it should be taken as standing for a certain class. Another way of putting the same point is to say that analysis will, at least in general, leave unaltered the overall from of the sentence being analyzed. The constituents of the proposition may not be those suggested by the parts of the sentence, but each part of the sentence will generally stand for some constituent in the proposition, and the constituents will generally be arranged in the sort of way suggested by the arrangement of the parts of

[46] Ibid. p. 67.
[47] Ibid. p. 68.
[48] Russell, B. 'On Denoting', *Mind,* 14, 1905.

the sentence. Thus in "Principles of Mathematics" he says: "The correctness of our philosophical analysis of a proposition may... be usefully checked by the exercise of assigning the meaning of each word in the sentence expressing the proposition. On the whole, grammar seems to me to bring us much nearer to a correct logic than the current opinions of philosophers...."[49]

After "On Denoting", Russell's idea of analysis is quite different. He comes to assume that analysis of a sentence will generally reveal that it expresses a proposition of a quite different logical form. The unit of analysis becomes the sentence, and Russell's attention is focused on the logical forms of propositions. The analysis of sentences containing definite descriptions is a paradigm here: the sentence has subject-predicate form, but analysis in accordance with the theory of descriptions reveals that it expresses a proposition which is an existential quantification.

A consequence of Russell's new view is that he comes to take it for granted that 'our ordinary language is generally misleading.'[50] In sharp contrast to his view in principles, he holds that our sentences generally have forms quite different from the real forms of the propositions which they express. A primary task of philosophy thus becomes that of getting past the misleading surface structure of language to the underlying structure. Here we have a crucial contribution to an important theme in twentieth century analytic philosophy quite generally: the idea that language is systematically misleading in philosophically significant ways. We also have one of the points of origin for the more specific idea of a contrast between the surface structure of language and its deep structure,

---

[49] Russell, B. "*The Principles of Mathematics*", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1910-13. p.42.

[50] Wittgenstein, L. "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*", (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922). P.13.

or between grammatical form and underlying logical form. Along with this, however, Russell is also forced to pay more attention to language and symbolism. In principles, language in the sense was never at the centre of his attention; he treated it as a more or less transparent medium through which we can perceive the underlying reality which is our concern. Now, he has to be more self conscious about symbolism, if only to avoid being misled by it. In a course of his lectures given early in 1918, Russell said: "There is a great deal of importance of philosophy in the theory of symbolism, a good deal more than at one time I thought. I think the importance is almost entirely negative, i.e., the importance lies in the fact that unless you are fairly self conscious about symbol...you will find yourself attributing to the thing properties which only belong to the symbol".[51]

This shift of attention towards language- towards the actual words spoken or written- was to be of the greatest importance both for Russell's own thought and for that of philosophers who came after him.

A further aspect of the importance of the idea of an incomplete symbol in Russell's thought is simple that it goes along with the notion of contextual definition- that is, that in order to define a symbol it is sufficient to define the contribution that it makes to all the sentences in which it may occur. This was an idea that Russell exploited increasingly over the ensuring ten years, perhaps most notably with his definition of classes in terms of propositional functions. According to this definition, a subject-predicate sentence whose subject is a class symbol is to be understood as an existential quantification, asserting the existence of a propositional function satisfying certain conditions.

[51] Russell, B. "*Principle of Logical Atomism*", papers 8, 1972. p. 166.

Russell's idea of an incomplete symbol is clearly new with "On Denoting".[52] According to the theory of denoting concepts definite descriptions do stand for constituents of propositions, namely, denoting concepts; hence they are not incomplete symbols. In the case of other, Russellian ideas which are also associated with the theory of descriptions, however, the contrast is less clear- cut. I have in mind here Russell's views having to do with names, acquaintance, and the elimination of non-existent concreta. These views could have been developed in the context of the theory of denoting concepts and to a limited extent were. But it was the theory of descriptions which provided the context within which the views were developed in detail. To some extent, we may have here coincidences of timing: Russell's views on a number of related topics began to shift, or at least to become sharper, at around the same time that he developed the theory of descriptions or perhaps a little earlier. This may not entirely be a matter of coincidence, however, Russell's theory of denoting concepts was, as we have emphasized, in rather an open conflict with his fundamental metaphysical tenets. Under these circumstances, one might accept him to shrink from taking steps which would require heavy use of that theory. The theory of descriptions (except for the worry about generality) was, by contrast, right in line with his basic views, and it is not surprising that he was ready to exploit it to the full.

Let us begin with the question of one-existent concreta- whether there is, in some sense, such a thing as the planet Vulcan or the present king of France. As we saw, the theory of denoting concepts, in fact, gives Russell the means to avoid accepting that there are any such things. He can say that whenever we appear to have a proposition containing a non-existent concretum, what we really have is a proposition containing a denoting

[52] Russell, B. "On Denoting", *Mind* n. s. 14 (1905), pp. 479-93; Papers 4, pp. 415-27; very widely reprinted.

concept which lacks a denotation. Russell, as we saw, came to appreciate this possibility before "On Denoting"[53] but, whether by coincidence of timing or not, he does not fully exploit it. Once the theory of descriptions is in place, by contrast, he has no hesitation in exploiting that theory to rid his ontology of non-existent concreta. What appears to be a definite description of such an object is, of course, analyzed to show that the proposition does not contain the alleged object, but only properties which are claimed to be uniquely satisfied. More strikingly, names which appear to name such objects must be treated in the same fashion. They are, on this view, not genuine proper names at all, but rather disguised definite descriptions. Understanding a sentence in which a (non-genuine) name of this sort appears does not involve simply fastening the name to an object with which one is acquainted. It involves, rather, having in mind (being acquainted with) a property and asserting that it is uniquely satisfied.

How widely is this tactic to be applied? Obviously, it is to be applied whenever we have a sentence which appears or purports to be about a concrete object which in fact does not exist. What of sentences which appear to be about concrete objects which, as far as the speaker knows, may or may not exist? Russell seems to think that the analysis of a proposition should be available to one who understands it. But clearly he does not think that merely by analyzing propositions one can tell whether some supposed object in fact exists. So, the general rule is: if there is a proposition apparently about a certain concrete object, but the existence of that object is at all open to doubt then the proposition is to be analyzed in accordance with the theory of descriptions, i.e., as not really containing the object after all. So the presence of "a name in a sentence does not indicate the presence of the named object in the corresponding

[53] Ibid. p.418.

proposition unless we have a guarantee that the object really exists.''[54] Without such a guarantee the name is thus not, by Russell's standards a genuine proper name at all.

What could give us such a guarantee? From within Russell's thought, the answer is easy: our being acquainted with an object of course guarantees that it is real (and hence, if it is a concrete object that it exists). In a proposition which I can understand, all the constituents must be entities with which I am acquainted. At the end of "On Denoting" Russell claims that this principle- sometimes knows as 'the Principle of Acquaintance- is a result of the theory of descriptions.'[55] Superficially this claim is quite misleading. In one sense the Principle of Acquaintance is by no means new in Russell's thought with the theory of descriptions; it is implicit, at least, in principle, and I think Russell would have accepted it at any time from 1900 onwards. But in a deeper sense there is something new. Russell's denial of non-existent concreta goes along with a difference in the role that acquaintance plays in his thought. (This new role, and the denial of non-existent concreta, perhaps could have been worked out in terms of the theory of denoting concepts, but in fact were not.)

In principles Russell took a very lax attitude towards acquaintance: if the exigencies of his theorizing required that we be acquainted with objects of a certain kind, then he was willing to assert that we are, in fact, acquainted with objects of that kind. The notion of acquaintance, we might say, functioned to deflect epistemological worries but did not impose any constraints on Russell's thought. This changes from 1905 on; over following decade the constraints imposed by the notion of acquaintance come to dominate his views. The denial of non-existent

---

[54] Ibid. p. 419.

[55] Russell, Bertrand. "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Soceity*, 11, 1910-11. p.154.

concreta is the first step in this process. We are not acquainted with the planet Vulcan. By the argument which we indicated above, it seems that we cannot be acquainted with the actual planet Mars either, since we have not absolute epistemological guarantee of its existence. But then it is clearly an open question: with what (concrete) objects are we acquainted? Once Russell's attention is focused on this question, he draws narrower and narrower limits to the scope of our acquaintance with concrete objects. (In the case of abstract objects, however, it is notable that Russell continues to think that acquaintance has a very wide scope; here, it seems, the notion continues to impose no independent constraints.)

Russell's thought after 1905(at least up to and including his lectures on the "Philosophy of Logical Atomism"[56], given in the first few months of 1918) thus makes heavy use of the theory of descriptions. He no longer took at face value most- or, as time went by almost all words which appears to refer to concrete objects, the most familiar words there are. Instead of being thought of as names of the relevant objects, such words were treated as definite descriptions, and analyzed accordingly. He invoked the notion of a sense-datum in order to have appropriate objects for us to be acquainted with. When I look at and touch a familiar table, say, what I am actually acquainted with is not the table itself but certain immediate deliverances of the senses-a certain colored shape and a certain sensation of hardness, perhaps. A sentence which is, as we ordinarily say, about the table, in fact expresses a proposition which does not contain the table itself but rather contains immediate deliverances of the senses- sense-data-and uses them to give a definite description of the table. Here we have a vivid illustration of the point made in connection with incomplete symbols: most sentences that we utter, perhaps in the end

[56] Russell, Bertrand. 1918 "*Philosophy of Logical Atomism*", papers 8, 1972. p. 154.

just about all of them, express propositions whose real constituents, and real structure, are quite different from what is suggested by the superficial structure of the sentence uttered. Language is systematically misleading.

Objections to Russell's description theory

The concern of this essay, as of this volume, is with Russell, to this point we have dealt primarily with Russell's reasons for adopting the theory of descriptions and with the significance of that theory in his thought. In this final section, however, we shall shift focus and consider objections made to Russell's theory since 1950. The discussion will, necessarily, be very brief; the aim is merely to give some idea of the best known objections to Russell's theory. These objections can be divided into two sorts: those that concern the analysis of definite descriptions and those that concern the idea that some or all proper names can be treated as if they were definite descriptions. It will be convenient to discuss these separately.

1. Objection to the theory as an analysis of definite description

One objection of this sort is put forward by Strawson, who argued that Russell's theory is mistaken or misleading about what we ordinarily mean by sentences of the form "The F is G". Such a sentence, Strawson claims, does not assert that there is one and only thing which is F, rather it presupposes that fact. If someone said that "The king of France is wise", then we would not say that he had said something false (as we should, on Russell's view), nor, of "would be inclined, with some hesitation" to say that "the question of whether his statement was true or false simply did not arise".[57]

It is hard to assess this objection. One fundamental point at stake is how we are to think of the relation between ordinary language and the notation of modern logic, and on this point we have a true missing of minds. The

[57]. Ibid. p. 154.

advantages of the sort of method of analysis that Russell adopts, it might be said, are precisely that they make explicit what is otherwise merely presupposed- that is, they replace presupposition with assertion. But this is the very thing to which Strawson objects. We can think of the advantages of the theory of descriptions as arising from the fact that it shows us how we can smoothly incorporate the idiom of definite descriptions into logic, with corresponding gains in clarity. Standard modern logic, the logic inherited from Frege and Russell, leaves no room for the category of the merely presupposed, as opposed to the asserted. Strawson rejects the theory of descriptions on the grounds that it does not do justice to the nuances of ordinary usage. Proponents of the theory, such as Quine, 'may insist upon the benefits of the theory in facilitating inference and may claim that strawson's concern with ordinary usage is not to the point.'[58] This may seem to leave matters at a complete impasse, but there is more that can be said on each side.

The Strawsonian side might emphasize that there are systems of logic which take some account of the idea of presupposition. This fact holds out the prospect of the best of both worlds: enabling us to have the advantages of representing our ordinary discourse in logical terms without giving up on idea of presupposition which is, presumably, part of that discourse. It may be doubted, however, whether any system of logic will really do what the Strawsonian wants. It may be doubted, that is to say, whether it is possible to do full justice to the nuance and subtlety of ordinary discourse while also imposing on that discourse the sort of clarity of form that would enable us to subject it to the mathematical treatment of modern logic.

[58] Quine, "*Ways of Paradox*", Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 137-157.

On Russellian or Quinean side, it may be possible to undermine the idea that ordinary discourse is really committed to the notion of presupposition. Strawson bases his claim upon the fact that we do not actually say, of a sentence containing a definite description which we know to be empty, that it is false; we tend to use more complicated terms of criticism. For all that, it might be said, such sentences are false. The reason we do not call them false, according to this suggestion, is not that they are not false, or even that we do not hold them to be false. It is, rather, that calling them false is liable to be misleading, by suggesting that they are false in the most straightforward way. Our reluctance simply to say of such a sentence that it is false is, on this account, to be explained in terms of our wish to avoid misleading our audience- a reluctance which therefore does not suggest that the sentence is in fact anything other than false. 'This line of thought gets some encouragement and theoretical baking from ideas of Paul Grice's.'[59] Grice emphasizes that the thought conveyed in a sentence is often not, or not only, what the sentence literally says. Thus, to adopt his famous example, suppose I am asked to give my opinion of a student of mine who is being considered for a position teaching philosophy, and I say: "He has Beautiful handwriting, and is always punctual". If that is all that I say, then the reader of my letter will quite rightly infer that I have a poor opinion of the student's ability. Yet that is certainly not what my letter literally says, as is shown by the fact that I could without contradiction add a paragraph saying how able the student is, what a good philosopher, and how well read. Similarly, it might be said that our reluctance to say of a sentence such as "The King of France is bald" that it is false, and nothing else, arises from the fact that we could reasonably expect our audience to infer, from our

[59] Grice. Paul. "Logic and Conversation", in studies in the *Ways of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

saying that, that there is a king of France; we wish to prevent that inference. So our reluctant to say that the sentence is false, even when all the facts are before us, may be compatible with the sentences in fact being false.

Another kind of criticism of the theory of descriptions arises from the fact that our definite descriptions are very often radically incomplete. Strawson gives as an example the sentence: "The table is covered with books"[60] Certainly there are contexts in which this sentence seems to express something true; yet there are, of course, a large number of tables in the world, not only one. The response to this sort of case is that much of what we say is dependent upon the context in which we say it, and not only when we are using definite descriptions. Russell was largely concerned with the context-independent propositions of mathematics, and so perhaps gave this point less weight than it should carry. On the way to a party with a group of friends I may say "No one knows the street number"; once safely at the party I may say "There's no more wine". In each case, the remark may be perfectly appropriate, yet each is obviously false unless one supposes some tacit restriction_ no one in my group of friends knows the street number; there is no more wine at the party . In the case of the table, if the remark is a sensible one then most likely we are in a room containing only one table, or one table in the room is more noticeable than any other . Yet perhaps there are cases where the room contains two tables, equally noticeable but for the fact that one of them is covered with books. In such a case "the table" is perhaps being used to mean "that table". Perhaps this usage can be dismissed as incorrect; if we accept it as correct, then we have here a limited class of exceptions to the theory of descriptions.

---

88. Strawson, Logico-Linguistic Papers 7, p. 14.

'Another category of criticism of the theory of descriptions is associated with Keith Donnellan.'[61] Suppose we are at a party, and I see a man, looking slightly inebriated, drinking a clear liquid from a martini glass.(Suppose further, if you like, that there are open bottles of gin and vermouth on the table besides him, and that everyone else in the room is, quite evidently, drinking red wine.) I know that he is a famous philosopher, and say to you: "The man drinking the martini water is a famous philosopher". In fact, however, his glass contains water.

Building on this kind of example, Donnellan distinguishes two kinds of uses of the definite descriptions: the attributive use, which is as the theory of descriptions claims, and the referential use, in which a definite description is used simply to refer to some person or thing, without regard for whether the descriptive predicate in fact holds uniquely, or holds at all, of the object being referred to. On Donnellan's account, the example of the previous paragraph is a referential use. I use the phrase to refer to the inebriated-looking man with the martini glass and go on to say something about him; since he, in fact, is a famous philosopher, my utterance is true. As interpreted by the theory of descriptions, by contrast, the utterance is false (since there is no man- with in the relevant context- drinking a martini).

Donnellan appeals to the alleged fact that, in the above sort of example, the utterance clearly is a true one. But a number of philosophers who have discussed this sort of case dispute this claim. They appeal to the same Grecian distinction which we invoked above. Clearly, one of the things I mean when I make my remark is that that man, the one we can both see, is a famous philosopher. Perhaps, in context, it is clear that this is the thing I mostly mean to convey. Yet the fact is compatible with the

[61] Donnellan, Keith. "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review*, 77 (1966), pp. 203-215.

idea that what I literally say is something else, something in accord with the way the sentence reads according to the theory of descriptions. Further plausibility accrues to this idea from the thought that what I say at the party has both something right about it and something wrong. The Russellian line as supplemented by Grice seems able to do justice to this: what I literally say is false, but what I clearly mean to convey is correct. Donnellan's line, however, seems harder pressed to explain why there is anything at all wrong with what I say.

Both Donnellan and his opponents here agree that there is such a thing as what I literally say in such a case. Perhaps it is fitting to close this section on a note of partial skepticism about this assumption. If we are to fit our language into the scheme of logic, then we have to find a definite claim made by any given utterance. To think that Russell's theory gives us as good a way of doing this as any is compatible with acknowledging that any such schematization will distort our ordinary thought and language, if only because is causal contexts we are not as definite as logic requires.

2. **Objections to the theory as a way of treating ordinary proper names**

Our concern here is with objections not to Russell's analysis of definite descriptions but rather to the idea that it can be extended to ordinary proper names, via the claim that names are 'disguised definite descriptions'. All the objections that I shall mention are to be found in Kripke's "Naming and Necessity".[62]

One objection here concerns the behavior of proper names and definite descriptions in counter factual or modal contexts. Suppose I say for example,

a) Alexander Fleming might have died in childhood

[62] Kripke, S. *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

I am inviting my audience to imagine circumstances which (fortunately) did not actually occur. To whom, in those circumstances, does the name "Alexander Fleming" refer? To Alexander Fleming, the same person to whom it refers in fact, in the actual circumstances. But consider the description, "the inventor of penicillin", which is perhaps the most plausible description to use if we think of the name as a disguised definite description. To whom does that description refer in the imagined circumstances? Not to Alexander Fleming, for in those circumstances he would not have been the inventor of penicillin. Kripke puts the point by saying that proper names are "rigid designators", meaning that they designate the same thing in all possible circumstances; whereas a definite description is not, for it may designate various distinct objects in various counterfactual situations. Hence, he of course concludes, proper names cannot be satisfactorily analyzed as definition descriptions.

Kripke claims that this distinction can make a difference. Contrast a) with:

b) The inventor of penicillin might have died in childhood

a) seems to be straightforwardly true (at least as straightforwardly as claims about what might have been are). b) However, is less clear. If it is making the claim that penicillin might have been discovered by a child genius who then died young we may be inclined to dismiss it as false; discovering penicillin, in fact, took more scientific sophistication, and more time, than any child could have had. Clearly, however, this is not the only or even the most natural way in which to construe b). Perhaps because we tend to interpret what we are told charitably, we would be more likely to construe it as saying that the person who in fact (that is, in the actual circumstances, not in the counterfactual circumstances we are being asked to imagine) discovered penicillin might have died in childhood. This ambiguity can be captured by Russell's analysis.

Another ground on which Kripke objects to using Russell's theory to analyze names is that people often use names although they have in mind nothing like an identifying description of the thing or person they are talking about. Kripke's example is the physicist, Feynman. Non-specialists are unlikely to be able to produce a definite description of him. Nevertheless, Kripke says: "The man in the street...may ...still use the name 'Feynman'. When asked he will say: well he's a physicist or something. He may not think that this picks out anyone uniquely. I still think he uses 'Feynman' as a name for Feynman". [63] It is, however, unclear that Kripke's man in the street really does lack identifying knowledge of Feynman, because he knows enough to use his name. The description: "famous physicist called Feynman'" presumably applies uniquely to Feynman. Russell, indeed, seems to have anticipated this point. When we talk of Julius Caesar, he says: "We have in mind some description of Julius Caesar...perhaps, merely 'the man whose name was Julius Caesar'". Kripke objects to this idea on the grounds of circularity, but it not clear that his objections in this regard are conclusive. If they are not, then one might use Russell's theory to get a picture not unlike that which Kripke himself suggests: some people have identifying descriptions of (say) Feynman which are independent of uses of his name; other (most of us) do not, but refer to him as the person called 'Feynman', the person so-called by member of the first group.

The last objection I shall consider arises in a different way. Most people who have a identifying description of Gödel which is not dependent upon his being called "Gödel" probably identify him as the person who proved the incompleteness of any formalization of arithmetic, or the person who proved the completeness of first-order logic. But, Kripke asks, what if the

[63] Dummett, M. Frege: *Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), especially p. 81.

man called "Kurt Gödel", who held a position at the institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, did not, in fact, prove those results? What if he stole them from someone else, who died "under mysterious circumstances"?[64] Nevertheless, Kripke maintains, our ordinary uses of the name "Gödel" would refer to the man who lived in Princeton, not the one who died in Vienna in the nineteen-thirties. Again, the example is compelling, however, it is not entirely clear that it shows as much as Kripke claims. For one thing, it may be that "the man who was called 'Gödel'" is a crucial part of the identifying description of Gödel for all of us who did not actually know that famous logician. For another, the non-expert would perhaps make no very clear distinction between identifying Gödel as "the man who proved such and such" and identifying him as "the man who is widely thought to have proved such and such". The experts to whom the second description implicitly defers would presumably have other ways of referring to Gödel, which would survive any discoveries about the true provenance of the theorems attributed to him.

.....x.....

[64] Ibid, p. 84.