

An Aspect of Russell's Theory of Descriptions

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Abstract

Russell's renowned Theory of Descriptions has been hailed as possibly his greatest accomplishment; in fact, Ramsey referred to it as a philosophical paradigm. However, Strawson and other language philosophers have recently sharply criticized the theory of descriptions. This essay aims to investigate a particular facet of Russell's theory of descriptions by contrasting it with Aristotle, Frege, and Strawson's accounts of descriptive phrases. Following this comparison, it might be able to offer a method for assessing the notable distinctions between Strawson and Frege and Russell. In addition to pursuing its primary goal, this essay aims to investigate some of the philosophical underpinnings of Aristotle's own distinctive perspectives on the logic of descriptive phrases. Russell's holding that the existential presuppositions behind the descriptive phrase—that is, that the so-and-so exists—are in fact a component of the statement's content is a crucial component of his analysis of descriptions. Because of this, the existential claim is stated explicitly when the term is defined in usage as one of the included statements made by an original sentence.

Keywords: *Theory of Descriptions, Russell, philosophical paradigm, Ramsey,*

Russell's celebrated Theory of Descriptions has been claimed to be perhaps his first achievement; indeed, Ramsey (Ramsey) called it a paradigm of philosophy, in recent years the theory of descriptions has been subjected to severe criticism at the hands of Strawson and other linguistic philosophers. This article seeks to explore an aspect of Russell's theory of descriptions in comparison with the account of descriptive phrases to be found in Aristotle, Frege and Strawson. After this comparison it might perhaps be possible to suggest a way of evaluating the sharp differences between Russell on the one hand and Strawson and Frege on the other. Subsidiary to this main aim, this article also seeks to explore some of the metaphysical reasons why Aristotle himself had certain characteristic views on the logic of descriptive phrases. An essential element in Russell's analysis of descriptions is that he holds the existential presuppositions behind the descriptive phrase, namely that the so-and-so exists, is actually a part of the content of the statement in which the descriptive phrase occurs. That is why, when the phrase is defined in use the existential claim is explicitly set forth as one of the

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Received 11 June 2024; Accepted 20 July 2024. Available online: 30 July 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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included assertions made by an original sentence. In other words, Russell would analyze a sentence such as 'the author of Waverly is Scott', into three component assertions. (1) at least one man wrote Waverly, (2) at the most one man wrote Waverly and (3) whoever wrote Waverly is identical with Scott. The main issue between Russell and Strawson (Strawson 44) would seem to turn on whether we can call the existential claim a part of the content of the statement itself or merely a pre-supposition of it. For Strawson the existence of an object described is a presupposition and not a part of the descriptive sentence itself (as it is maintained by Russell). That is why, Strawson holds that a sentence like 'the king of France is bald' is not a genuine statement, because the presupposition behind it namely that 'there is a king of France' is false. This implies for Strawson descriptive phrases can be meaningful although they do not refer to an object. Aristotle also would seem to accept this position when he holds that when there is no object corresponding to descriptive phrase. According to him the existence of an object described is a necessary condition for the description to be meaningful. This seems to be the reason why he regards any statement about future events as neither true nor false, since in its case, the object described, namely the future event, does not yet exist. Therefore, Aristotle and Strawson would agree that a sentence of the form 'the king of France is bald' is neither true and false, since the sentence does not constitute a statement. Whereas Russell, for whom every well-found stance expresses a statement, says that the sentence in question is a false statement. From Aristotle, Russell differs by holding that every proposition must be either true or false, whereas from Strawson, Russell differs by holding that what Strawson calls a pre-supposition of assertion is actually a part of the assertion itself. This also seems to be the difference between Russell and Frege. Frege also makes a distinction between a sentence and an assertion. A descriptive phrase when it occurs within assertion presupposes the existence of the object to which it refers. But this pre-supposition itself is not part of the content of the assertion. Here Frege and Strawson hold the same view. Only for Frege (Y. 69) the pre-supposition itself can neither be true nor false.

For Frege "if anything is asserted, there is always an obvious pre-supposition that the simple or compound proper names used have reference." For instance, Kepler died a miserable death, and the person who discovered the elliptic shape of planetary orbits also died a miserable death. The primary assertion 'Kepler died in misery' is predicated on the existence of an individual with the name 'Kepler', while the primary assertion 'He who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits died in misery' involves the discovery of an individual as the first to discover the elliptic form of the planetary orbits. In the example, we see that the term "Kepler" indeed denotes something in the first assertion and that the person who discovered the elliptic shape

of planetary orbits first also signifies something in the second statement. This implies that the statements which are made must designate something (which must have an existence or being either in the Past, or in the Present or in the Future) to have proper pre-suppositions. Statements such as "Kepler met his untimely death" or "someone discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits first" are secondary statements since they presuppose the statements that are main. But, these secondary assertions do not follow the primary assertions and also they are not part of the sense of the primary assertions. If the genre of the secondary assertion is a part of the sense of the primary assertion, then the negation of the judgement 'Kepler died in misery' would be like 'either Kepler did not die in misery' or 'the name Kepler has no reference'. He regards this as a 'reductio ad absurdum' (Black 49) but he does not also explain what he means by the word 'pre-supposition'. Frege is in sharp conflict with Russell's theory of descriptions, because for Russell any assertion which is made about the so-and-so does entail that the so-and-so exists. This shows that both Frege and Russell disagree with the analysis of secondary assertions. But both agree in pointing out that when the secondary assertion is true, the primary assertion is legitimate. When it comes to the secondary assertion, they diverge because, according to Russell, the primary assertion is also false, while, according to Frege, the primary assertion cannot be made because the sentence required to make the assertion is neither true nor false. For a phrase to qualify as a statement, according to Frege, it must contain a reference and a meaning throughout. The language that is required for the main statement stands for nothing if the secondary assertion is wrong, and the phrase cannot support the true or the false. According to Max Black, Frege's presumption is a "necessary condition for having reference." That presumption is a prerequisite for the sentence's validity.

According to Strawson" a 'statement' has a truth value only when the pre-suppositions are satisfied with truth. He therefore dismisses Russell's idea of descriptions. Only after a presupposition is met does the original statement's validity or untruth become a question. In this regard, Frege and Strawson concur. The definition of presupposition according to Strawson is as follows: "The truth of S1 is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S' is how S presupposes S1'." Here a shift has occurred. According to Frege a pre-supposition is that which refers to the statement has 'either is or is not'. For example, a presupposition of the assertion that 'the king of France is Wise', is that only one-man reigns over France. Whereas for Strawson a pre-supposition is always a statement which is true or false, genuine or spurious, It follows that a pre supposition can have another pre supposition and these can be accepted or rejected. Frege does not have this problem, since for him presupposition is a necessary condition for reference but not a statement.

As far as the pre-supposition is true, there is no question of difference between these three philosophers. If the pre-supposition is false, the statements would mean for Frege and Strawson: For example: (1) There is now just one king of Siam, and the current monarch is a bachelor. The phrase "the current king of Siam is bachelor" creates nothing about truth value and has no reference, even if it makes sense. If we assume that Frege is wrong and there is no monarch of Siam, then the accessory requirement for reference fails. However, Strawson has a different stance. He is unable to argue that the falsehood of the second statement—that there is now only one king of Siam—means that the first statement—that the current King of Sam is a bachelor—cannot be used to support any claim. If this is the case, then presupposition must be defined differently: There is now just one king of Siam, and the current monarch is a bachelor. The phrase "the current king of Siam is bachelor" creates nothing about truth value and has no reference, even if it makes sense. If we assume that Frege is wrong and there is no monarch of Siam, then the accessory requirement for reference fails. However, Strawson has a different stance. He is unable to argue that the falsehood of the second statement—that there is now only one king of Siam—means that the first statement—that the current King of Sam is a bachelor—cannot be used to support any claim. If this is the case, then presupposition must be defined differently:

The above discussion implies that the differences between Russell, Aristotle, Frege and Strawson are due to the differences in the metaphysical approaches. Russell's analysis is based on the realistic approach Frege and Strawson though realists in describing the object, set they are not realists, in the sense, that the theory of descriptive phrases is based completely on the linguistic metaphysical approach. Whereas Aristotle though an idealist, yet he comes very close to Frege and Strawson as far as the descriptive phrases are concerned. When Russell says that presupposition is part of the sentences, he avoids two difficulties. Firstly, he avoids Meinong's interpretation of an object, which is an entity. Russell gives the ontological status to the object, though he does not explain the real status of the object. For Russell Meinong's objects belong to 'unreal world' since the descriptions of them do not refer to the object or they are not parts of the objects. For Russell descriptions are the parts of the objects. And they are real since the objects are also real.

Russell tried to give a satisfactory realistic approach to the theory of knowledge in the 'Problems of Philosophy and in 'the Analysis of Matter.' (Russell, The Problems of Philosophy) As far as these two books are concerned, we can say that according to Russell pre-suppositions are the parts of the statements and that statements must refer to an existent object. These statements are also well-founded sentences. But every sentence is not a statement because the

statement not only includes a pre-supposition but also refers to an existent object. This brief discussion implies that Russell's pre-suppositions have a basis in realism. Secondly, accepting a presupposition as a part of the statement Russell avoids one fundamental problem of perception. The fundamental problem in the perceptual process is that there must be a direct relation between meaning and knowing. In one sense it appears that Russell's pre-suppositions have this kind of direct relation between the pre-suppositions and statements, without which knowledge is not possible. Firstly, we can say that Russell's pre-suppositions (Russell, 'The Analysis of Matter') refer to the meaning part of the perceptual theory, since for him without pre-suppositions there cannot be any statements and only when the pre-suppositions are meaningful and true, then the statements would also be meaningful and true. Secondly, statements may concern the knowing part of an object. Generally, we say that in the theory of perception the 'knowing' part implies the knower, the known object and the truth of that object. Similarly, for Russell these statements have references to an existent object and the meaning or the truth of that objects. Russell accepts that when there are such statements, then only it is possible to explain the theory of knowledge in statements.

Strawson's pre-supposition is not part of the statement but itself is a statement. As it is a statement, it pre-supposes another presupposition (or statements) and we will have series of pre-suppositions one by one, ad infinitum. Again, for Strawson, a statement is not a genuine statement alone since for him there are also spurious statements. This difficulty arises because a presupposition does not have a direct relation with the statement, and it is also not a part of the statement. It is made independent of the statement According to Strawson and Frege there is no relation between the pre-supposition of the assertion and the assertion itself. Because of this, only they do not seem to consider the pre-supposition as a part of the assertion.

Aristotle though an idealist, logically speaking, in one sense is a realist, since for him descriptive phrases must have a reference for true statements, His main problem is to refute the deterministic position of the Stoics which is purely based on the logic. For the Stoics every proposition must be either true or false. (Bensonmates) If so, then the future pro positions must also be either true or false. But for Aristotle, such future statements are neither true nor false. He accepts this position because of his ethical notion which refers to the freedom of will. Future events cannot be true or false since for him the description arises only when there is a reference to an existent object and a genuine statement must refer to an existent object. This implies that description has no reference for false statements. Here lies the very close contact between Aristotle, Frege and Strawson. Both Aristotle and Russell have metaphysical doctrines of their own though their method of approach is different from one another. As far as the descriptive

phrases are concerned both advocate realism Aristotle who accepts 'form' as real, says that this form has meaning and a statement to have a descriptive phrase. Similarly, Russell also accepts that a descriptive phrase must have a pre-supposition and a statement.

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