WHY "ON DENOTING"?

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A recent trend in Russell scholarship has been towards the thesis that, contrary to his own recollections, Bertrand Russell really didn't need the 1905 theory of descriptions to deflate an excessive ontology, because (1) there was no excessive ontology in *The Principles of Mathematics*, at least not one with golden mountains and the like, and so (2) Russell's real motive, at least his main one, was not ontological but rather was to replace the incoherent sense–reference distinction on which the old theory of denoting depended. I want to gently dispute that thesis by showing that Russell's old theory in *Principles* was ambivalent on ontic commitment to non-existent things and it could not give an adequate account of the central problem which Russell faced before "On Denoting", viz. our apparent discourse—including our ability to make true and false propositions— about non-existent things. I also show briefly how the new theory solves the old problem.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In his 1905 paper "On Denoting"[1] Bertrand Russell put forward his famous theory of descriptions—a theory which has been called a "paradigm of philosophy".[2] In the 100 years since the appearance of that theory, several controversies have arisen regarding Russell's motivations for the theory, whether he needed the theory to trim the bloated ontology in his earlier *Principles of Mathematics* or for other reasons. Contrary to some recent scholarship, I wish to claim that (1) Russell's views in *Principles* are ambivalent, if not contradictory, regarding the being of non-existent individuals; (2) quite apart from the sense–

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[1] Reprinted in *LK*, pp. 41–56; *Papers* 4: 415–27.

[2] Frank P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), p. 263.

reference incoherence later revealed, his pre-1905 theory of denoting could not account satisfactorily for what I claim was the main problem that he faced, *viz.* our ordinary discourse about non-existent objects; and (3) the new theory was needed to solve this main problem in a way that avoided what he took to be the pitfalls of both Frege and Meinong.

In his 1903 *Principles*, Russell appeared to subscribe to a rather robust ontology. It included propositions as non-linguistic entities. These were subsistent entities, as were their constituents or terms. Every proposition had at least two terms, one of which was "the subject about which the proposition is" (*PoM*, p. 45). Terms were indeed bountiful. In his words:

Whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition, or can be counted as *one*, I call a *term.* This, then, is the widest word in the philosophical vocabulary. I shall use as synonymous with it the words unit, individual, and entity.... A man, a moment, a number, a class, a relation, a chimera, or anything else that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term; and to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false.   (P. 43)

Notice that Russell says that anything that can be mentioned is a term. Since Russell, like Frege, took definite descriptions as proper names of a sort (p. 502), it seems to follow that non-existent objects such as the golden mountain and the round square were terms and could occur as constituents of propositions. Moreover, in *Principles* Russell was clear about the ontological status of terms:

Being is that which belongs to every conceivable term.... Numbers, the Homeric gods, relations, chimeras ... all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no propositions about them. Thus being is a general attribute of everything, and to mention anything is to show that it is.   (P. 449)

By contrast,

Existence, on the contrary, is the prerogative of some only amongst beings.... [T]his distinction [between being and existence] is essential, if we are ever [meaningfully and truly] to deny the existence of anything. For what does not exist must be something, or it would be meaningless to deny its existence; and hence we need the concept of being, as that which belongs even to the non-existent.   (Pp. 449–50)

In *Principles*, Chapter v, Russell presents his theory of denoting, which

deals with denoting phrases—or more properly, denoting concepts—of the form "the so-and-so". Very simply: "A concept *denotes* when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept [i.e. is denoted by it]" (p. 53).

Russell does clearly say in Chapter VI on classes, that not all denoting concepts denote: "a concept [e.g. "even primes other than 2"] may denote although it does not denote anything" (p. 73). But he gives only brief attention to, and few examples of, denotationless concepts. But he regarded these as a problem because they raise the question: what are propositions containing denotationless concepts about?

In *Principles* we can find two answers suggested, neither of which Russell definitely endorses. One answer Russell suggests in Chapter VI (pp. 73–5) is that such propositions are about the null-class. However, he says that this account is philosophically unsatisfactory, since the null-class is itself nothing, and, although he's willing to say that some denoting concepts *denote* nothing, he's not willing to say that some propositions are *about* nothing, i.e. lack a subject.[6] I will return to the null-class in the next section.

Another answer suggested, although not explicitly stated, is that the putative denotata of many "denotationless" descriptions (e.g. "the golden mountain") would be non-existent terms which yet have *being* and could serve as subjects about which the propositions are. In this way Russell's theory, by positing subsistent but non-existent denotata, could account for both the meaningfulness and the truth-value of propositions about non-existent individuals.

Some, including Russell after 1905, have claimed that the theory of descriptions was invented largely to avoid this second answer. I think this is true, although this doesn't mean that Russell in *Principles*, or later, ever explicitly held such a bountiful theory of denoting. Doubtlessly Russell wanted a theory of denoting that (1) was able to account adequately for our ability to discourse meaningfully, and truthfully, about non-existent things, but (2) did not thereby commit us to ontologically outrageous entities. In *Principles* we find him not yet settled on what he regards as an adequate theory and, consequently, ambivalent about what there is.

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[6] In *Principles*, pp. 76–7, he seems to say that not all propositions need subjects, but he merely means that they don't need *single* subjects.

II. THE INTERIM

In the interim between *The Principles of Mathematics* (finished in mid-1902) and "On Denoting" (written in late July 1905), Russell wrestled with his theory of denoting in five unpublished papers, and he attempted to work out a version which combined elements of his *Principles* theory with Frege's theory of sense and reference.[7] In the course of these papers Russell tries to understand the nature of denoting complexes, their relation to their denotata, whether whole propositions have both meaning and denotation, what the constituents of these might be, and what description sentences are "about".[8] At this time it's clear that Russell thought that Frege's distinction between sense and reference was useful in avoiding ontic excess, saying so in a letter to Meinong in late 1904:

I have always believed until now that every object must in some sense have *being*, and I find it difficult to admit unreal objects. In such a case as that of the golden mountain or the round square one must distinguish between *sense* and *reference* (to use Frege's terms): the sense is an object, and has being; the reference, however, is not an object.[9]

Note that Meinong's unreal objects in this case were objects without existence or being (subsistence), not merely objects without existence. Thus Russell seems to believe that Frege's distinction could also avoid commitment to subsistent entities. This is again confirmed in a reply in *Mind* to Hugh MacColl, written in April or May 1905, where Russell invokes a similar sense–reference distinction to avoid commitment to

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[7] See *Papers* 4: "On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases" (1903); "Dependent Variables and Denotation" (1903); "Points about Denoting" (1903); "On Meaning and Denotation" (1903); "On Fundamentals" (1905).

[8] "On Meaning and Denotation", *Papers* 4: 317–27. It would be too simplistic to say that Russell was concerned to obtain an adequate theory of denoting solely to solve the problem about denotationless descriptions and related puzzles (see n. 18). He also believed that such a theory might contain clues for solving the contradiction concerning the class of classes that are not members of themselves. He did find connections between denoting and the Contradiction. But that is a complicated story that unfolded gradually, with many twists and turns, between 1903 and 1908. We shall not pursue that story in this paper. See Kevin Klement, "The Origins of the Propositional Functions Version of Russell's Paradox", *Russell* n.s. 24 (2004): 101–32; also his "Russell's 1903–1905 Anticipation of the Lambda Calculus", *History and Philosophy of Logic* 24 (2003): 15–37.

[9] D. Lackey, "Russell's Letters to Meinong", *Russell* no. 9 (1973): 15–18 (at 16).

unreal individuals and to (some) subsistent individuals:

... "The present King of England" is a complex concept denoting an individual; "the present King of France" is a similar concept denoting nothing. The phrase intends to point out an individual, but fails to do so: it does not point out an unreal individual, but no individual at all. The same explanation applies to mythical personages, Apollo, Priam, etc. These words have a *meaning,* which can be found by looking them up in a classical dictionary; but they have not a *denotation*: there is no entity, real or imaginary, which they point out.[10]

It might seem as though Russell's apparent ontological prodigality in *Principles* (pp. 43, 449) had pretty much been deflated by application of the old theory of denoting and Frege's sense–reference distinction *before* the advent of the theory of descriptions in "On Denoting". If so, it might seem that Russell's new theory of denoting was not really needed for the job that Russell often claimed, *viz.* avoiding commitment to an unduly populous ontology. Nicholas Griffin has recently claimed exactly this.[11]

But there were still problems about denotationless phrases that weren't satisfactorily solved until "On Denoting", as a close look at his unpublished papers after *Principles,* but before "On Denoting", reveals. For example, in his 1903 paper "On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases" Russell says: "... we must take it as axiomatic that the subject of a proposition is part of the denotation of the proposition."[12] And he concludes that since "the present King of France" lacks a denotation, "the present King of France is bald" won't convey a proposition at all:

If we consider "x is bald", where x is a variable, x here must always denote something, if we are to have a proposition at all. Among the values of x for which "x is bald" is true, the present King of France is not included. Thus "the present King of France is bald" is neither true nor false. There is a complex concept, which is the meaning of "the present King of France is bald"; and this concept has the form of those that denote[13] propositions. But in the particular case considered, the concept does not denote a proposition.   (*Papers* 4: 286)

[10] "The Existential Import of Propositions", *Papers* 4: 487.
[11] See Nicholas Griffin, "Denoting Concepts in *The Principles of Mathematics*", in *Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytic Philosophy,* ed. R. Monk and A. Palmer (Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1996), p. 57.
[12] *Papers* 4: 286.
[13] In "On Meaning and Denotation", *Papers* 4: 320, he says "affirm".

So after *Principles*, Russell's theory of denoting clearly did avoid commitment to a denotation for "the present King of France", but it could not account for our ability to make true or false propositions involving the phrase. This was not a happy situation, and Russell may well have thought that objects *à la* Meinong or *Principles*, page 449, would yet be required in order to explain the ability of language and thought to be about something.

There is some evidence that Russell had not definitely abandoned the apparently gratuitous ontology of *Principles*, page 449. In his 1904 paper on Meinong's theory of complexes and assumptions (written in 1903), Russell begins by listing the theses to which he (Russell) subscribes. For example, "... that the object of a thought, even when this object does not exist, has a Being which is in no way dependent upon its being an object of thought" (*Papers* 4: 432). And again, in the same paper, his discussion of the golden mountain seems to say that it's the golden mountain—a subsistent individual—which has being:

We must hold that the Being, or, as Meinong says, the subsistence, of the non-existent is often immediately known.... [W]hen we originally thought of the golden mountain, we already perceived ... that the golden mountain subsists....[14]

(*Papers* 4: 443)

Griffin has argued that "objects of thought" should be understood in passages like the above to be denoting *concepts*, not the individuals which such concepts purport to denote (*op. cit.*, p. 54). This seems implausible. There seems to be a clear difference between thinking of the golden mountain and thinking of the *concept* of the golden mountain. In defence of his interpretation, Griffin cites a letter that Russell wrote in early 1904 to Victoria Welby explaining his notion of denoting in *Principles*. Russell wrote:

... in certain cases, like that of ["the present Prime Minister of England"], a further relation of the object of the idea (which object, in such cases, I call a *concept*) to another object or collection of objects; it is this third relation that I call *denoting*. The object before the mind when we think "the Prime Minister"

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[14] In this passage, Russell's choice of the golden mountain is a bad example to make in the context of discussing Meinong's work for whom the golden mountain neither exists nor subsists. But the important point here is that Russell seems to think that the golden mountain subsists because we can think of it.

is not the same as when we think "Mr. Arthur Balfour", or when an image of the man himself is before us.   (Quoted in Griffin, pp. 59–60)

So when we think of the so-and-so, it's not the so-and-so that is before the mind, but the *concept* of the so-and-so. This view *may* be in *Principles*, but I don't think it's unambiguously there. But even so, it stops short of denying that, with the help of conceptual objects before the mind, we can think about, and know propositions about, non-existent things.

Russell's argument in Principles *(p. 449)*

Even if Russell's description of his *Principles* theory in the Welby letter is accurate, it's tough, as Griffin concedes, to make it work to clearly rule out commitment to those beings (individuals) that some passages of *Principles* seem to commit Russell to. The main difficulty is with those passages where Russell says, for example, "Numbers, the Homeric gods, chimeras … all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no propositions about them" (p. 449). Here it strains credulity to think that Russell is talking about the being of *concepts* and not putative *individuals* like the number 2, Medusa and Zeus. After all, Russell didn't think that we ordinarily make propositions about denoting concepts. The very essence of the theory of denoting was, as he says, that our description sentences are *not* about the denoting concept, but about what the concept denotes (p. 53).[15]

This point can perhaps be made more persuasively in terms of Russell's own argument, not discussed by Griffin, in *Principles*:

"*A* is not" must always be either false or meaningless. For if *A* were nothing, it could not be said not to be; "*A* is not" implies that there is a term *A* whose being is denied, and hence that *A* is. Thus unless "*A* is not" be an empty sound, it must be false—whatever *A* may be, it certainly is.   (P. 449)

Consider the case where *A* = the golden mountain. Assuming that "the golden mountain is not [i.e. lacks being]" expresses a proposition, Russell seems to be implying that the proposition is false, i.e. the golden mountain *does* have being. It won't do to say, *à la* Griffin, that the argument is really meant to prove only that the *concept* of the golden mountain has

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[15] This point is strongly made in *Principles*, p. 64.

being. For, by hypothesis, the name "*A*" is not "the concept of the golden mountain", but "the golden mountain".

The null-class again

Russell's discussion of the null-class in *Principles* is taken by Griffin to provide solid evidence that Russell was not committed to subsistent individuals like the present King of France.[16] But at most I think Griffin merely establishes that Russell's treatment of denoting and related issues in *Principles* is not consistent, or at least is ambivalent. In Russell's discussion of the null-class (pp. 73–6), he does say that some denoting concepts (e.g. *even primes other than 2* and *chimeras*) denote nothing. So it's clear that Russell does not, in this part of *Principles*, think that all denoting concepts denote beings. He says:

> ... ["Chimeras are animals" and "even primes other than 2 are numbers"] appear to be true, and ... not concerned with the denoting concepts, but with what these concepts denote; yet that is impossible, for the concepts in question do not denote anything.   (P. 73)

So what are such propositions about? Russell considers an intensional analysis of "Chimeras are animals" in terms of a relation of predicates, but he rejects it as inadequate (p. 74). He considers an extensional version which he says is philosophically inadequate inasmuch as it makes use of the null-class which isn't real (*ibid.*). He then sketches a complicated device to replace the putatively denoted null-class by the class of equivalent non-denoting concepts. Presumably it is this correlated entity—a class which is not null—which is somehow concerned in propositions of the above sort. But it's not clear how this would work, and Russell gives no examples. He describes this move as a "technical" procedure involving "complicated entities" and speaks of the replacement of the null-class rather cryptically as "symbolic" rather than "philosophical" (pp. 75–6)— remarks reminiscent of Russell's later complaint in "On Denoting" against Frege's postulation of the null-class as the denotatum for denotationless descriptions—a move which may not yield logical error, but is "plainly artificial, and does not give an exact analysis of the matter" (*LK*, p. 47; *Papers* 4: 420).

There is one more factor that lends support to the idea that Russell

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[16] Griffin, pp. 49–51.

was indeed concerned about excessive ontic commitments before "On Denoting" and welcomed the theory of descriptions largely because it provided a way to avoid such commitments, *viz.* that Russell says so. Consider his 1943 autobiographical essay in the Schilpp volume:

I had been a realist in the scholastic or Platonic sense.... Meinong, whose work interested me, applied the arguments of realism to descriptive phrases. Everyone agrees that "the golden mountain does not exist" is a true proposition. But it has, apparently a subject, "the golden mountain", and if this subject did not designate some object, the proposition would seem to be meaningless. Meinong inferred that there is a golden mountain, which is golden and a mountain, but does not exist.... This did not satisfy me, and the desire to avoid Meinong's unduly populous realm of being led me to the theory of descriptions.

(Schilpp, p. 13; *Papers* ɪɪ: 12–13)

Russell is not quite saying that he ever embraced unreal or subsistent individuals, but he is suggesting that before 1905 he couldn't see how to solve the central problem of denoting without undue ontic excess.

It was after he completed *Principles* that Russell began to read Frege on sense and reference, although the theory of denoting in *Principles* was similar to Frege's and developed independently. As we have already seen, Russell definitely thought that Frege's distinction yielded real advantages for the problem of denotationless descriptions—though not a solution to the problem of denoting. In his 1905 *Mind* review of Meinong and others, written a few months before he discovered his theory of descriptions, he (again) recommends Frege's theory of sense and reference rather than Meinong's theory of non-existent objects, but adds: "There are certainly difficulties in either hypothesis; but I think the hypothesis adopted by Meinong ... involves the greater difficulties."[17] What difficulties faced by Frege's theory is Russell referring to? We know about the "inextricable tangle" of sense and reference that would be pointed out in "On Denoting". But that wasn't clearly seen (as far as we know) until June 1905. But there were other difficulties, *viz.* those concerning the problem of giving an adequate account of what description sentences are about.

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[17] *Mind* 14 (Oct. 1905): 530–8; *Papers* 4: 596–604 (at 599).

III. RUSSELL'S NEW THEORY: OBJECTIONS AND SOLUTION

Russell's objections to Meinong

In this last section, I'd like to sketch briefly Russell's solution to the central problem about denoting and to indicate some of the ways in which the new theory was superior to the rival ideas of Frege, Meinong and his own earlier theories (which I'll call "Russell–Frege theories"). Russell identifies the main difficulty that had confronted him since *Principles*:

One of the first difficulties that confront us, when we adopt the view that denoting phrases *express* a meaning and *denote* a denotation [the Russell–Frege view which Russell had held since *Principles*], concerns the cases in which the denotation appears to be absent. If we say "the King of England is bald", that is, it would seem, not a statement about the complex *meaning* "the King of England", but about the actual man denoted by the meaning. But now consider "the King of France is bald". By parity of form, this also ought to be about the denotation of the phrase "the King of France". But this phrase, though it has a *meaning* provided "the King of England" has a meaning, has certainly no denotation.... Hence one would suppose that "the King of France is bald" ought to be nonsense; but it is not nonsense, since it is plainly false.

(*LK*, p. 46; *Papers* 4: 419)

It's important to see that Russell offers his new theory for its ability to deal mainly with this problem. Indeed, this problem is at the root of two of the three puzzles that Russell says an adequate theory must be able to solve.[18] Meinong's theory won't do because it takes unreal objects to serve as the denotata of "non-denoting" descriptions. This is especially worrisome because unreal objects, e.g. the round square, are "apt to infringe the law of contradiction" (*LK*, p. 45; *Papers* 4: 418). I won't examine Russell's arguments here, since the matter is technical and space is short.[19] But Russell no doubt also thought, as he later says in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, that Meinong's solution offended against a sense of reality that ought to be preserved in logic as well as in science:

[18] *LK*, pp. 47–8; *Papers* 4: 420. Only the first puzzle—substitutivity of identicals in non-extensional contexts—does not directly concern non-denoting descriptions.

[19] For an excellent treatment of issues, see Griffin, "Russell's Critique of Meinong's Theory of Objects", *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 25–6 (1985–6): 375–401.

It is argued, e.g. by Meinong, that we can speak about "the golden mountain", "the round square", and so on; we can make true propositions of which these are the subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being, since otherwise the propositions in which they occur would be meaningless. In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure for that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies.   (P. 169)

There is some controversy over whether Russell really understood Meinong.[20] It seems to me that he did, certainly at the time that he produced the theory of descriptions. The above quotation from *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (written in 1918), where Russell attributes "a kind of logical being" to Meinong's unreal objects, may suggest a sense of existence that is not ontologically neutral and not fair to Meinong's notion of *Aussersein*. But all Russell apparently means is that being the logical subject of a proposition seems to require *some kind* of ontic status. Consider:

(1)   The golden mountain does not exist.

On Meinong's theory, the subject position in proposition (1) is occupied by an unreal object. Now imagine that object removed, as in

(2)   __ does not exist.

(1) and (2) are different, and it seems appropriate to describe the difference by saying that *there is* something in (1) that *there is not* in (2). Russell's talk about a "kind of logical being" in (1) seems merely to reflect this difference.

Russell's objections to Frege (and to Russell–Frege theories)
Russell's main objection to the old theory—at least the objection he spends most time on—is that the meaning–denotation distinction involved is "an inextricable tangle ... and wrongly conceived", and he presents his famous argument involving "the first line of Gray's Elegy" to make his case.[21] The argument has been thought to be hopelessly

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[20] *Ibid.* See also Griffin, "Russell's 'Horrible Travesty' of Meinong", *Russell* nos. 25–8 (1977): 39–51.
    [21] *LK*, pp. 48–50; *Papers* 4: 421–2.

muddled by use–mention confusion, but it has recently been defended.[22] I will not discuss the argument, which I believe to be sound. But even if it is not, Russell has two other objections against Russell–Frege theories which go to the core of what I have called the main problem.

The first objection is that the theory can't account for the fact that we make true and false propositions about non-existent objects. Frege's "solution"—similar to Russell's in *Principles*—was to posit "some purely conventional denotation", *viz.* the null-class, to serve as the denotatum for denotationless descriptions (*LK*, p. 47; *Papers* 4: 420). Russell says: "… this procedure, though it may not lead to actual logical error, is plainly artificial and does not give an exact analysis of the matter." Russell seems too kind here. The procedure may yield no "error" in the case of "the King of France is bald",[23] but it would seem to give an unacceptable result for existential assertions and denials. Consider:

(3)   The King of France exists.
(4)   The King of France does not exist.

With Frege's "solution", (3) would seem to be true and (4) false, since, for Frege, the null-class was an object and, presumably, an existent.[24]

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[22] Rudolph Carnap describes the argument as "rather obscure". See his *Meaning and Necessity*, enl. edn. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1956), p. 140. Alonzo Church has claimed that the argument suffers from use–mention confusion and, when cleared up, "Russell's objections to Frege completely vanish." See Church, "Carnap's Introduction to Semantics", *Philosophical Review* 52 (1943): 302. But the argument has been defended by A. J. Ayer, *Russell and Moore: the Analytical Heritage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1971); H. Hochberg, "Russell's Attack on Frege's Theory of Meaning", *Philosophica* 18 (1976): 9–34; C. E. Cassin, "Russell's Discussion of Meaning and Denotation: a Re-Examination", in *Essays on Bertrand Russell*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1970), pp. 256–72; S. Blackburn and A. Code, "The Power of Russell's Criticism of Frege: 'On Denoting', pp. 48–50", *Analysis* 38 (1978): 65–77. An excellent bibliography and defence of Russell may be found in G. Makin, *The Metaphysicians of Meaning: Russell and Frege on Sense and Denotation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

[23] A. J. Ayer has claimed, mistakenly, I think, that Frege's procedure will have the "odd" consequence of making both "the King of France is bald" and "the King of France is not bald" true "… since the null-class is included in all classes." See his *Russell and Moore*, p. 32. Here Ayer seems guilty of having conflated class membership with class inclusion.

[24] Frege, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* (Jena, 1893), 1: 19. I do not intend here to imply that this was Frege's definitive interpretation of existentials of the form "the so-and-so exists." The fact is that he says very little about existence sentences in the singular, and

Indeed, all existential denials of the form "the so-and-so does not exist" would appear to be false—a consequence hardly compatible with Russell's "feeling for reality" by 1905.

The other, closely related, objection is even more serious, although I think few have noticed. Russell says that on the old Russell–Frege theory of denoting, denotationless description sentences like "the King of France is bald" "ought to be nonsense" (*LK,* p. 46; *Papers* 4: 419), and one might take this remark as evidence that Russell has simply misunderstood Frege. For the whole idea of the sense–reference (and the denoting concept-denotation) distinction is presumably to allow the issue of meaning to be separate from the issue of reference, so that even though there be no King of France, "the King of France" can still have meaning. Russell's point here is that the fact (if it is one) that "the King of France" has meaning is not enough to ensure that "the King of France is bald" is a meaningful proposition. Now Frege *says* that such description sentences are meaningful.[25] But as Russell asks: "How can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?" If we reject Meinong's view, it seems a non-entity can't be the subject, and so, the proposition, lacking a subject, should be nonsense, i.e. no proposition at all. Frege would have us think that on his view of the proposition or thought, sentences like "the King of France is bald" perfectly well express thoughts or propositions. But he admits that in natural language such thoughts do not (and cannot) *predicate* anything of anything.[26] Yet predication seems a requirement for the meaningfulness of any sentence, i.e. a thought or proposition is meaningful only if it does *say* something *about* something. So Frege's claims notwithstanding, his sense–reference distinction seems unable to account for our ability to discourse about—make true and false propositions about—non-existent individuals.[27]

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one can only speculate as to what he would have considered an acceptable analysis in 1905. Russell's new theory was, in part, to provide just such an analysis.

[25] See Frege, "On Sense and Nominatum", trans. H. Feigl; reprinted in Feigl and W. Sellars, eds., *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), pp. 90–1. Recall that Russell, in his 1903 unpublished paper, says that the very sentence in question *is* meaningful, although he says it does *not* express a proposition. See the quotation cited at note 13.

[26] Frege, *ibid.*

[27] This criticism of Frege is more fully presented in my "Russell, Frege and the 'Meaning' of the Theory of Descriptions (or): Did Russell Know His Frege?", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20 (1982): 407–24.

Russell's solution

In his new theory of denoting, Russell provided a clear account of what any description sentence or proposition is *about*. His analysis breaks up the denoting phrase so that neither the denotation (if any) nor the denoting concept occurs as a constituent in the expressed proposition. This fact can be expressed by saying that the sentence is about (i.e. directly about, in a sense to be explained) neither the so-and-so nor the concept *the so-and-so*. Consider:

(5) The King of France does not exist.
(6) The King of France is bald.

Russell's analysis depends on his use of the logical notion of *propositional function* such as "*x* is King of France" and on the idea of asserting a propositional function to be always true, sometimes true, or never true. On Russell's analysis, (5) becomes:

(5') "*x*, and *x* alone,[28] is King of France" is never true

 and (6) becomes:

(6') "*x*, and *x* alone, is King of France; and *x* is bald" is sometimes true.

What appeared in (5) to be a sentence about a non-existent monarch becomes, on Russell's analysis, a sentence about a propositional function or property, *viz.* the property of being sole King of France. And (6) is about the (more complex) property of being sole King of France and bald.

Russell usually speaks of structures like "*x* is bald" as propositional functions rather than properties, but he uses both expressions in "On Denoting".[29] It is these properties that are the constituents of the

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[28] Here I am simplifying the logical structure of the uniqueness condition implicit in "the".

[29] See *LK*, pp. 42, 51, 53, 56; *Papers* 4: 416, 423, 244–5, 427. A rough equivalence between predicates, properties and propositional functions is informally described by Russell in *My Philosophical Development*, p. 124. For an illuminating account of the evolution of Russell's conception of propositional functions from the time of *Principles* to "On Denoting", see Klement, "The Origins of the Propositional Functions Version of Russell's Paradox" (cited in n. 8).

expressed propositions and serve as the subjects about which the proposition is. As he says,

... the propositions in which this thing [real or not] is introduced by means of a denoting phrase do not really contain this thing as a constituent, but contain instead the constituents [i.e. properties] expressed by the several words of the denoting phrase.... [In these cases] we know the properties of a thing [by acquaintance] without having acquaintance with the thing itself....

(*LK*, pp. 55–6; *Papers* 4: 427)

Although Russell never explicitly says in "On Denoting" that description sentences are about properties or propositional functions, he does say so in a paper published a few years later (1910) in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society.* Speaking generally, he says:

Such judgments, therefore, can only be analyzed by breaking up the descriptive phrases, introducing a variable, and *making propositional functions the ultimate subjects*. In fact, "the so-and-so is such-and-such" will mean that "x is so-and-so and nothing else is, and x is such-and-such" is capable of truth.[30]

So we're able to talk or think about objects by means of description sentences, like "the so-and-so is F", which are "really" about properties or propositional functions. We should speak of direct and indirect aboutness here. Indeed, we may distinguish at least three senses of "about" implicit in Russell's ideas at the time of "On Denoting" or soon after:

(7)   Description sentence S is (directly) about$_1$ O if and only if O is an object of acquaintance named (strict sense) by a word or phrase in S (or in the analysis of S).
(8) S is (indirectly) about$_2$ O iff O is denoted by "the so-and-so" in S.
(9) S is (indirectly) about$_3$ O iff S is not "about" O in senses 1 or 2, and S contains a description (truncated or not) purporting to denote O.[31]

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[30] Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", in *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 232; *Papers* 6: 161. Emphasis added.
[31] This sense seems implicit in Russell at this time. The reader will recall (see above, p. 28) that in his 1905 paper "The Existential Import of Propositions", Russell says of "the present King of France", "*the phrase intends to point out an individual,* but fails to

Thus, consider:

(10)   The author of *Waverley* is bald.
(11)   The King of France is bald.

(10) is about₁ "*x* is sole author of *Waverley* and bald" (i.e. the function or property). The function or property is an expressed constituent known by acquaintance. But (10) is also about₂ Scott (i.e. the author of *Waverley*) because the description denotes Scott. (11) is about₁ "*x* is sole King of France and bald". But it is not about₂ the King of France—indeed, it's about₂ nothing, since the King of France is non-existent. But it is about₃ him since it contains the description "the King of France".

This third sense of "about" need not be construed as a relation between sentences, or denoting phrases or concepts, and non-existent objects as Meinong's position seems to require. Rather, "being about₃ *O*" is to be thought of as a property which description sentences have in virtue of their description's denoting form and the lexical senses of their component words or concepts.³²

Thus, description sentences are to be construed as being indirectly about their objects by being directly about properties or propositional functions. But our ability to speak (indirectly) about objects—even about non-existent objects—would not require the existence or subsistence of such things.

Ronald Searle once caricatured Russell for *Punch* (March 1957). The cartoon caricature carried the gentle rebuke: "There are more things in Heaven, though, my lord, / Than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

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do so" (*Papers* 4: 487, emphasis added). I.e. a description sentence containing the denotationless phrase is about₃ the present King of France, even though there is no such individual.

³² These senses of "about" are not only implicit in Russell, they also help to clarify some of his informal talk. For example, in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* he says that while we can speak about the present King of England (1918), "We cannot speak about 'the present King of France' [i.e. the present King of France] because there is none" (p. 176). But he had already said (p. 170) that he was seeking a theory that could provide a correct analysis of "propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects". These remarks seem contradictory unless we adhere to something like the above distinctions of "about". Thus Russell should be understood as saying (rightly) we can't speak about₂ such pseudo-objects, although we can—and the theory of descriptions gives us an analysis of that fact—speak about₃ them.

With characteristic wit, Russell retorted in the margin:

On the contrary: put
$$\omega = \hat{x}\,(x \sim \epsilon\, x)$$
Then
$$\omega \sim \epsilon\, \omega \equiv \omega\, \epsilon\, \omega$$

I dreamt of ω, but it wasn't in heaven or earth.   (*Auto.* 3: opp. 97)

Indeed, Russell spent several years (1901–08) thinking and discoursing about ω (the class of classes that are not members of themselves), notwithstanding its non-existence.

   In sum, his 1905 theory gave us a clarifying account of how descriptions function in our language and of how we manage to discourse meaningfully and truly about all sorts of things, including things inexperienced and non-existent; and he did it without recourse to some of the ontological excesses of his pre-1905 ideas. And for that, as Quine has said, we are all immensely grateful.