

## Preface

# AFTER RUSSELL, AFTER MEINONG

DALE JACQUETTE  
Philosophy / Pennsylvania State U.  
University Park, PA 16802, USA  
DLJ4@PSU.EDU

The papers presented in this special issue commemorate the 100th anniversary of the publication of Russell's justly celebrated, much-discussed, but in many ways still enigmatic 1905 essay, "On Denoting". They were selected from the papers delivered at a conference organized by Nicholas Griffin, Director of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre, and myself in May 2005. That meeting, "Russell versus Meinong: 100 Years after 'On Denoting'", attracted about 100 philosophers from fourteen countries, presenting a total of 41 papers. Many of the essays delivered then and assembled here reflect special interests in Russell's complex adversarial relation to Alexius Meinong's object theory.

Russell's essay in many ways epitomizes the early ambitions of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century. It is, as Frank C. Ramsey famously remarked, "that paradigm of philosophy". It is a paradigm that continues to inform philosophical analysis in studies far afield of logic and semantics. Russell demonstrates a way of penetrating the surface grammar of a specific set of expressions with important philosophical implications and of systematically unpacking their component meanings. Like a beam of white light entering an optical prism, Russell breaks down sentences containing definite descriptions into distinct ontic, uniqueness and predication constituents. Russell's theory of definite descriptions marks an important turning point in his philosophical development, as he breaks from his prior qualified admiration for Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie* and rejects outright a semantic domain of beingless intended objects. The existence requirement in the first clause of Russell's analysis of definite descriptions marks a sharp departure for Russell toward the extensionalism that came to characterize his philosophy of logic and theory of meaning later in his career.

The existence condition for definitely described objects has sparked the greatest controversy in the years since Russell published his analysis. By denying the possibility of referring to and truly predicating ordinary properties of non-existent objects, Russell complicates the theory of referential meaning for false statements, works of fiction, mistaken scientific theories and hypotheses, and

expressions of acts of fantasy and imagination. Where Meinong unifies the semantics of all such commonplace feats of reference and predication, treating them as no different than discourse about intended objects that happen to exist, Russell, from a contrary but also legitimate philosophical perspective, sharply divides the meaning of thought and language according to whether or not their ostensible objects actually exist.

Russell's prestige exerted a powerful influence on generations of philosophers. Their apprenticeship typically featured a close study of "On Denoting" to embrace a robust sense of realism by adopting semantic extensionalism, limiting reference to existent objects only. It became a part of this tradition also to ridicule Meinongianism, often without bothering to read Meinong's writings, as Russell had with at least an initial dose of sympathy. The intentionalist tradition that continued the line of thought begun by Franz Brentano through Meinong and others was nevertheless not extinguished with the publication of Russell's invaluable essay or subsequent criticisms in such works as *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. Many scholars since 1905 have doubted whether Russell has properly understood the logic and semantics of definite description, despite his name's being so closely associated with the topic. More particularly, it has come increasingly to be questioned whether Russell accurately evaluates the prospects of Meinong's admission of beingless intended objects to a semantic domain alongside existent physical spatiotemporal and abstract entities. Russell rejects Meinong's semantic doctrine as logically incoherent in those applications in which we try to speak of an existent round square as being existent, round and square. By overlooking certain of Meinong's key distinctions, Russell disputes Meinong's central contribution to an intentionalist theory of mind and meaning, by which it is otherwise possible to refer to and truly predicate constitutive properties of non-existent as well as existent objects.

These are among the principal topics explored by participants in the 2005 McMaster University conference. The papers collected from that meeting and edited for this special issue of *Russell* focus especially on the logic of Russell's theory of definite descriptions and the conflict of his extensionalist convictions with the attractions of a Meinongian theory of non-existent objects. The ongoing conversations about these vital topics of logical theory and semantics, in their complex historical-philosophical context, are vigorously advanced by the contributions compiled here. They take up themes that Russell first sounded in his groundbreaking, endlessly rewarding essay, marking essential differences of perspective that fundamentally determine logical, semantic, and metaphysical theory-building in many parts of philosophy.

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