

## Russell's Unpublished Writings on Truth and Denoting

It is clear from his correspondence that Russell was very hurt in his later years by the comparative neglect into which his philosophy had fallen. In particular, the theory of descriptions,<sup>1</sup> which for nearly half a century seemed unassailable and was regarded by many as Russell's finest philosophical achievement, was partially eclipsed in his own lifetime by the work of Strawson.<sup>2</sup> Russell was never able to see any merit in Strawson's proposals, and replied to him in *My Philosophical Development*. Having written the reply, Russell wrote as follows to Ayer:

*Could you tell me one thing? I have always been curious as to whether my criticism of Strawson in My Philosophical Development was ever noticed or taken up by Strawson or those who see things as he does? (letter of 30 December 1961)*

Although Russell's criticism was warmly received by those sympathetic to his approach, it must be admitted that the criticism has not attracted much attention from Strawson or his followers. It is one of the ironies of the history of philosophy that *before* embracing the classic theory of descriptions Russell put forth and then rejected the Strawson theory, according to which sentences in which there are non-designating singular terms such as 'Apollo' or 'the king of France' are neither true nor false. The classic theory, of course, confers falsity upon such sentences.

In the *Principles of Mathematics* (1903) Russell adopted the view of Meinong, according to which there are many subsistent entities, such as the king of France, which have being but lack existence. He felt ontologically committed to such entities because we appear to frame propositions about them, e.g., when we say 'the king of France is a monarch'. But when he hit upon the theory of descriptions he was able to show that such propositions are not really *about* any non-existent entities - at least not in any sense of 'about' which requires that we treat the king of France as an entity. "On Denoting", where he first presents the theory of descriptions to the world, appears to have been written late in June of 1905.<sup>3</sup> But his distaste for subsistent entities emerges in his unpublished writings late in 1904 or very early in 1905 (at any rate, before 18 January 1905<sup>4</sup>). In these writings he rejects subsistent entities, and adopts Strawson's view that sentences in which non-designating singular terms occur are neither true nor false. But then in June of 1905 - it must have been immediately before the composition of "On Denoting" - he returned to the position advocated in the *Principles*. The formidable obscurity of "On Denoting" is explained in part, I believe, by the chaotic state of Russell's thought at this time.

In one of his unpublished papers on denoting Russell writes:

*...we shall have to say that "the present king of France is bald" is neither true nor false; for truth and falsehood have to do with what a sentence denotes, not with what it means; and we must take it as axiomatic that the subject of a proposition is part of the denotation of the proposition. This may be stated in another way, as follows. If we consider "x is bald", where x is 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. But if "x is bald" is a proposition at all, and is not a true proposition, then "x is not bald" is true. But among the values of x for which this is true, the present king of France is not included. Thus, "the present king of France is bald" is neither true nor false.<sup>5</sup>*

This problem would not arise, given the theory advocated in the *Principles*: for 'the king of France' would denote something - namely, a subsistent being. So, Russell has moved away from the position he

adopted from Meinong. But following this discussion which issues in the conclusion that 'the present king of France is bald' is neither true nor false because there is no king of France, Russell quickly raises a doubt:

*Can we extend the above theory to all false propositions? Are these all complex concepts which denote nothing? Consider (say) "Shakespeare was blind". Here there is not a failure of denotation in the parts, as in "the author of the Iliad was blind". But it may be said that there is a failure of denotation in the whole; that the phrase should denote Shakespeare's blindness, and that there is no such entity. This is a difficult question; it shall be left open at present.<sup>6</sup>*

Throughout nearly the whole of his philosophical career, Russell maintained a correspondence theory of truth: the proposition expressed by a sentence is true if it 'corresponds' with some 'fact', and false if it does not. A proposition purports to denote a certain fact and is true if it does so denote, false if it does not. He writes, "...a true proposition denotes a fact, which a false one denotes nothing."<sup>7</sup> Both 'Shakespeare was blind' and 'the author of the Iliad was blind' make existential claims. And in both cases the claim is false owing to a failure of denotation. Therefore, concluded Russell, if the one proposition is neither true nor false, so must the other be as well. But this is intolerable, since 'Shakespeare was blind' is clearly false. Thus, Russell says, "If we decide that in all false propositions there is a failure of denotation, we shall say that truth and falsehood attach to meanings, not denotations."<sup>8</sup> This, however, would force Russell to abandon his correspondence theory of truth.

Not wishing to abandon that theory, Russell returned to the position advocated in the *Principles*; and in a paper dated June 1905 he says: "...we must admit that there are entities which do not exist."<sup>9</sup> But he did not long remain satisfied with this view, and in the margin of the paper he penciled in "Rewrite". Soon after this, it must have been, he discovered the now classic theory of descriptions, which ended his commitment to subsistent entities and, at the same time, preserved his correspondence theory of truth. According to the theory of descriptions, as presented in "On Denoting", the proposition expressed by 'the present king of France is bald' is logically equivalent to the proposition expressed by 'there *exists* one and only individual such that he is the present king of France, and this individual is bald'.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. B. Russell, "On Denoting", 14: *Mind*, Oct. 1905, 479-93.

<sup>2</sup>P.F. Strawson, "On Referring", *Mind*, 59: July 1950, 320-44.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. B. Russell, *Autobiography* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967), I, 269-71.

<sup>4</sup>There is a group of three papers, all unpublished and all written at approximately the same time (before "On Denoting"): "Points about Denoting", 18 pages; "On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases", 22 pages; and "On Meaning and Denotation", 99 pages. In the first of these Russell refers to Combes as the Prime Minister of France, and Combes held that office only until 18 January, 1905.

<sup>5</sup>"On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases", pp.5-6.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>7</sup>"Points about Denoting", p.5.

<sup>8</sup>"On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases", p.6.

<sup>9</sup>"The Nature of Truth" (unpublished), p.7a.