DENOTATION AND ABOUTNESS IN RUSSELL

There is hardly any topic in the philosophy of language that has been more discussed than Russell's theory of descriptions. Hence, any attempt to contribute something new to understanding it may seem pretentious. Yet, some basic tenets of the theory and its philosophical significance have often escaped notice or been misrepresented. The most important of these is Russell's conception of the object-directedness of descriptive propositions, which dominates his early notion of denoting but still is prominent in his new theory of "On Denoting" (henceforth OD).[1] This object directedness is manifest not only in the very title of OD, but in three substantial aspects of the theory: (i) the explicit motivation of the theory in which Russell talks of “reaching objects” by means of denoting phrases; (ii) the need to explain knowledge **about** objects, or knowledge of objects by description; (iii) the definition offered in OD for the notion of denotation.

Any interpretation of Russell's views must address the problem of reconciling this conception with his analysis of descriptive propositions as quantified ones. His conception of denoting and his theory of descriptions must be seen in light of this problem. In particular, the philosophical significance of the eliminating procedure for definite descriptions proposed in OD, and his notion of incomplete symbols entirely depend on it. Russell's way of coping with this problem was based on the idea, which I regard as his main point in OD, that when a descriptive statement is true it is indeed about an object, but the object the proposition is about – its denotation - is not a constituent of the proposition and is not determined by any constituent of the proposition (as was the case in all previous theories), but by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole.[2] These then, I propose, are the two great innovations of OD: that a proposition can be about an object which is not its constituent (I shall call it “remote intentionality”), and that its capacity for this remote intentionality is effected by dint of its logical structure - the logical structure of the whole proposition. In both these points Russell

made important steps beyond Frege and other previous theories, including his own earlier views in *The Principles of Mathematics* (henceforth POM). Being about an object is a property of a whole proposition, not of a term in it, and OD is in many ways the first theory in which the notion of aboutness is seriously taken as a propositional notion, where the logical structure of the whole proposition is at work in determining what the proposition is about.

The particular way in which Russell conceived of the object directedness of descriptive propositions, and the fact that he so persistently insisted on it ,in spite of his quantificational analysis of such propositions and of his conception of descriptions as "incomplete symbols", point to another important philosophical moral that I shall not discuss here in detail: that there is important conceptual interdependence between our understanding of quantification and our capacity for reference by description.

Denoting – Object-directed and Universalistic Construals

Russell's theory of descriptions, as the title of his classical paper of 1905 says, is **on denoting**. The problem of denoting was, for Russell, the problem of the capacity of thought and of propositions to be **about objects**. Hence, the primary aim of his theory (at least in its original phase) was to reveal and analyze the concepts and mechanisms involved in the relations of a thought or a proposition with the objects it is about. Nevertheless, there is a prevalent tendency among modern theorists to present Russell's theory as just the opposite: as if mesmerized by the problem of "empty descriptions", philosophers have presented Russell's **main** idea as the claim that propositions that seem to be "object directed", (or "identity dependent") are, in fact, not such at all, but general, or universalistic in nature.[3]

The difference between an object-directed and a universalistic construal of descriptive statements is not to be undermined; it has both logical and epistemological significance. Logically, an object-directed construal renders such propositions as basically singular and quantifier-free; a universalistic one construes them as quantified. Epistemically, an object directed construal motivates a conception of the grasp of such propositions as involving a

conception of the object concerned, and the content in question as sensitive to the existence and the identity of the object. It goes hand in hand with the idea that such propositions are intrinsically **about** an object. A universalistic construal, on the other hand, is free of these sensitivities and commitments (though it may have others, depending on the style of interpretation of the quantifiers adopted).

This difference should not be blurred by the fact (assuming it to be a fact) that both construals are associated with the same (or with extensionally equivalent) truth conditions: The proposition that the F is G is verified, one can say, by an object being the sole satisfier of F and being G, whether we conceive of the proposition as singular and object directed, or not. This in itself, however, does not impede the significance of the above difference, for much depends here on how these truth conditions and their knowledge are conceived. Russell, in any case, made it clear that his notion of proposition was finer grained than this extensional conception of truth conditions: he repeatedly stresses that different propositions may be logically equivalent.[4]

Now, I don't wish to deny that when we focus on the problem of empty descriptions Russell's theory may be naturally interpreted as saying, or implying, something like the above prevalent conception, namely, that a proposition that seems to be object-directed is in fact a general or universal one. But this is not its main idea. Its main idea is, in a sense, quite the opposite: The problem with which he was preoccupied at OD was the problem of **successful descriptions**: how can a descriptive proposition be concerned with objects, which are not among its constituents, in case it is so concerned. Thus, take a proposition of the form

(1) "the F is G"

and assume that there is one and only one F. Then, on Russell's theory, this single F is the denotation of "the F", and it is what the proposition is about. However, it is not what "the F" means, for "the F", on that theory, is an incomplete expression having no meaning in itself. The whole proposition is, of course, meaningful and is rendered as a quantified one:

(2) "There is an x such that it is G and every y is F iff it is identical with x".

Russell's problem, then, was to explain how this is possible: how a proposition can be about something which is not the meaning of any of its meaningful expressions.

In many expositions of Russell's theory the tension between the "object directedness" or the "aboutness" component of the meaning of the propositions involved and the quantified or "universalistic" rendering of them is undermined or unnoticed at all. Thus consider Hylton's typical formulation:

> A sentence [1] ascribing a certain property to a definitely described object is understood as [2] asserting that the predicate from which the definite description was formed is uniquely satisfied, and that whatever object satisfies it has the property in question. Thus, to use Russell's own example, the sentence 'The father of Charles II was executed' expresses a proposition whose form is more accurately mirrored by the sentence [3] 'It is not always false of x that x begat Charles II, and that x was executed and that "if y begat Charles II y is identical with x" is always true of y (The numbers in square brackets are mine, G.B.).[5]

[1] expresses the object directedness of the analyzed proposition; its being about an object, ascribing a property to it. [2], on the other hand, expresses the "universalistic" rendering of the sentence as being about predicates, or of the proposition as being about propositional functions. Hylton (quite faithful to Russell here) remains indecisive as to the relationship between them: Is it that the proposition only seems to be object directed (as in [1]), but is really universalistic (as in [2])? Hylton refrains (justly, I believe) from saying so. The ambivalence involved reappears in Russell's notorious unclarity about "is always true (false) of x" in [3]. It looks like a sort of de re formulation, but is in fact a quantification which Russell often understood as a predication of propositional functions.[6] But the tension is there and the fact that Russell persistently retained both poles of it is, as we shall see, important for understanding a crucial aspect of his position.

This is just the general problem of denoting exhibited by the use of definite descriptions. A "universalistic" interpretation takes this rendering of the logical form of the proposition as

meaning that such propositions, contrary to what they seem to be, are not really about objects.[7] If this were correct as a general interpretation of Russell's main insight, it would render Russell's theory as denying the presumption of the problem of denoting, which it was designed to solve. For in rendering such propositions as general or universal, we lose an important aspect of their meaning – their being about objects – the denotations concerned. One may think that this is merely a superficial and misleading feature of their grammatical structure, which has nothing to do with their meaning. But, as we shall see, on Russell's theory it is not. In fact, it is a crucial feature which the theory was designed to explain. Naturally, it was an especially reassuring advantage of his theory that it could handle "failures" (sentences with empty descriptions) as well. But focusing exclusively on that feature of it may detract our attention from its main aim and merit.[8]

The locus classicus of Russell's notion of denoting is his Principles Of Mathematics of 1903 (henceforth POM) and the significance of OD must be understood against its background.[9] In what follows I shall critically present some of the main features of the notion in POM and indicate their connection to OD. The key to understanding Russell's view in POM and in OD is to realize that denoting, for him, was a logically structured notion which played a central theoretical role in explaining the intentionality of propositions – i.e. the fact that propositions are about objects.[10] This is an important fact, for it is part of our understanding of propositions. It formed the starting point of Russell's philosophy of language and of mind at that time. But it is also a puzzling fact, because by our understanding of many propositions they are typically about objects that are not their constituents. Hence, denoting is anything but a simple, direct designating relation (like naming on some theories). I said that denoting is a logically structured notion. As we shall see, in this point lies the main advance of OD over POM. For, although the point is hinted at in POM, it is very obscure and not elaborated there. But it becomes the focus of the theory in OD, where denotation becomes a function of the logical structure of a complete proposition.

In order to get a bit clearer about this, it may be helpful to trace some of Russell's ideas on the relationships between denotation and the notion of a proposition being about something (which may be the denotation of a denoting phrase in it). Therefore I shall now briefly discuss some of Russell's ideas on aboutness and denoting in POM and their relations to his position in OD.

Aboutness as Constitutive of the Notion of Proposition in POM

The notion of aboutness is constitutive of the notion of a proposition: in every proposition something - what he calls assertion - is asserted about something - a term (section 43, p. 39; see also p. 44). Saying that the notion of about is thus constitutive of the notion of proposition does not mean that every proposition is about something, anymore than saying that the notion of truth is constitutive of that of proposition means that every proposition is true. What it means is rather that we cannot understand what a proposition is without understanding what it is for it to be about an object, just as we cannot understand what a proposition is without understanding what it is for it to be true. The fact that some propositions, like “The golden mountain is in France”, appear not to be about anything poses a serious problem for Russell, but in itself it does not disclaim the general conception that aboutness is constitutive of the notion of proposition – it poses a challenge within that conception.

Aboutness then is constitutive of the notion of proposition. Is it also constitutive of the individuation of propositions? Russell is not entirely clear about that. On the one hand it seems that the answer must be negative. For, he insists that the same proposition – A is greater than B - may be regarded on one analysis as being about A, and on another, as being about B (section 48, p.44). This naturally suggests what is perhaps the more orthodox view – that aboutness is not constitutive of the individuation of proposition. On the other hand he says that

(3) "Socrates is human" and

(4) "Humanity belongs to Socrates"

are different propositions. In the first, "the notion expressed by "human" occurs in a different way from that in which it occurs when it is called humanity, the difference being that in the latter case, but not in the former, the proposition is about that notion" (ibid. p.45). Here he seems to hold the more radical view that aboutness is constitutive of the individuation of propositions.

Later on in the section Russell argues in the same spirit that `human' and `humanity' must be regarded as the same term. He concludes that "terms which are concepts differ from those which are not, not in respect of self-subsistence, but in virtue of the fact that, in certain true or false propositions, they occur in a manner which is different in an indefinable way from the manner in which subjects or terms of relation occur" (p.46).

It seems then that propositions are individuated by their terms and by the way in which these terms occur in the proposition. This way is constituted by the relation of aboutness: the notion `human' occurs in both (3) and (4), but in a different way. The only thing we are told about this difference is that in the second case (in the form of `humanity' in (4)) it occurs as a term, a logical subject, so that something is being asserted of it, which is not true of the first case. Russell then adds that calling this notion a concept relates only to this feature of the manner it is used, not to its "self-subsistence."

Things (to be distinguished from concepts) are defined ,now, as those terms which are "not capable of that curious twofold use which is involved in human and humanity". (ibid.)

Descriptive Propositions and Their Constituents – Denoting Concepts

We have seen that the notion of aboutness is constitutive of the structural difference, or difference of use between human and humanity, assuming both to be the same concept.

The notion of aboutness is also of vital importance for delineating a special class of concepts - denoting concepts. In the proposition:

(5) "I met a man"

something is asserted about myself; nothing is asserted about the concept `a man', though it occurs in the proposition. Something, however, is asserted about "some actual biped denoted by

the concept" (section 51, p.47). This may suggest that this actual biped about which something is asserted is a term, a constituent of the proposition. As we shall see, however, Russell was not entirely clear, or consistent, about this in POM, and the difficulties involved here may be among the reasons that led him to the alternative proposed in OD.

In ch. V of POM Russell emphasizes the fundamental character of the notion of denoting and its importance. He elaborates on the previously quoted remark and says: "the fact that description is possible – that we are able by the employment of a concept to designate a thing which is not a concept – is due to logical relations between some concepts and some terms, in virtue of which such concepts inherently and logically denote such terms". (Later on we shall expand on the significance of the logical character of this relation).

And he proceeds in the next paragraph to define: "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" (p.53).[11]

It may seem that on Russell's conception the actual man about which, as we have seen, something is asserted in (5) is the “term connected in some peculiar way with the concept”, according to the above definition. This, however, is not as simple as it may seem. In fact, Russell's position here becomes embarrassingly complicated, or totally confused. In developing his theory further on in the chapter, he says that the “perfectly definite” man I met (in case 5 is true) is not contained in the proposition. Furthermore it turns out that the denotation of the denoting concept – a man – is a complex Russell calls "a disjunction", or a disjunctive object (54 ff.), and the proposition is about it. This “disjunction” is definitely different from the actual man I met. Hence it becomes unclear what the proposition is about after all.

Moreover, we assumed above that the object, whatever it is, which is what the assertion or the proposition is about is a term or a constituent of the proposition. This indeed is a most natural assumption, given Russell’s explanation of the division of propositions into assertion and terms, which are what the assertion is about. This, however, goes against a prevalent

interpretation (perhaps the standard one) of Russell's view. On this prevalent interpretation the denoted term may not be a term of the proposition in question (cf. Hylton, p. 206-7). This appears to be a basic assumption of Hylton's entire approach to Russell's conception of denoting in POM as arising from the problem of explaining our ability to grasp propositions about infinite totalities. But this interpretation, I believe, can be challenged. Russell never says in POM that the denoted term is not a part or a constituent of the proposition in which it is denoted. In the above quoted definition of denoting he says that the proposition is not about the denoting concept but about a term related to it, but he does not say that this term is not a constituent of the proposition. Moreover, on various occasions he explicitly says quite the contrary. With regard to "Socrates is a man", for instance, he says that "the proposition contains a term, a relation, and what I shall call a disjunction" (POM 54; cf. also pp. 44,46,47). The disjunction in question is the denoted term of the denoting concept - a man. Russell's view was, therefore, that the denoted term is a part of the proposition in question.[12]

We seem, in sum, to be facing two interpretive problems: 1. Is the proposition (5) about the “actual biped” I met (in case 5 is true) or is it about the “disjunction”, whether it is true or not? 2. Is what the proposition (5) is about a term of the proposition, i.e. a constituent of it, or is it “external’ to it - a term that lies outside it? In POM Russell is not clear and decisive about these problems, and his vacillations here indicate a deep unclarity (or even incoherence) in his notion of proposition in POM. There are, I believe three different roles the notion of proposition plays in POM, which were not sufficiently distinguished by Russell there: (I) A proposition is in some sense the fact of which the truth of a true proposition consists. This is the fact that contains (is about) the “actual biped” I met in case (5) is true. We may call this the factual role of propositions. (ii) A proposition is an abstract embodiment of the truth conditions of a statement like (5). Here the proposition is not about any actual biped I met, but about the “disjunction” of all men. It is remarkable, incidentally, that Russell felt even here a need to construe the proposition - the abstract embodiment of the truth conditions - as being “about” something - the

disjunction in question. We may call this the semantical role of propositions. (iii) A proposition is something we can know and to which we may have epistemic access. In this role, the notion of proposition is central to epistemology and a theory of understanding. We can therefore call it the epistemic role of propositions. Part of the confusion that POM evokes is rooted in Russell's efforts to unify these three roles. But it is questionable whether this can be done, and in any event, a lot more has to be said about it. For example, in insisting that the terms of the proposition - the things it is about - are its constituents, with which we must be acquainted, Russell is evidently thinking of the epistemic role (iii above). But (i) is concerned with factual aspects which do not require such acquaintance. And so is (ii), whose commitments are again different from those of both (i) and (iii).

This has far-reaching consequences for Russell's notion of proposition in POM. I cannot enter into a detailed discussion of it here, but let me mention that it seems that we should say at least something like the following: Ontologically, a proposition contains both the denoting concept and the term denoted as its constituents; epistemically, however, we have direct access only to the denoting concept, and succeed in thinking about the denoted term "indirectly" in terms of the logical relation of denoting between the denoting concept and the denoted term. Alternatively we might say that there are two propositions involved: one which we grasp and which is the object of our epistemic attitudes; this does not contain the denoted object but only the denoting concept (and other constituents). The other is the ontological complex to which we aim; this does include the denoted term along with other constituents. There are many problems raised by this conception of proposition and the tangles involved may have led Russell to abandon it (and the denoting theory that was part of it). It seems to me plausible that this obscurity of the notion of proposition in POM, with the difference between the ontological and epistemological propositions (or parts of one proposition) involved was one of the reasons that led Russell to abandon the POM theory of denoting and to develop the OD conception in its stead. For besides other crucial advantages, the OD conception of proposition was also sharper

and neater than the POM one: A proposition consists of constituents with all of which we have direct epistemic relation (acquaintance), and it may be about things outside it in virtue of its logical structure.[13]

I have pointed out two main problems in the POM theory up to now: one pertains to the nature of propositions and to the question of whether the denoted term is a constituent of the proposition; the other to the relation of aboutness and to whether e.g. (5) is about an actual biped, or about a disjunctive object. There are, in addition, notorious problems in understanding the "peculiar relation" between a denoting concept and the object it denotes: What is the peculiar way in which a term is connected with the denoting concept? Is it a property the concept itself has, or is it a feature of its occurrence in particular positions in the proposition? In what sense is this relation a logical one? The aboutness relation appears, in the definition, to be a mark of the denoting concept. But it remains unexplained how it is effected: What brings it about that whenever the concept occurs in a proposition the proposition is not about it but about an object? and how is it determined which object is concerned?

These questions have no easy answers in the framework of POM, but getting clear about them is crucial for the intelligibility of its theory. In his book on Russell (ibid.) Hylton traces some of Russell's reasons for abandoning the POM doctrine of denoting concepts. The main reason, according to Hylton, is that we cannot consistently state the denoting relation between a denoting concept and the object it denotes. Suppose, for example, you want to say that

(5) "A horse denotes the class of horses".

Then, since the denoting concept A horse occurs in the proposition, the proposition is not about it, but about its denotation - the class of horses. But the resulting proposition – that the class of horses denotes the class of horses – is evidently not only false but also not what you wanted to express. So a proposition that would express what we want must contain not the concept A horse but another term that would denote it. This other term must be a denoting concept, for otherwise the resulting proposition would be about it and not about the concept A horse as desired. We

would then face the same problem again. Hence the effort to spell out the fact of denoting is self-defeating.

Hylton presents this argument, in Russell's name, as devastating for the POM theory (it is of course reminiscent of Frege's own puzzle about the difficulty in saying that the concept horse is a concept). Whether Russell's basic difficulty was the impossibility of stating the fact of denoting (Hylton's version presented before) or the obscurity concerning the relation of denoting, the nature of propositions and its terms, and the aboutness relation (all pointed out above; these points, I believe, are complementary, and Russell was troubled by them all), it is no wonder that shortly after publishing the book he could not find this satisfactory and fought his way to an alternative. The alternative is his celebrated theory of descriptions of OD. But the huge difference between it and POM notwithstanding we should not lose sight of some important connections.

Two basic points emerge out of our discussion as characterizing the POM conception of denoting: the object-directedness of descriptive propositions, and its being based on the logical nature of the denoting relation. There results, I have argued, an obscure and perhaps even incoherent notion of proposition. The first point was impeded by the bizarre and extravagant multiplicity of objects in POM, including objects like disjunctions (in “I met a man), conjunctions (in “All men are mortal”), and the second remained obscure and hardly intelligible.[14] But these two basic points remained with Russell in OD and shaped his conception there; but on both he made a tremendous advance. On the first by getting rid of the bizarre ontology of POM; on the second, by explicating the logical nature of the relation of denoting in terms of the logical structure of the proposition. The change from the POM conception to the OD theory also results in an important clarification of the very notion of a proposition. It results in a clear recognition that a proposition may be about external things – things that are not among its constituents, and in a clear separation of the ontological constraints (which are relevant to the

truth and falsity of propositions) from the epistemic ones (which function in a theory of knowledge and understanding).

Denoting in the Theory of Descriptions

I assume here that the basics of the theory of descriptions of OD are well known to every reader, and will not present it. I shall, however, draw attention to some points that are too often ignored in presenting it. The fundamental problem of denoting that preoccupied Russell in POM remained with him in OD: How is it that a proposition can be about objects that are not (immediate) constituents of it?[15] Russell presents the problem in epistemic terms, relying on his principle of acquaintance, thus:

> We know that the center of mass of the solar system at a definite instant is some definite point, and we can affirm a number of propositions about it; but we have no immediate acquaintance with this point, which is only known to us by description. The distinction between acquaintance and knowledge **about** is the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the **things we only reach by means of denoting phrases**. (p. 41; last emphasis is mine, G.B.)

Russell doesn't speak here of denoting concepts (as in POM) but of denoting phrases, but he still holds firm to the idea that by means of these denoting phrases we "reach things", which are not constituents of the proposition (things of which we don't have presentations, or that are not known by acquaintance). This idea, which was the heart of the notion of denoting in POM, is still the main idea and driving force in OD, and it shapes the basic philosophical problem of this seminal article. It reflects Russell's consistent conviction, which we have seen in POM, that the idea of a proposition being about what it is about is constitutive of the notion of a proposition and possibly also of its identity (this, of course is not to belittle the other problems connected with descriptions by which Russell "tests" his theory and proves its adequacy and superiority to its alternatives). Also the pre-OD manuscripts of 1905 are full of expressions of this conviction.[16] Russell proceeds to explain his problem and says that in perception and in thought:

> "We do not necessarily have acquaintance with the objects denoted by phrases composed of words with whose meanings we are acquainted. To take a very important instance: there seems no reason to believe that we are ever acquainted with other people's minds, seeing that these are not directly perceived; hence what we know about them is obtained through denoting. All thinking starts from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking about many things with which we have no acquaintance" (p. 42).

This then is the constitutive idea of the theory of denoting here. And the vast difference between it and the conception of POM notwithstanding, the general character of this idea is taken over from there. It is quite characteristic of this spirit that even with regard to indefinite descriptions Russell refrained from taking, say, the Fregean attitude of regarding propositions with such descriptions as being about concepts (or classes), and writes: " `a man' denotes not many men, but an ambiguous man" (p. 41). Explaining the notion of denotation in the new theory, Russell writes:

> "Thus if `C' is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity x (there cannot be more than one) for which the proposition `x is identical with C' is true, this proposition being interpreted as above. We may then say that the entity x is the denotation of the phrase `C' " (p. 51).

The basic conception of the object-directedness of descriptive propositions is thus manifest both in Russell's explicit statement of his primary motivation, in the significance he ascribes to knowledge of, or reference to, objects by description, and in his definition of denotation.

Now the gist of the theory of OD is that denoting phrases are "incomplete symbols", which are meaningless in themselves and which are analyzed away in a proper analysis of propositions in which they occur. What we are left with in such an analysis, according to the theory, is just a unique existential proposition, with its real constituents and its logical structure. Thus, "the F is G" is analyzed as "there is exactly one F and every F is a G", where the

description “the F” is eliminated. Russell's explanations of the quantifiers involved are in terms of propositional functions being "sometimes true" (for the existential quantifier) and "always true" (for the universal one).[17] The denotation of a description, it thus appears, does not play any role in Russell's "semantics" for descriptive propositions.[18] Whence, therefore, comes the idea that there are things which are not constituents of the proposition, but about which the proposition nevertheless is? And whence the idea that these are "reached by means of denoting phrases"?

The idea is not a casual one; it recurs endlessly in Russell's writings subsequent to OD, and it forms the fundamental idea of his epistemology and of the distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description".[19] It expresses a deep trend in his thought that is hard to reconcile with the basic insight of OD. Strictly speaking, it may look as if the theory presented in OD simply doesn't leave room for the role ascribed to denoting phrases in the above quotation; as if this role and the idea of such propositions being about objects is merely a relic of the previous conception of POM, or a lip service to the vernacular expression, a facon de parler which is explained away in favor of the quantificational construal. This is undoubtedly the root of the prevalent "universalistic" interpretation mentioned at the outset.

Seen on the background of POM Russell's position in OD seems to derive from and improve on the better parts of the passages from POM we have discussed above. We have seen that, although this may not have been Russell's clear and explicit position, there is pressure in the theory of POM to regard denoting as based on the idea of a proposition being about something which is not a constituent of it (we may call it "external aboutness" or "**remote intentionality**"); indeed, the fact that in POM he did not hold this position explicitly manifests, as we have seen, one of the faults of his conception of propositions and of the objects they are about. In OD this view of remote intentionality became his clear and explicit view. “The author of Waverly is bald” is definitely about an object – Walter Scott – which is not a constituent of the proposition. The problem (exegetical and substantive) of whether the denoted object is contained in the

proposition, that beset us in POM, does not arise here. There results a much clearer and neater notion of proposition, where all its constituents are known by acquaintance. The notion of aboutness, under this conception of remote intentionality - is richer and more complex: a proposition is about its constituents, and can also be about external objects which are not its constituents. But this is still much clearer and simpler than the obscure relation of denoting in POM.

The other important idea in POM was that the relation of a proposition being about a denoted object is effected by a logical relation. In POM the idea was rather obscure: Russell talked there of an irreducible logical connection between a denoting concept and the term it denotes. In OD, instead of this obscure idea, Russell developed an articulate theory, according to which this remote intentionality and the object directedness of descriptive propositions are effected by the logical form of the proposition as a whole. “The author of Waverly is bald” is about Scott; he himself is the object the proposition is about. But he is determined as such not by any particular concept, but by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole: (Ex)((y)(Ax–––> x=y)&Bx). The nested quantificational structure, with the various positions of the bound variables, the predicates and their positions – this whole logical structure determines Scott as the denotation - what the proposition is about.

And how is this notion of aboutness to be construed when there is no denotation, like in “The King of France is bald”? The proposition is of course not about a non-existent King of France; where there is no denotation it is “just” about its constituents, and the effect of remote intentionality is emptied. Aboutness is thus a sort of “disjunctive notion”: A proposition is always about some things; if there is a denotation, it is about its constituents and about the denotation; if there is none, it is only about its constituents. This conception of aboutness and of remote intentionality is most natural to take when, like in the new theory of OD, the denotation, the object the proposition is about, is determined by logical structure, and where the proposition is secured to be about something in any case - even when the structure does not in fact determine

any existent denotation. The problem of “empty descriptions”, where there is in fact no denotation, is, in contrast, a very serious problem in the POM theory. The main reason for that is that denoting was regarded in POM as a primitive, irreducible logical relation; it thus remains completely mysterious how the question of whether there is a denotation, and whether the proposition is about it could depend on purely factual considerations (like whether there is at present a King in France).[20] This acute problem is avoided in the new theory of OD with its conception of remote intentionality. Denotation is not regarded anymore as a primitive logical relation between a concept and a term, but as determined by the logical structure of a whole proposition; a lack of denotation is construed now as a feature of the truth or falsity of the proposition, which remains, in any event, as being about something.[21]

It is here, in the second point, that the major advance of OD over POM is made, and it is a radical advance: Instead of speaking in terms of the obscure (and perhaps senseless) idea of logical relations between a concept and an object, Russell took the bold step of making logical relations as indeed the heart of the matter. But talk of logical relations here, is simply talk of logical structure of a complete proposition. The combination of these two steps is the characteristic feature of Russell's view in OD. It marks a deep break with the main tradition: A fundamental semantical relation – denoting – is construed as the (logically) structured way in which a proposition "reaches out" to the objects it is about; and this reaching out is not effected by a simple lexical relation between an expression (or a concept) and an object, but by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole. The capacity of thought to be concerned with objects which are not among its constituents is explained not in terms of the puzzling denoting power of concepts, but is relegated to the logical structure of the proposition as a whole.[22]

How is this effected? How does Russell's quantificational construal of descriptive statements succeed in maintaining the object-directedness of these propositions? Answerring this by appeal to the idea of remote intentionality as determined by the logical structure of a complete proposition may seem, as it stands too programmatic and dull. Indeed, there are other factors that

must get into the picture, such as the interpretation of the quantification involved and of the very notion of predication. But remote intentionality and its determination by logical structure are the central ones, and it is in them that the main novelty of OD consists. In order to get a sharper view of the role I ascribe here to the logical structure of the whole proposition we might consider two other approaches that Russell entertained before and eventually rejected.

The first is the "theory of the variable", which Russell entertained in POM and subsequently at least until OD. For various reasons, into which we cannot enter here, Russell considered the variable as a term, a constituent of a proposition. Now, the variable was conceived on that view as having a peculiar relation to objects, something analogous to the relation of denoting. Hence, its occurrence in a proposition had the effect of turning this proposition into one about objects (and not about the variable itself). Accordingly, one could think that the occurrence of a variable in the quantificational rendering of a descriptive statement explains (and secures) its being about an object – its object-directedness.

However, the two basic ideas here – that of the variable as an actual constituent of a proposition, and that of the "mysterious" denoting relation of that constituent to objects are so obscure that this theory cannot serve any useful purpose here. It should also be noted that in this theory of the variable the logical structure of the proposition does not count at all. It is the variable itself, with its mysterious denoting power, that is supposed to do the entire job of determining what the proposition is about. It is no wonder that Russell himself was dissatisfied with this theory almost immediately on proposing it.[23]

The second theory may be called "the satisfaction theory". According to it a descriptive proposition, quantificationally construed, may be regarded as being about an object when this object is conceived as the sole satisfier of a predicate (concept). Thus, we can understand how "The author of Waverly is bald" (quantificationally construed in the familiar Russelian way) is about Scott by conceiving of Scott as the sole satisfier of the relevant predicate. The idea is a very appealing one, and it is fairly close to Russell's own explanation of the notion of the

denotation of a description in OD. In itself there may be nothing wrong in it. The only problem with it is that it cannot serve as an explanation of the phenomenon in question because "the sole satisfier of a predicate" is itself a definite description (where a particular predicate is inserted). Hence, we must understand its denoting effect (or the object-directedness of propositions in which it occurs) in which case it cannot serve as the basis of an explanation of that effect. In this respect it is like "what x denotes", which troubled Russell, e.g. in "On Fundamentals". Russell regarded this as a paramount difficulty in the theory of denoting concepts.[24]

On this background we may appreciate better why Russell felt that he had solved the problem of denoting in the new theory of OD, and the point of my emphasizing that in this new theory the object concerned is determined by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole. For in the new theory we do not need any recourse to such descriptions (or denoting concepts): Using the quantificational apparatus gets the desired effect of this (semantic) meta-linguistic description - the determination of the object concerned; and it gets it by dint of the logical structure of the whole proposition: the positions of the variables and their binding by the quantifiers within the truth-functional schema, etc.[25]

There is a tension between the thesis of aboutness and the conception of denoting phrases as incomplete symbols - a tension, but not an outright contradiction. Most interpretations lean on the latter and disregard the former - in spite of Russell's repeated appeal to it. And there are, of course, some more utterly non-Russellian treatments of descriptions.[26] But a fair interpretation of Russell should respect both these elements. The above aimed at showing what it is that should be respected here, and why it is not evident that this cannot be done. Crucial was the notion of "remote intentionality" - the idea that in general, part of the meaning of a descriptive proposition is that it is indeed about an object, but one not determined by any lexical meaningful expression, but by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole. It is mainly here that the revolutionary character of Russell's conception lies: It relaxes the grip on our thought of the Fregean idea that

an object can be what a proposition is about only by being the referent of a constituent of the proposition.

Frege insisted that a proposition can only be about what is explicitly mentioned in it – i.e. the referents of its names. This principle, which is repeatedly emphasized in his *The Foundations of Arithmetic* and in "On Sense and Reference", motivated his conception of quantification as second-order predication, and of quantified statements (existential and universal) as being about concepts and not about objects. I cannot elaborate here on Frege's reasons for this strong principle and on its far-reaching consequences: it has to do with the strong connection between the notion of aboutness and that of reference; there is hardly a topic in his philosophy which is not dependent on the particular way in which Frege conceived of this connection.

Russell's notion of denoting in OD and the conception of remote intentionality that emerges out of it amount to an outright rejection of the Fregean doctrine. This is because the denotation of a descriptive statement is proclaimed to be what the statement is about, although it is not a constituent of it (hence, not the meaning of any of its names). It is rather determined by the logical structure of the proposition.

Now, an epistemic strengthening of this idea has often been ascribed to Russell (notably by Evans) namely, that understanding such a proposition involves having independent knowledge of what it is about. This, in general, is what Evans calls "Russell's principle" (ibid. ch. 4). If our "remote intentionality", or external aboutness, is construed in the strong reading Evans offers to this principle, it does seem to conflict with Russell's doctrine of incomplete symbols and with his construal of descriptive propositions (and thus the universalistic reading of his theory is supported). But then I find slim basis for Evans' reading of Russell's principle in Russell (which, of course, does not detract from the intrinsic value of Evans' own defence and elaboration of the principle). The gist of Russell’s idea is that by being acquainted with the constituents of a proposition we may come to understand it, in virtue of its logical structure, as being about an object we do not otherwise know. This is what the idea of remote intentionality

amounts to. When I say, for instance, that my upstairs neighbor is noisy, I understand the proposition as being about a person, even when I do not have any independent knowledge of him.

Russell did adhere to a related principle - the principle of acquaintance - which says that in order to understand a proposition we must know (be acquainted with) its constituents. But this would undermine our claim about remote intentionality only if it were granted that it is only its constituents that a proposition can be about. I find no reason to believe this, or to believe that Russell believed this. We have seen that a central idea of Russell's conception of denoting (in both POM and OD) is that of remote intentionality – the idea that a proposition can be about an object that is not among its constituents. The distinguishing idea of OD, as I have argued, is that this remote intentionality is effected by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole. In OD Russell continued to hold fast to his previous "object-directed" construal of descriptive statements as being about objects (their denotations); but he explained it in terms of the quantificational structure of the proposition; he did not explain it away or reduce it to the quantificational idiom in the manner for which he is often praised.[27]

I have said before that there is a tension between the object-directedness of descriptive propositions - their being grasped as about objects (their denotations) - and the elimination procedure of Russell's theory - their analysis in terms of quantification. Why then not satisfy ourselves with the latter? Why not give the lie to the former as a misleading feature of our vernacular way of talking? I have argued that at least as far as Russell's conception is concerned, there is a strong evidence that he would not so regard it and that he took the object-directedness of descriptive propositions very seriously. As to the problem itself, much here depends on whether we have a thorough understanding of quantification, which is in no way dependent on descriptions – on our capacity to refer to objects by descriptions. I incline myself to believe that there is a good case for saying that we don't – that our understanding of quantification and of some sort of reference by description are interdependent, and that therefore we cannot reduce

one to the other. It is in this spirit no accident and no slip on Russell's part that the elimination procedure of OD notwithstanding, he continued to insist on the object-directedness of descriptive propositions, on remote intentionality and on knowledge of objects by description. Some version of these is part of our understanding of quantification not less than the other way around. But I cannot undertake a discussion of this issue here.

Notes

[1] Reprinted in *Logic and Knowledge*, (R. Marsh ed.) pp.39-56.

[2] This leads to further problems concerning the interpretation of quantification in general, and the relationship between general propositions and their object-directedness - their being about objects. I shall not deal with these additional problems here.

[3] A classical exposition is Quine's "Russell's Ontological Development", reprinted in *Theories and Things*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1981, pp.73-85. A more recent typical example is S. Blackburn's explanation of the main significance of Russell's theory. Blackburn says that the theory is important "for it gives us an account of how utterances using definite descriptions can be identity-independent in respect of whichever item satisfies the description" (*Spreading The Word*, Oxford, 1984, p.310). I don't deny that Russell's theory does give us such an account. But this, I surmise, is not where its real significance lies. (The same goes for Blackburn's earlier remark that Russell's theory "is an empirical theory about the kind of information actually expressed by many English sentences" (p. 307).

[4] This is entirely clear with respect to Russell's view in *The Principles of Mathematics*, 1903, (henceforth POM); see, for instance p. 54. There is no evidence that Russell changed his view on this in OD; moreover, it is implied, I think, by his remarks e.g. on pp. 43, 55 there.

[5] P. Hylton: *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford, 1990, p. 239.

[6] As Hylton nicely explains, the root of the matter is in Russell's lack of clarity about the notion of "the variable" and of propositional functions and their relations to their "values" and instances; see Hylton, ibid. chapter 5, particularly pp. 216-20.

[7] At least, this would be so on a Fregean interpretation of the quantification involved, rendering these propositions second-order predications about concepts. Other

interpretations of the quantifiers may call for other formulations (such as "being about an unspecified object"). Although some such formulations occur in Russell, he does not seem to have held any clear conception on the matter.

[8] One can justly feel a tension here, but this is a tension in Russell's own thought: Russell was not very clear about the significance of his theory and he toyed with these – seemingly conflicting – views for a very long time. I have elaborated on the tension and its significance in Russell's epistemology, as manifested in his notion of knowledge by description, in my "Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Description in Russell", *Russell*, vol.9\2, 1989, pp. 133-156.

[9] In 1904-5, before writing OD Russell had written a lot on the subject of denoting, much of it unpublished until recently. Of particular importance are "On Meaning and Denotation" and "On Fundamentals". For an insightful survey, see R. Cartwright: "On the Origins of Russell's Theory of Descriptions", in his *Philosophical Essays*, MIT, 1987, pp. 95-133. These evidence an intensive thought on the subject and rapid changes of view on both terminological and substantial issues. I shall not enter here into a detailed analysis of this important material. I think that it changes none of my main contentions here.

[10] Occasionally Russell uses "denoting" differently - as a simple relation of name to object; see previous remark.

[11] This "definition" of denoting raises a problem. We have seen before that the distinctive mark of concepts in general (presumably including denoting concepts) is that they are capable of "that curious twofold use which is involved in human and humanity" in (3) and (4). We have also seen that the difference between (3) and (4) is that (3) is not about the concept (human). By the definition of denoting concepts quoted above we might conclude that the concept is denoting in (3). But Russell explicitly denies that (POM 54); it is evidently also not denoting in (4) (where it occurs as Humanity in the subject position). One should perhaps conclude here that a concept is denoting only if whenever it occurs in

a proposition the proposition is not about it. Hence, Human is not denoting in (3) because it occurs in (4) and is what (4) is about. Alternatively, one could think of denoting as pertaining only to concepts in subject position.

12 Hylton's view, according to which the denoted term is not a part of the proposition in which it is denoted is not only unsupported by the text; it also seems to me to make poor explanation of the very phenomenon it is designed to explain. For if, say, an infinite totality is not a part of the proposition in which it is denoted, what proposition is it a part of? If none, what is the ontological complex which constitutes a truth about this totality – a truth we may know?

13 Cf. OD pp.55-6, where this conception of a proposition being governed by the principle of acquaintance is presented as "one interesting result of the above theory".

14 In his book (ibid.) Hylton claims that in POM Russell adopted a sort of a Meinongian ontology, which ascribes being to non-existents like the golden mountain or the present King of France (see pp. 173, 241). I believe that this claim is unfounded. Hylton refers to section 427 in his support. But there Russell ascribes being to any **term**, “any conceivable object of thought...everything that can possibly occur in any proposition” (p. 449). The present King of France (the purported object, not the concept), however, is not such a term and cannot occur in a proposition simply because there is not any such thing (this is of course different with regard to the concept).

15 The "immediate" serves to cover both the POM and the OD conceptions. We have seen above that with regard to POM the situation is rather problematic, and Russell probably thought that the denoted terms are constituents of the proposition, although, in some sense, not immediately so, since they are denoted by denoting concepts. The OD conception is immune to these difficulties, and one may simply omit the "immediate" in the above formulation.

16 See, for instance, "On Meaning and Denotation".

[17] Cf. OD 42; A similar explanation is given in the introduction to *Principia*, p. xx-xxiii.

[18] There are semantical treatments of such propositions that do regard the description as singular terms and give the denotation a semantic role, but they are utterly non-Russellian, and deny the basic Russellian idea of "incomplete symbols".

[19] Cf. my "Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Description in Russell", *Russell*, vol.9\2, 1989, pp. 133-156.

[20] Russell is surprisingly brief and casual about the problem of empty descriptions in POM. In section 73, for instance, he speaks about denoting concepts that do not denote anything. The definition he gives is that all propositions containing the concept and not being about it (i.e. all propositions in which it occurs as a denoting concept) are false. As examples he gives there “All chimeras are flying”, and “The golden mountain is in Europe”. I believe the definition deserves refinement (what about “No Chimeras are flying”?), and that he doesn’t seem there to be fully aware of the problems involved.

[21] I believe that the problem of “no denotation” and of empty descriptions in POM was missed by Hylton and by many subsequent writers. Hylton repeatedly argued (and probably convinced many subsequent writers) that these were not real problems for the POM theory, which, according to him, offered a neat solution to them (See Hylton, e.g. pp. 240-1). He suggests that Russell did not realize this in POM but only in his 1905 paper “The Existential Import of Propositions”. But in all this Hylton seems to me to have missed the sting of the acute problem mentioned in the text.

[22] Hylton explains that the great achievement of the OD theory is that it eliminates "non-propositional complexity" so that the only kind of complexity left is propositional (Hylton, ibid. 256-259). I find this very apt and close to the view I am trying to present here. The crucial point I find missing (or at least somewhat undermined) in Hylton's account is that this elimination is designed primarily in order to explain denoting – the capacity of thought

to be about objects, and that it is effected by a conception that thoughts have this capacity in virtue of their logical structure.

[23] Cf. Hylton, ibid. 216-17.

[24] Cf. Cartwright, ibid. p. 128.

[25] Thus I take issue with Hylton's remark that "The OD theory does not offer an alternative explanation of the variable; on the contrary, it takes that notion for granted ... he does not eliminate denoting but simply reduces it to the one case of the variable" (ibid. 255). The remark may be misleading precisely in overlooking the crucial contribution of the structure of the proposition to the explanation of denoting.

[26] Besides Frege's original view and Strawson's, see also G. Evans *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford, 1982, ch. 2, particularly pp. 51-60.

[27] See, for instance, Quine, op. cit.