Analysis Without Elimination

On the Philosophical Significance of Russell's "On Denoting"

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1. Analysis and Elimination - Some Conceptions

Since its very beginning, analytic philosophy - inspired by its great founders, Frege and Russell - has been ontologically oriented. By way of its concerns with ontology it has put language at the center; and this has been done more out of fear than out of love, for the great founders of analytic philosophy were concerned with language mainly because they believed that language can be profoundly misleading. It can mislead ontologically by suggesting unfounded ontological pictures, preconceptions and presumptions, which may have far-reaching philosophical consequences.

Contrary to a common view, the great analytic philosophers were so concerned with language not because they believed that "everything is linguistic" and that "language is the key to truth", but for quite the opposite reason: they believed that language, i.e. natural language, can be profoundly misleading and that we must free ourselves from its bonds. The idea was not that language is misleading in its regular capacity as a tool of communication. The idea was rather that some features of language - particularly logical and grammatical features - may suggest wrong and misleading philosophical (again, mainly ontological) conceptions. And that is how logic came to acquire its central role. Logic was held to be the route to freedom - the means of escaping the misleading bonds of language. This does not mean that we can disregard or eschew language, and get directly at the truths themselves. This is impossible. The fight against the misleading bewitchment of language was held to be so important just because language was held to be so powerful, to reign everywhere, so that we are caught in its bonds at every turn.

But language, it was believed, can be fought against from within, so to speak, by rejecting, correcting and improving the pictures and preconceptions it suggests. It has been often assumed and asserted by the great champions of analytic philosophy that modern logic, and the logical analysis of language, are the main weapons against this misleading bewitchment by language. Hence, "elimination" in my title is mainly elimination of "coined entities" and spurious ontological misconceptions, and "analysis" is logical analysis of language. This marriage of ontological concerns with logical analysis has turned on two main axes: the logical analysis of the notion of existence (construing it

quantificationally in contrast to understanding it as a property of objects), and a detailed examination of the ontic commitments and implications of sorts of talk and expression.

These two ideas are Fregean in origin. This is obvious with regard to the quantificational construal of the notion of existence. But it is also true with respect to the second axis: The paradigm examples are the Fregean idea of contextual definitions and their ontological implication in Grundlagen, his reduction of Arithmetic to Logic, and the various techniques he used for this end, as well as his analyses of various forms of compound sentences (e.g. in "On Sense and Reference"). I will not discuss the Fregean background of this trend in analytic philosophy, but will focus, after some preliminaries, on its manifestation in Russell.

A major trend in analytic philosophy has been to show that certain kinds of entities (dubious entities) are eliminable by means of a logical analysis of the sentences in which the expressions purporting to denote them occur. This has taken either the radical way in which the dubious entities were totally eliminated, or the milder way in which they were shown to be reducible to more respectable kinds of entities. Thus numbers were reduced to concepts and sets (Frege, Russell); and sequences were reduced to sets (Wiener, Kuratowski); and some kinds of intensions were reduced to extensions (Carnap in *Meaning and Necessity*; Lewis on explicating modal operators in possible worlds semantics; see his *Counterfactuals*). All these belong to the mild sort of elimination. I call it "mild" because reducing a certain domain to another, more "respectable" one, may be regarded as legitimating the former domain, just as easily as rejecting it, or eliminating it in favor of the latter one.

Examples of the more radical sort are analyses of what may seem to be mental talk in terms of extensional contexts about physical objects (sentences; brain processes). One such example is Quine's opposition to mental predicates and certain uses of modal operators, and the ways he and others proposed for analysing modes of speech (or what is legitimate in them) that seem to be committed to these unwelcome conceptions. Russell's theory of descriptions may appear to belong here too: It shows that certain kinds of entities (denotations) are eliminable in the strong sense that talk, which is purportedly about them, is analysable as talk in which they do not function at all; or so at least it has been usually taken to show.

I said that the analysis was of the sentences and expressions involved. This, though true in general, is inaccurate in a way, since many of the proponents of analytic philosophy,

of whom Russell is a paramount example, regarded the (logical) analysis involved as directed at the facts, propositions and concepts themselves, rather than at their linguistic expressions. G.E. Moore was quite explicit about this (e.g. in his "Replies" in Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*), and G. Ryle, for example, concluding his discussion in another classic of analytic philosophy, writes:

> Philosophy must then involve the exercise of systematic restatement...Its restatements are transmutations of syntax,...controlled...by the desire to exhibit the forms of the facts into which philosophy is the inquiry...For we can ask what is the real form of the fact recorded when this is concealed....by the expression in question. And we can often succeed in stating this fact in a new form of words which does exhibit what the other fail to exhibit. And I am for the present inclined to believe that this is what philosophical analysis is, and that this is the sole and whole function of philosophy (Ryle: "Systematically Misleading Expressions" PAS 1931, reprinted in Flew, ed. *Logic and Language*, First Series, p. 36).

Quine seems to share Ryle's appreciation of the possibility of restating a certain phrase in less troublesome terms. He is probably less sympathetic to the realistic spirit in which Ryle speaks of analysis as revealing the true "form of facts"; he is likely to prefer keeping analysis within its linguistic confinements. Thus, in explaining his dictum that "*Explication is elimination*", Quine cites some exemplary explications (of ordered pairs, definite descriptions, indicative conditionals, quantification) and says:

> In all these cases, problems have been dissolved in the important sense of being shown to be purely verbal, and purely verbal in the important sense of arising from usages that can be avoided in favor of ones that engender no such problems (*Word and Object*, MIT, 1960, p.261).

Quine gives this way of analysis an explicitly pragmatic turn:

> We have, to begin with, an expression or form of expression that is somehow troublesome ... But also it serves certain purposes that are not to be abandoned. Then we find a way of accomplishing those some purposes through other channels, using other and less troublesome forms of expression. The old perplexities are resolved" (ibid. 260).

Though both Ryle and Quine (like many others) cite Russell and his theory of descriptions as a paradigmatic example for their versions of philosophical analysis, Russell, I believe, had a much "thicker" notion of philosophical and logical analysis - a notion that is more "constructive" and systematic than Ryle's, and less "pragmatic" and more analytical than Quine's. For Russell, analysis does aim at revealing the truth and its ultimate constituents.

It consists in "going backwards", in a sort of inductive manner, from conclusions to premises, from intuitively known or believed truths to their ultimate constituents and structure:

> The process of sound philosophizing, to my mind, consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to something precise, clear, definite, which by reflection and analysis we find is involved in the vague thing that we start from, and is, so to speak, *the real truth of which that vague thing is a sort of shadow* ("Philosophy of Logical Atomism", in *Logic and Knowledge*, R. Marsh, (ed.), pp.179-80, my italics).

The motivation in Russell is explicitly epistemological. Analysis ends up in simpler truths and concepts, about which claims to knowledge are less risky. He sums it up himself by saying: "Whenever possible, substitute construction out of known entities for inferences to unknown entities" ("Logical Atomism", op. cit., p.326). And as examples he mentions there, in addition to numbers and classes, the theory of descriptions (ibid. 327-8).

Generalizing, and disregarding for the moment these (and other) important differences, we may say that in Quine, Ryle and Russell, as well as many other philosophers, elimination of a kind of entity is supposed to be attained by logical analysis in the following way:

a. A certain expression seems to suggest a commitment (of some sort) to objects or concepts of a certain type.
b. For some philosophical reasons, this type of object is dubious and problematic.
c. Logical analysis reveals that this mode of expression is superfluous - sentences of this kind can be analysed or paraphrased by others which do not have these undesirable commitments, without a significant loss in content.
d. The logical analysis concerned reveals the true (logical) form of the "content" in question (proposition, fact, concept).
e. Thus, the "problematic" expression is proved to be unnecessary and unfaithful to the "real" logical form of the content, and the dubious sort of entity to which it is committed is eliminated by logical analysis.

Among the many questions that can (and have) been raised on this issue, a natural one pertains to the constraints about such analyses, and the conditions they must satisfy:

When (under what conditions) should we regard an analysis as giving the logical form of the desired fact (or proposition or concept)? This is, of course, a very large question - it is in fact the question of analysis. I am not going to discuss it in any comprehensive way. I should like, however, to point out three main approaches to the question; I shall then make a general comment pertaining to all three, and proceed in this light to discuss some features of Russell's theory of descriptions in "On Denoting".

1. The first approach is the pragmatic one, often associated with Carnap's notion of "explication" (also a Fregean notion in origin): A certain form of speech (or a whole "language") is offered in the place of a previous one. The only conditions required here are that the new mode will be in some respect "better" (more precise, well defined) than the old one, and that it will at least match the pragmatic utility of the old one (apply to most of the typical cases of the old one, and satisfy some other pragmatic conditions). Quine's approach, cited above, is very much in this spirit.

2. The second is the "local", intra-linguistic approach - a local, sometimes piecemeal paraphrase. A good example is provided in Ryle's own paper, cited above, with regard to what he calls "quasi-referential" descriptions like "The owl perched at the top of that tree", where the description seems to refer to a definite thing or place, but proper paraphrase may show that no such reference is "really" involved. Similarly, the phrase "the idea of taking a holiday has just occurred to me" is paraphrased so that no Lockean ontology of ideas is presupposed ("I have just thought of taking a holiday"). In these cases, Ryle writes, "Philosophers and others who have to abstract and generalize tend to be misled by the verbal similarity of 'the'-phrases of the one sort with 'the'-phrases of the other into "coining entities" in order to be able to show to what a given 'the'-phrase refers" (op. cit. p. 27). Ryle's main reason for thinking this to be a mistake is that these statements can be easily rephrased in a way that does not suggest any such ontological commitments (p. 30).

3. The systematic - global approach, where global conditions on the equivalence (or sameness) of contents are proposed (e.g. in terms of truth conditions), and an analysis is shown, in a systematic way, to retain the content, as thus determined, invariant, say, by providing an analysis with the same truth conditions. Analyses of this kind have become very common in logical and semantical studies. It can be called the "classical approach", to which most of the classical analyses offered by Frege, Russell and many other analytic philosophers belong. Many reductions, in which a certain domain is modeled on another belong here. A relatively simple example is Quine's presentation of the Kuratowski set-

theoretic definition of sequences as a paradigm of analysis (see *Word and Object*, pp. 257-62). Here identity conditions of sequences are fixed, and then a set-theoretic formula is proven to satisfy these conditions, thus providing a set theoretic analysis of the notion of a sequence (or of order). The idea that modeling a certain domain on another one is sufficient for reduction has often been challenged, and many proposals have been offered as to what additional conditions must be satisfied in order for a genuine reduction to occur. A discussion of this, though relevant, would take us too far afield.

I would like to mention, however, one point which pertains, in a greater or lesser degree, to all these approaches. Actually, the point pertains to the very idea of elimination by analysis. A philosophical analysis, one may feel, should aim at more than just offering a way to bypass or avoid a problem. A proper philosophical analysis should, in addition, show or explain how the problem in question arises; what are the concepts, principles and conceptions whose use or misuse engenders it. It should detect those elements in the concepts and principles involved that are valid and should be respected, and those that need change and correction. Such an analysis, when successful, should not merely point out the fact that we went wrong somewhere, and by a miraculous trick put us at the right place; it should rather explain how we went wrong, and by putting us back on the main road would provide us the means to get at where we want by our own routes. Philosophical troubles are not eliminated by showing how they could be avoided by taking altogether other routes. Philosophical troubles are eliminated by showing how they should be avoided by proceeding properly and carefully in the same routes that, when taken improperly and carelessly, led to them.

2. Denotation and Aboutness in Russell's "On Denoting"

In light of these general remarks I would like to examine some features of what is perhaps the classical paper of analytic philosophy, a paper considered by many to mark its beginning: Russell's "On Denoting" of 1905 (henceforth OD).[1] The theory, I assume, is familiar to everybody and so I shall not repeat its details. Generally, it analyses what appears to be singular (subject-predicate) statements of the form: "The F is G" as quantificational statements of the form: "There is an F such that there is no other F and every F is G". The main significance of the theory was formulated by Russell in the doctrine that descriptions (like other denoting phrases) are "incomplete symbols", i.e. they

are meaningless in themselves, though they contribute in a systematic way to the meaning of the sentences (propositions) in which they occur.

At a first glance the paper seems to fit nicely both the general characterization of elimination by analysis and the third approach to analysis mentioned above. There are many troubles that descriptive statements may seem to raise, and Russell's theory shows how to handle descriptive statements so as to avoid the troubles. Thus, "The present King of France is bald" seems to be a subject-predicate singular statement that ascribes (perhaps wrongly) baldness to someone, in analogy to the way "The present King of Jordan is bald" seems to be a singular subject-predicate statement that ascribes baldness to King Hussein. But the former statement, as we know, is problematic in many ways: it may even threaten the coherence of our logic, or invite unwelcome creatures such as a subsistent but non-existent King of France. Likewise, "The golden mountain does not exist" seems to deny a property (existence) to something, just as "The Golan mountain is stony" ascribes a property to a mountain. But this again is very problematic in similar ways. Russell's theory, with its quantificational rendering of these sentences, offers nice solutions to these problems - they simply don't arise in Russell's renderings.

In general, then, it appears that the theory provides an analysis of the third type mentioned above: it provides general, systematic prescriptions for formulating sentences of pure quantification theory, with no alleged reference to any dubious entities - sentences which exactly match the content - the truth conditions - of the original sentences "as intuitively understood" (I regard it particularly significant that the equivalence between the "problematic" idioms and the "accepted" ones is typically established only in the veridical cases, where the problematic idiom is understood on its face value, without the analysis, but I shall not argue for this here). In this sense, whatever could be said in terms of the previous "problematic mode" of descriptions can be transformed into the new mode of quantificational theory.

This is good and familiar enough, and Russell's paper would remain a paradigm of analysis if it did only that. But it does much more. This is the main point I want to stress here, for I believe that not only has this "more" escaped the notice of able commentators, but that it is this "more" that includes the main philosophical significance of "On Denoting": The relationship between descriptive reference and its quantificational analysis is not one of simple, one-way reduction, but rather one of revealing inner conceptual inter-connections. Descriptive reference is analysed in terms of the quantificational idiom; but

our understanding of quantification involves, and may even depend on, our capacity of descriptive reference. Russell's theory of descriptions in OD does not eschew or eliminate descriptive reference altogether; it rather shows how to handle it by connecting it to general referential features of quantificational idiom. By revealing and analysing the internal inter-connections between descriptive reference and quantification theory Russell reveals (discovers) and explains essential features of the very referential, intentionalistic, machinery of our language and thought.

I shall mention here some of the most important features of what is thus revealed and explained. The following five points are inter-connected: the significance of each should be seen in conjunction with the others.

(i) The Role of Aboutness

Russell's theory shows how to respect the general intuitive demand that any meaningful sentence be about something. Russell, as far as I know, never formulated this principle explicitly, but it exists as a covering principle in the background of whatever he did. Much of *The Principles of Mathematics of 1903 (*henceforth POM*),* for instance, is unintelligible without it, although even in that work Russell does not always comply with it. The notion of aboutness is constitutive of the notion of a proposition in POM: 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, any more 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.[2]

The notion of aboutness is also of vital importance in POM for delineating a special class of concepts - denoting concepts. In the proposition "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). 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". 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).[3]

As remarked above, a descriptive proposition may contain a denoting concept - the meaning of the description - which does not denote anything, and hence, be about nothing. Russell discusses such propositions in POM, though he is surprisingly brief here (see, for instance, pp.73-4). Some commentators have argued that the theory of denoting concepts in POM does provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of "empty descriptions" (though Russell may have missed the solution at the time). I believe that this is a mistake: There is no satisfactory solution to the problem in POM, as Russell rightly thought when he later considered this one of the main reasons to abandon the theory and replace it by the one in OD.[4] There is therefore a real tension in POM between the role of aboutness as constitutive of the notion of proposition, and the idea that some descriptive propositions are devoid of denotation and not about anything.

In the new theory of OD Russell could maintain the intuitive demand that any proposition be about something by broadening the scope of the aboutness relation. A descriptive proposition - like any proposition - is about its constituents; it is also about its denotation, where it has one. A meaningful proposition is thus never about nothing, and sometimes what it is about is determined by the facts. What makes such a view possible is precisely the fact that denotation is not regarded anymore as a primitive logical relation (as it was in *POM*), but as determined by the logical structure of the proposition as a whole. There being a denotation for the proposition to be about, is thus naturally regarded as an aspect of its truth, determined by the facts.

(ii) Objecthood of Descriptive Statements

Russell's position in OD respects the basic intuition that descriptive statements are "object-oriented" or "entity-involved", i.e. not only is a descriptive statement about something, it is typically about an object, determined by its description. This is a major point on which I must elaborate, as it goes against the prevalent, almost unanimous, interpretation of Russell's view. The object-directedness I am talking about is the idea that descriptive

statements are conceived as typically directed at and being about an object (in which they may fail), rather than purely "universalistic", as their quantificational analysis may suggest.[5] This object-directedness is manifest not only in the very title of OD, but in three substantial aspects of the theory: (1) the explicit motivation of the theory, in which Russell talks about "reaching objects" by means of denoting phrases (OD 41); (2) the need to explain knowledge about objects, or knowledge of objects by description (ibid.); (3) the definition offered in OD for the notion of denotation (51).

Russell's theory of descriptions, as can be seen in the title of his classical paper of 1905, is **on denoting**. The problem of denoting was, for Russell, the problem of the capacity of thought and propositions to be **about objects**. Hence, the primary aim of his theory (at least in its original phase) was to reveal and analyse the concepts and mechanisms involved in the relations of a thought or a proposition with the objects it is about. The problem Russell was preoccupied with in OD was the problem of **successful descriptions**: How can a descriptive proposition ever be concerned with objects which are not among its constituents? 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.[6] 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 involved. 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, my claim is that on Russell's theory this is not the case. In fact, this is a crucial feature which his theory was designed to explain. Naturally, it was an especially reassuring advantage of the theory that it could handle "failures" (sentences with empty descriptions) as well. But focusing exclusively on that feature may detract our attention from the theory's main aim and merit.[7]

As I indicated above, this conception of descriptive reference, and the object-directed approach to descriptive statements are echoed in Russell's notion of knowledge by description, or knowledge about, which is a central notion of his epistemology. Here again, knowledge by description, which was analysed by Russell in terms of the quantificational rendering of his theory of descriptions, was persistently conceived by him as knowledge of

objects. A purely universalistic conception of these renderings does not leave room for such a conception and even makes it unintelligible.[8]

(iii) Remote Intentionality

An important feature of Russell's theory is that it contradicts the (Fregean) "dogma" that what a proposition is about must be explicitly mentioned by one of its constituents (must be the referent of a name). In Russell's theory **a descriptive statement can be about something "external" to it**, that is, not one of its constituents (I call this feature remote intentionality). This again is a major theme on which I can only make here some brief remarks: Frege's theory, and Russell's theories prior to OD held that a proposition (sentence, thought) can only be about one (or some) of its constituents (I use the term "constituents" loosely to cover also Frege's referents of the components, or names of a sentence). This is a very important principle in Frege's philosophy, which, in a way, shaped his conception of general statements as about concepts rather than objects.[9] In his POM Russell generally upheld this principle, though the point is debatable. Some commentators would deny this on the basis that denotations - the objects that denoting concepts denote - are not constituents of the proposition. I think there is no evidence for this view in the text, and there is much evidence for the opposite view - that the denotation is a constituent of the proposition.[10] In POM, denotation is effected in terms of "denoting concepts", and the "peculiar logical" relation they have to objects which are their denotations. Russell never says in POM that such an object - the denoted term - is not a part or a constituent of the proposition in which it is denoted. 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 contained in the proposition in question, and this may be naturally glossed as the view that it is a constituent of the proposition.[11] On the other hand Russell says in POM that a proposition like "I met a man", when true, is about some "actual biped", which is, supposedly, no constituent of the proposition. It may thus appear that it is unclear in POM whether a proposition contains its denotation as a constituent. This may cause much trouble in understanding the notion of proposition in POM, and may well be one of the reasons why Russell found it unsatisfactory.

All this is drastically changed in Russell's theory of OD, where the principle that a proposition must contain (as a constituent) what it is about is clearly and neatly abondoned: A descriptive proposition, in the new theory, is about its denotation (when it has one) even though the denotation is in no case among its constituents. A much clearer notion of proposition is thus affected: what a proposition contains - what are its constituents - is governed by an epistemic constraint - the principle of acquaintance, according to which all the constituents of a proposition we can understand must be known to us by acquaintance. The notion of proposition is thus construed as distinctly belonging to a theory of understanding and of knowledge.

(iv) Intentionality by Logical Structure

Finally, what is perhaps the most important point is that Russell's theory shows how **denotation and what a statement is about are determined by logical form**, i.e. by the logical form of the whole proposition. King Hussein is the denotation of "The King of Jordan is bald" even though in the analysed form of that proposition - "There is a King in Jordan such that there is no other King in Jordan and any King in Jordan is bald" - there is no name or expression which has King Hussein as its meaning. Rather, it is determined as the denotation and as what the proposition is about by the structure of the whole proposition. And again, this is a great innovation: no previous theory (as far as I am aware) has claimed or shown that. On all previous conceptions, reference and what a proposition is about are determined "locally" or "lexically", by a certain expression in the sentence, or a certain constituent of the proposition. This is true, with some reservations, even of Frege; for, in his conception a proposition (or a thought) is about the references of its names, and these references are determined solely by the respective senses. "Global" features of the proposition, like its logical form, are irrelevant here. They are important of course for many other things, such as the deducibility power of the proposition, and even for how to understand it. In POM, denoting was regarded as a primitive "peculiar" logical relation between a denoting concept and an object. But this relation and its marvelous effects remain there completely mysterious, and Russell could say nothing on how it is determined - except as by some mysterious feature of the denoting concept itself.

All this is, of course, completely changed in OD. Russell's OD theory is the first in which the logical structure of the (descriptive) proposition as a whole is regarded as determining the reference (denotation) of terms - or what the proposition is about. And this is an essential feature of Russell's theory: Denotation, or what the proposition is about

(when it has a denotation), is not determined "locally" or lexically, but rather by a "global" feature of the proposition as a whole - its logical structure.

(v) Predication

One of the main problems which occupied both Frege and Russell concerns the nature of proposition, or more specifically, the problem of the unity of a proposition - what has been later referred to as the propositional "cement" or "glue". In Russellean terms the problem is what distinguished propositions from other "complexes". Frege dealt with the problem in terms of his distinction between objects, which are complete and "satisfied" entities, and concepts (or functions) which are essentially incomplete and unsatisfied (ungestaettigt), and his view that concepts are "essentially predicative". Important differences notwithstanding, Russell's general picture in POM was similar. We have already mentioned that he explains the peculiar nature of proposition in terms of his distinction between "assertion" and "term", and in ascribing the assertive or predicative force of a proposition to the assertion it contains. (I use "predication" here in a wide sense, including many-place relations). An important feature common to both these views is that the assertive or predicative force, which is the essence of the propositional "glue", is ascribed to a particular component of the proposition, actually to one of its constituents.

This picture is in fact shattered in the new theory of descriptions in OD: Here Russell strictly maintained that all the constituents of a (descriptive) proposition are objects, either particular (the meanings of names) or universal (the meanings of predicates or general terms). The predicative force and the propositional "glue" are not ascribed to any of the constituents, but solely to the logical form of the proposition. This revolutionary point is more difficult to appreciate in the case of simple atomic propositions than in descriptive of quantified ones. But in fact, as Wittgenstein was later to see in the Tractatus (where he pressed this point to its extreme), it apples to all propositions, and effects a revolutionary change in the conception of the nature of a proposition. This then is another point in which Russell's new conception brings logic and logical form to the metaphysical fore.

Eliminating a Meinongian ontology of subsistent (non-existent) Kings of France or round squares by means of logical analysis of propositions and expressions that seem to be committed to it is fine and important; doing this extensionally, without appeal to notions like Fregean senses or Russellean denoting concepts, is even more impressive and

significant. But there are many philosophical conceptions that are presumed or pre-supposed along the way - whether explicitly or not. Revealing, explaining and analysing them is I believe the main philosophical significance of this theory. One very important conception of this sort is the idea of incomplete symbols: the idea that an expression may be meaningful - in the sense of systematically contributing to the meaning of sentences in which it occurs - without having any meaning in isolation. This has been widely discussed, and I have hardly touched on it here. I have tried rather to point out at least five other important philosophical conceptions that are revealed in the theory of OD, sometimes in a very implicit way. Seen in the light of these, Russell's theory of descriptions in OD is seen not as a suggestion to reduce, or to replace descriptive idioms by quantificational ones, but as a real analysis that goes deep into essential features of our referential capacity. It is not an analysis that eliminates descriptions or descriptive reference (though it does eliminate bad philosophical concepts and conceptions of it - e.g. in terms of denoting concepts). It is rather an analysis of some of the basic principles and notions behind our capacity of descriptive reference. The five points I discussed here are among these basic notions. These points have shaped so much of the concerns and ways of philosophizing in the analytic tradition that bringing them to the fore may, I hope, simultaneously contribute to a clarification of what this tradition is, and to explaining why Russell's OD is a paradigm of it.

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Notes

[1] Originally published in *Mind.* Reprinted in *Logic and Knowledge,* R. Marsh, ed. pp. 41-56. All citations and references are to that edition.

[2] The notion of aboutness is also constitutive, I believe, of the individuation of propositions in POM, but I shall not elaborate on it here.

[3] This "definition" of denoting raises a problem. 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 (1): “Socrates is human”, and (2): “Humanity belongs to Socrates”. We have also seen that the difference between (1) and (2) is that (1) is not about the concept (human). By the definition of denoting concepts quoted above we might conclude that the concept is denoting in (1). But Russell explicitly denies that (POM 54); it is evidently also not denoting in (2) (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 (1) because it occurs in (2) and is what (2) is about. Alternatively, one could think of denoting as pertaining only to concepts in subject position.

[4] Hylton, a notable example of these commentators, is right that the fact that a description is empty does not rob the proposition, in *POM*, of the appropriate constituent - it still contains the denoting concept as a constituent. But Hylton seems to miss the grave problems this view raises. I shall briefly mention two: A proposition containing an empty description would be a (meaningful) proposition about nothing, which was an appalling idea to Russell. Secondly, denotation and the relation between a denoting concept and what it denotes was regarded as a primitive, logical relation in *POM*; this doesn’t seem to cohere with the idea of empty denoting concepts, for this idea relies on the view that whether a denoting concept is denoting is an empirical one (see P. Hylton: *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford, 1992, pp. 73; cf. 247).

[5] The object-directedness I am talking about is weaker, more general and abstract than, e.g. Donnellan’s “referential” use of descriptions. It does not mean that in uttering a

descriptive statement the speaker has a particular object in mind about which his statement says something, but rather that he conceives of the statement as being or purporting to be about an object.

[6] 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 of the matter.

[7] 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. The tension and its significance in Russell's epistemology, as manifested in his notion of knowledge by description, are discussed in my "Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Description in Russell", *Russell*, vol.9\2, 1989, pp.133-156.

[8] I have elaborated on this claim and on its philosophical significance in the paper cited in the previous note.

[9] I have elaborated on this in my book: *The Sense of Reference - Intentionality in Frege*, Walter de Gruyter; 1996, especially in chs. 1 and 7.

[10] See P. Hylton: *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford, 1992, pp. . As mentioned in the text I believe Hylton's claim is unfounded. Moreover, it conflicts with Russell's repeated claims in *POM* that the "disjunction" (which is the denotation of the denoting concept "a man") in "I met a man" is a constituent of the proposition. This is not a trivial matter of exegesis, for, if I am right, it shows the notion of proposition in *POM* to be bogus - it contains constituents to which we don't have direct cognitive access. This is another aspect in which the theory of OD is far superior to that of *POM*.

[11] 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, which is the possibility of a proposition to be about an infinite totality. 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?