teorema
Vol. XXIV/3, 2005, pp. 00-00

Towards a Re-Evaluation of *On Denoting*

Harm Boukema

RESUMEN

El artículo de Russell "On Denoting" [OD] [Russell (1905d)] debe su fama a la *teoría de las descripciones* [ToD] que contiene. Desde la segunda guerra mundial se ha venido prestando una atención creciente al carácter peculiar de OD, a su trasfondo y al argumento de la *Elegía de Grey* [GEA] que aparece en el artículo. Todos los intentos de evaluar este argumento se basan en la presuposición de que apoya en cierto modo la ToD. Sin entrar en la exégesis de GEA se defiende que esta presuposición está en desacuerdo con la estructura, el alcance y la historia del propio OD.

ABSTRACT

Russell's article "On Denoting"[1] [OD] [Russell (1905d)] owes its fame to the *Theory of Descriptions* [ToD] contained in it. Ever since the Second World War increasing attention has been paid to OD's peculiar character, its background and the *Gray's Elegy Argument* [GEA] occurring in it. All current attempts to evaluate this argument are based on the presupposition that it somehow supports the ToD. Without going into the exegesis of the GEA, it is urged that this presupposition is at variance with the structure, import and history of OD itself.

INTRODUCTION

In his writings, Bertrand Russell has exhibited three sorts of qualities rarely united in one philosopher: first the open-mindedness needed to detect unsuspected problems involved in his own assumptions, secondly the ingenuity to invent and try out new theories in order to cope with those problems, and lastly the willingness to communicate his findings, however sophisticated and complicated they might be, to as many fellow creatures as possible, expounding them in an accessible and popularized fashion. Both Russell himself and those who have assessed his philosophy, be it in admiration or in disdain, are prone to overlook that the possible drawbacks of the latter two virtues are liable to overshadow the importance of the first one [Griffin (1993)].

In the reception of OD, both the inclination to overrate the importance of the possible merits or demerits of the ToD contained in it

and the counteractive attempt to pay attention to the problems behind that theory, especially the one discussed in the GEA, have played an important role. No doubt, the latter pursuit has considerably widened the perspective on OD.

But, and that is my main contention, because of its reactive character, it has not been radical enough. The method I'll use to advocate this view is based on the principle that for antagonisms, the converse of Berkeley's famous slogan concerning ideas holds: their *esse* is *non percipi*. Paying attention to oppositions is both of psychological, historical and logical importance. It leads to a somewhat uncommon critical evaluation of OD which, more than the usual ones, is in accordance with both its underlying structure and its spirit and the historical facts related to it. Usually it is assumed, that there is only one way of evaluating the GEA: going straightforwardly into its content. According to the approach I'll advocate, there is also a second, less travelled road which deserves to be trodden first: going *around* it. In the following exposition, I'll confine myself to the latter, postponing the detailed exegesis of the GEA for later discussion. I'll start this roundabout with considering the history of OD's reception as far as the GEA or its ignorance is concerned. In the second part I'll go into OD itself, exploring the immediate textual and historical surroundings of the GEA.

I. Not Paying Attention to OD Itself

I.1 *OD's reception, first period*

The said theory-minded attitude comes pre-eminently and conspicuously to the fore in the way OD was evaluated during the era of its glory, the period before the Second World War. It was hailed as the very first, maybe, somewhat stubborn, but anyhow memorable official appearance of a marvellous theory, the ToD, which, elsewhere has been expounded in a more comfortable way. The reasons why analytic philosophers such as Russell himself, the young Wittgenstein, Ramsey and Quine welcomed it as a great achievement are probably as divergent as their respective points of view. But the very fact that it could be used in such a variety of ways probably reveals one of its most remarkable features. To a considerable extent it seems to meet Leibniz's conception of divine perfection: *much by means of little*. Being mainly concerned with a very limited subject matter, the meaning of "the", it is capable of effecting great things.

As seen from Russell's own perspective [Russell (1959), Ch. 7], the greatest merit of the ToD seems to be that its main principle, the translation of sentences containing certain name-like expressions into

sentences not containing them, enabled him to refine and complicate his former, rather tentative Theory of Types in such a way as to avoid the paradox that had afflicted him for many years. So, OD seems to mark the second great step forward, the decisive liberating move which had to be made after the sweet "intellectual honeymoon" following the sweeping "revolt into pluralism" had been spoiled by the discovery of the contradiction.

Of course, reverence was paid not only to the ToD itself and to its various possible applications, but, just as much, to the critical arguments it is based on. Although Russell, both in OD and in later expositions, put forward different arguments in favour of the ToD, one of them, the argument against Meinong (and Frege) concerning denoting phrases such as "the present King of France" was generally supposed to be the most striking and conclusive one. For the sake of convenience I'll call it the *King of France Argument* [KFA].

During its heydays there was hardly any interest in ToD's historical background. Nevertheless, later on, Russell made some casual remarks on its genesis According to him,the very same consideration which appeared to be the most convincing one also happened to have *led* him to the ToD: "the desire to avoid Meinong's unduly populous realm of being" [Russell (1944), p. 13].

I.2 *Second period*

Shortly after the Second World War, a considerable change in intellectual climate takes place. Philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon world begin to realize that they belong to one great movement whose emergence is largely due to German speaking pioneers. The influence of the later Wittgenstein is growing, ordinary language philosophy is flourishing and some works of Frege, who, in his construal of definite descriptions had taken a stand much closer to ordinary language than the Russell of OD, are translated into English. In short, the happy years of OD's uncontested fame are gone. A new era of ideological strife is heralded by Strawson (1950).

Although this controversy is mainly concerned with the ToD, unintentionally OD itself gets more involved in it. Seven years before Strawson's attack, Church (1943), making an attempt comprehensively to safeguard Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, not only pays attention to Russell's KFA, but also to the GEA, which until then had not played any role at all. Somewhat later Carnap (1947) joins Church in his devastating criticism. Then Butler (1954) adds two new elements to the discussion: he tries to *mitigate* the attack of his predecessors in suggesting that the GEA could make some sense if construed as aimed at Russell's

own former theory of meaning and denotation, which is enormously different from Frege's doctrine both in character and in quality, although the two are treated as "very nearly the same" in OD. Both points have had a considerable impact on the subsequent quarrels. Geach (1958) has joined Butler's opinion in giving the reader of OD the advice to "ignore Russell's use of Frege's name". Cassin (1970) makes an attempt to further mitigate the tacit criticism implied in Geach's advice, suggesting that the GEA does not even purport to be a criticism of Frege, but only of Russell's own former view.

In 1970 a new revisionist trend emerges, initiated by Ayer (1971) and more thoroughly propounded by Hochberg (1976) and Blackburn and Code (1978). They all try to safeguard Russell's ToD from those humiliations, however mitigated they might be, in construing the GEA as a sound criticism of both Russell's former theory and Frege's.

I.3 *Third period*

Just as the beginning of the second period of OD's reception corresponds to a turning point in the general development of analytic philosophy, its self-conscious formation out of scattered materials, so does its end. About 1980, when philosophers of science are turning to the history of science, a growing number of analytic philosophers feel the need to approach the movement they belong to historically. It is, I presume, not accidental that at that very moment Russell's manuscripts were dug up and, among them "On Fundamentals" [OF] [Russell (1905c)], which appeared to contain a lot of valuable and surprising information about the true origin of the ToD. That theory did not, as Russell seems to suggest, emerge from his criticism of Meinong, but from the problem discussed in GEA. Furthermore, in OF no mention is made of Meinong or Frege; Russell appears to be exclusively concerned with his own former theory of denoting.

Coffa (1980) has first signalled these findings and others like Cartwright (1987), Hylton (1990) and Rodriguez-Consuegra (1992) have followed him. What is their conclusion ? First of all, that the revisionist view is out of date, and that, from now on, an attempt has to be made to understand OD and the GEA on the basis of its true Russellian origin. Secondly, that Russell's official story about the genesis of the ToD is a myth. Whoever wants to understand OD has to rely on what precedes it, not on Russell's later comments.

In short, both the dazzling, somewhat too youthful and innocent enthusiasm of the first era and the stormy, more or less suppressed animosity of the second one, are replaced by a more quiet and sober-minded atmosphere inspired by Geach's maxim that it is better to

understand a philosopher against his own background than against that of the victories he supposed himself to have gained over others.

I.4 *Perceiving the main opposition*

The general upshot of the history of OD's assessment seems to be rather salutary. It does not consist in simply turning towards or away from Russell, but rather in turning away from the self-forgetful older one in order to rescue the forgotten younger one from obscurity. Thus the main and final opposition dominating this development affects the direction of view. Russell's own official, forward-looking perspective, OD as memorably containing a theory whose rendered services promise future victories, is replaced by an unofficial retrospective view: OD as reflecting its author's previous wrestling with himself.

Just like other opposites, these have, as such, something in common: they are contrary forms of looking away from OD in order to find its real essence elsewhere. As soon as this common reductionist element is recognized as such, the question whether it is worth following this path is answered as a matter of course. It goes without saying, that paying attention to OD itself deserves preference. This, of course, does not mean that looking at its sources and its follow-up are to be put under a taboo. On the contrary, its charming, adolescent character cannot be revealed unless it is compared both with OF and with later expositions of the ToD. But, and that is the crucial point, if we want to know the extent to which OD does or does not agree with those other writings, one and only one reliable crown witness is to be consulted: OD itself.

However trivial and obvious this maxim may seem , it points in a new direction, one opposed to the two mutually opposed variants of the reductionist approach. OD is to be situated where it evidently belongs: half-way between the forgotten and the forgetful Russell. Both extremes are reflected in OD and both deserve attention, just as well as their opposition does.

I.5 *The riddle of Russell's forgetfulness*

Suppose the official story about the genesis of the ToD had been told not by Russell himself, but, instead, by some uninformed outsider. In that case, we would perhaps be entitled to turn our back to it. But, in fact, the story has been told by the leading actor himself! How could we ever entertain the slightest hope of understanding the plot of OD's history, unless we are prepared to dwell on Russell's words and investigate what lies behind them? We'll have to ask, firstly, what possible grain of truth is contained in them and in how far they are deceptive.

And if the story, at least to some extent, appears to be misleading, we'll have to ask a second question, namely: How is it possible that exactly the one person who happened to be acquainted with the true genesis of the ToD, has led us astray? Did Russell suffer from a memory defect? There are, as far as I can see, no indications to justify such an assumption. Did he deliberately play false? If so, what could possibly have been the underlying motive for such a fraud? And if his deceptive behaviour flows from self-deception, which might be the most plausible hypothesis, the same question is applicable. For in whatever way self-deception is construed, in Freudian or Sartrean fashion, it needs some hidden incentive. So, Russell must have had some 'reason' to banish the real origin or at least some of its features, from his conscience, in overemphasizing the importance of his being dissatisfied with "Meinong's unduly populous realm of being" and in not mentioning the problem occurring in OF at all. But what could this 'reason' possibly be? Is there anything shameful about the actual conception and birth of the ToD?

I.6 *Assumptions underlying the neglect of the riddle*

All these questions concerning Russell's forgetfulness are quite obvious. Nevertheless, they have not been raised. How is that possible? If the above account of the main antagonism dominating the reception of OD is right, this fact is not as surprising as at first sight might be supposed. It is a natural outcome of the reactive turn of mind which consists in focussing on the forgotten Russell instead of the forgetful one. Indeed, his being an unreliable witness is established as a curious, maybe somewhat embarrassing fact. But the opportunity of focussing on its very curiousness and of asking for an explanation has been either overlooked or deemed to be useless.

Why so? Evidently because Russell's later account of what led him to the ToD is supposed to be just a wrong answer to an unambiguous multiple-choice question, whose correct solution has been determined beforehand. There seems to be no reason either to be fascinated by it or to examine it any further. Forgiving and forgetting, preferably with a kind smile, such an evident flaw in order to turn to Russell's forgotten better self, seems the best way to cope with it.

Those who anxiously rely on the testimony of OF, do not, of course, suppose the GEA to be the only critical argument in OD. They are prepared to admit the occurrence of other arguments as well, such as the KFA and the one based on the principle of acquaintance.[2] So, there are at least two or three candidates qualifying for being nominated as *the* one which actually led Russell to the ToD. They do so in virtue of something they are supposed to have in common: purporting to undermine the old

view of denoting, they are all trailblazers and somehow supporters of one and the same new theory. One and only one of them can and does have the additional quality of being the leader of this team, just as one and only one among all those men who ever walked on the moon, can be the first one who ever did so.

This conceptual scheme is based on the following assumptions:

a) There is one and only one 'leader' because there is one and only *one way of being a 'leader'*. The past tense of the verb "lead" used in Russell's notorious saying that he was *led* to the ToD by his "desire to avoid Meinong's unduly populous realm of being", is supposed to be susceptible to one and only one interpretation: He wanted to make us believe that the said desire made him *conceive* his new theory. And that, of course, is precisely what the manuscript OF has revealed to be false.

b) The two or three critical arguments that possibly *could* have led him to the ToD, are deemed to have, all of them, the *same logical import*. In other words, the quality of being the leader, which actually does make a difference, must, according to this view, presuppose equality of legal status. Although their actual strength and validity may be assessed differently, all candidates *purport* to do the same thing.

c) What they actually purport to do may be construed in only two possible ways: either as merely undermining the old view on denoting and thus making room for the new one, or as both making room for it and supporting it. Consequently, the relation to the ToD is supposed to be *positive* anyhow.

There is one and only one way of testing the possible validity of these assumptions: paying attention to OD itself. In the subsequent discussion, I'll try to show that actually doing so leads to the conclusion that they are all mere dogmas whose persistency is only due to the habit, established by Russell himself, of seeking OD's essence beyond it.

II. Paying Attention To OD Itself

II.1 *OD's puzzling structure*

Let us start with the question in what way the KFA occurs in OD. In the third paragraph, Russell gives the following survey of the course of his argument:

> I shall begin by stating the theory I intend to advocate; I shall then discuss the theories of Frege and Meinong, showing why neither of them satisfies me; then I shall give the grounds in favour of my theory; and finally I shall briefly indicate the philosophical consequences of my theory [Russell (1905d) p. 480].

From these words, an uninstructed and unsuspicious reader inevitably gets the impression that the second part of OD will be devoted to criticism of theories about denoting put forward by *others*. Furthermore, such a reader will expect the purpose of criticism to be merely *destructive*. For all arguments in *favour* of the new theory seem to be relegated to the *third* part.

On nearer scrutiny, however, this impression seems to be rather misleading. In the footnote linked to this passage, Russell is referring to his own former theory of denoting, expounded in *The Principles of Mathematics* [PoM], saying: "The theory there advocated is very nearly the same as Frege's, and quite different from the theory to be advocated in what follows" [Russell (1903), Ch V]. From this we may infer that in the second section of OD, Russell not only wants to criticize the extant views of others, but his own former theory as well, which, *in being opposed to the ToD*, does not differ significantly from Frege's doctrine of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.

Thus, we may correct our first impression in supposing the author of OD to have two essentially different opponents: Frege and Russell's former self on the one hand and Meinong on the other. Although this view, of course, is wrong, it nevertheless contains a kernel of truth. It reflects the fact that shortly before his discovery of the ToD, Russell had criticized Meinong and declared himself in agreement with Frege, at least as far as the issue of possible non-existent and non-subsistent objects is concerned [Russell (1905a) and (1905b)]. In doing so, Russell had dissociated himself from PoM in which both Meinongian and Fregean elements are rather inconsistently mixed.[3] Actually, in OD, Frege and Meinong are bracketed together not so much as the two other philosophers who happened to have put forward a theory of denoting,

but, rather, as representing two mutually opposed views on a specific issue, namely the problem of non-being, which in some way or other seems to be connected with denoting.[4] Although Meinong and Frege did not take notice of each others existence, Russell went through both their views and through the conflict between them.

Consequently, our first impression of the objective and scope of the second section of OD has to be subjected to two further corrections. In what seems to be his assessment of current theories about denoting, not just three personalities occur, but five: Frege, the Fregean Russell, Meinong, the Meinongian Russell, and finally the author of OD who is equally dissatisfied by all of them. Furthermore, this criticism appears to be confined to one specific issue only, namely the problem of non-being.

Now, assuming that all arguments purporting to undermine other theories are to be found in the second section, we seem to be entitled to expect that the KFA is the only one occurring in OD. This anticipation, however, is refuted by the fact that in the course of the third section, destined to be reserved for arguments in favour of the ToD, an unannounced one occurs, namely the GEA. It is a criticism of "the" theory of meaning and denotation, i.e., pace Cassin and her followers, of the theory which Frege and the Russell of PoM are supposed to share.[5] This argument bears on an issue quite different from the problem of non-being, namely the question how the supposed meaning of an unambiguously denoting phrase can be made the subject of a proposition in such a way as to "preserve" the logical, extra-linguistic relation of the meaning to the denotation. The latter requirement implies that the meaning itself must somehow be involved in its being made the subject of a proposition. That is why I'll call it the *problem of reflexivity*.

II.2 *The puzzle of OD's structure solved*

It gradually has become apparent that it is far from easy to see how the actual structure of OD meets the general outline sketched in its third paragraph. What is more, there is something strange and unnatural about the announced course of argument. Indeed, OD does not pretend to be a philosophical poem like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. What Russell wants to convey, could just as well have been set out in many other ways. But, and that is the sticking point, once the decision is made to start, after a short introduction, with an exposition of the ToD itself, it seems to be rather inappropriate to continue with a purely negative criticism of extant theories. In the course of the first section [Russell (1905d) p. 482], Russell appears to be prepared frankly to admit that his interpretation of unambiguously denoting phrases may seem "incredible". So, what the poor reader of *Mind* is hoping for is, of course, a reason why there is any need of such an artificial and complicated theory.

In fact Russell does not defeat *that* expectation, as appears from the very first paragraph of the second section of OD, which runs as follows:

> The above gives a reduction of all propositions in which denoting phrases occur to forms in which no such phrases occur. Why it is imperative to effect such a reduction, the subsequent discussion will endeavour to show [Russell (1905d) p. 482].

It is, I presume, not accidental that "the subsequent discussion" actually meets the increasing impatience of the reader. To do so is the very *raison d'être* of OD's second section. Russell's somewhat too bold decision to start with a dry exposition of his theory is at the very root of OD's puzzling structure. I'll confine myself to its main consequences.

Of course, the KFA also serves another purpose, as appears from the fact that it reaches its climax in the exposition of puzzle (3).which is concerned with the interpretation of sentences such as "The difference between the morning star and the evening star does not subsist.". There Russell purports to prove, that neither variant of the old theory is able to solve that puzzle. And that is an essential part of what has to be demonstrated in the third section. So, the material of which the second part of OD consists properly belongs to its third section. For Russell's claim that the ToD is able to solve all three puzzles, cannot count in his *favour*, unless it is shown that the old theory is *less* successful.

This rule seems to imply that OD contains as many critical arguments as puzzles, namely three. However, only two such arguments actually occur. How is this irregularity to be accounted for? Evidently, puzzle (2) is exceptional in character. It concerns the question how it is possible that neither "The present King of France is bald" nor "The present King of France is not bald" expresses a true proposition. As seen from the old theory, this puzzle can easily be solved in a Fregean fashion by means of truth value gaps. It therefore is an internal problem of the ToD, or rather of the way that theory is expounded in the first section. Russell could have avoided it altogether in replacing "C (the S)" by "The S is P".[6] Anyhow, puzzle (2) serves as an occasion to introduce the difference between *primary* and *secondary occurrence* which indeed is pivotal to the ToD and to its solution of the other two really challenging puzzles.[7] At the end of the first section, Russell alludes to something very much the same as puzzle (2) and, urged by the need to meet the reader's impatience, leaves it for later discussion. It therefore properly belongs to the first section.

Taking into account all these considerations, there is nothing strange about the fact that, having set out the three puzzles, Russell starts with the GEA. For its obvious strategic role consists in proving the only thing that remains to be proved before the success of the ToD can be

established, namely that the old theory is not able to solve puzzle (1), which is concerned with identity, informativeness and indirect discourse and more in particular with the curiosity of George IV.

II.3 *General import of the argument against Meinong and Frege*

The KFA is able to serve the purpose of the second section, because it is *meant* to be both negative and positive. How is this unity of destructive and constructive power to be conceived? Evidently, the argument purports to show not only that the theories of Meinong and Frege for some reason or other fail to give a satisfactory interpretation of sentences containing denoting phrases such as "the present King of France", but as well to *explain why* they fail to do so, namely in virtue of their being *opposed* to the ToD.

What does "being opposed to the ToD" mean? Before its birth, nobody knew. So, we'll have to start with the question how it deviates from its predecessors. In spite of all their differences, Frege's theory and Russell's old theory of denoting are each of them opposed to a more primitive theory of the proposition, whose main idea is that propositions contain whatever is essential to their identity. Consequently, if a proposition is *about* some entity, that entity must be its *constituent*.

This view leads to several difficulties. For the sake of brevity, I'll confine myself to the most familiar one. How can a proposition like the one expressed by "The author of *Waverley* is the same as the author of *Ivanhoe*" be both true and informative? Russell and Frege solved it assuming that a proposition can be *about* something which is *not its constituent*. The content, the meaning of the phrase "the author of *Waverley*" actually is a constituent, and it denotes a topic beyond the proposition itself. Thus conceived, denoting is intentionality in the extra mental world of propositions.

According to the ToD, this notion of self-transcendence is half-hearted and inconsistent. For however emphatically the externality of the denotation may have been stressed by both Frege and the Russell of PoM, that cannot prevent the denotation from being of vital importance to the very essence of the proposition, namely its fitness for being true or false. So, the main idea of the ToD is, that the denotation only *seems* to be a topic, whereas in fact its relation to propositions with which it has to do, is much less intimate. The denotation is only relevant to the *actual* truth value, not to the *capacity* to be true or false.

How does this bear on the issue of non-being? The link is quite evident. According to the ToD, propositions do not have to fear the loss of their denotations. Their total absence does not injure the proposition's fitness for having a truth value. And that puts the opposition between

Meinong and Frege in a different light. Before the birth of the ToD, they seemed to represent the horns of an unavoidable dilemma: *either* assuming the *presence* of non-existent or non-subsistent objects in order to save the proposition's *capacity* to be true or false, *or* accepting *truth value gaps* in order to fully acknowledge the *absence* of the denotation. As seen from the point of view of the ToD, these positions appear to be mutually opposed versions of one and the same avoidable presupposition, namely that denoting phrases are, we read in OD, "standing for genuine constituents of the propositions in whose verbal expression they occur" [Russell (1905d) p. 482]. Indeed, this discovery might have led Russell to the *acceptance* of the ToD.

II.4 *OD's ambiguous tenor* (*ad a*)

Is this hypothesis confirmed by historical facts? At least partially. In OF, where the conception of the ToD actually takes place, neither Meinong, nor Frege, nor the problem of non-being to which they primarily owe their liaison, is mentioned at all. Furthermore — and the importance of this fact has often been overlooked — Russell appears to be very sceptical about the ToD. In OF §44, he even considers abandoning it altogether [Russell (1905c), p. 385]. As author of OD, however, he takes a much more self-confident stand. Evidently, this considerable change must be due to a new insight having emerged after the completion of OF, namely that the ToD has the great advantage of throwing a new light on the problem of non-being. Thus, as seen from OD itself, its origin appears to be twofold. Its writer was not a monk who copied a holy manuscript, but rather a very agile philosopher, who, even in his exposition of the GEA, changed a lot of things and who, in doing so, not only drew from OF, but as well from a whole series of new insights which must have come to his mind before or during the composition of OD.

But — and this is another fact whose importance has often been ignored — in OD, the former doubts have not completely disappeared. Some vestige of them remains and is quite essential to its tenor. OD itself is much more ambiguous than is generally supposed. This appears from the second part of the very first paragraph. Supposing himself to have explained what denoting phrases are, Russell says:

> The interpretation of such phrases is a matter of considerable difficulty; indeed, it is very hard to frame any theory not susceptible of formal refutation. All the difficulties with which I am acquainted are met, so far as I can discover, by the theory which I am about to explain.[Russell (1905d), p.479].

OD essentially contains a *second* view on denoting. Its main claim is, that its subject matter is much *more problematic* than at first might be supposed. Relying on his own experience, Russell proves to be completely certain of this contention. The second claim of OD, which of course presupposes the first one, is put forward with much less commitment. More conspicuously, this appears from the end of the very last paragraph. There, referring to the view of the ToD, he concludes:

> I will only beg the reader not to make up his mind against the view — as he might be tempted to do, on account of its apparently excessive complication — until he has attempted to construct a theory of his own on the subject of denotation. This attempt, I believe, will convince him that, whatever the true theory may be, it cannot have such simplicity as one might have expected beforehand [Russell (1905d), p. 493].

II.5 *GEA's import and scope* (*ad b*)

If OD contained no other critical arguments than the KFA, it would be unambiguous in tenor. Consequently, the mere fact of its actually being otherwise indicates that it must contain at least one critical argument with a quite different legal status. Now, in the body of Russell's exposition, one and only one such an argument occurs: GEA. On p. 485 it is introduced as follows:

> The relation of the meaning to the denotation involves certain rather curious difficulties, which seem in themselves sufficient to prove that the theory which leads to such difficulties must be wrong [Russell (1905d), p. 485].

The words "rather curious" reveal that Russell must have been surprised by those difficulties and did not know for certain how to *explain* them. He merely claims that "the theory which leads to such difficulties must be wrong", not that it is wrong in virtue of its being opposed to the ToD. Consequently, the GEA significantly differs in import from the KFA. Not being conceived from the point of view of the ToD, it is rather prospective with regard to a possible new theory than retrospective in character. Long before the manuscript OF was dug up, an attentive reader of OD could have guessed that it might have led Russell to the *conception* of the ToD.

In being addressed to both Russell and Frege, the GEA, of course, differs significantly from the corresponding passage in OF §§35-38. After having finished that manuscript, Russell must have asked himself whether the problem detected in his own theory is also to be found in Frege's similar doctrine of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. Having discussed the subject with

him about one year before, Russell was quite well aware of their differences, as is evidently reflected in OD, p. 483, second footnote. The essential point, however, was not and still is not how great the differences are, but, rather, how relevant to the problem of reflexivity. Russell must have faced a question very similar to the one he had faced three years earlier, namely: Is my problem a private one; is it merely due to an un-Fregean feature of my logic? Both in 1902, when he wrote his first letter to Frege, and in 1905, when he confined himself to using Frege's name in OD, his answer was negative. And in both cases, it was not based on any available explanation, but on having sensed the unsuspected and obstinate nature of the problem itself. That in the former case, Russell's diagnosis, although mingled with misunderstandings, was essentially right, has been generally acknowledged, both by Frege himself and by others. The question whether this also applies to the latter case, deserves an extensive investigation, which is far beyond the scope of this article.

II.6 *The riddle of Russell's forgetfulness solved* (*ad c*)

However, another related question does indeed belong to the present discussion, namely whether a positive result of such an investigation must lead to a new, historically sound version of revisionism. This, in fact, seems to be the position of Makin, who, as far as I can see, has discussed the subject more thoroughly than anyone else. I fully agree with his main contention, namely that the GEA actually applies to Frege's theory in spite of its purely Russellian origin.[8] But, and that is the main point of this article, I disagree with Makin's accepting, as a matter of course, the widespread assumption that the GEA is positively related to the ToD, not only in having occasioned its conception, but in making room for it at all.

From Church onwards, this tenet has dominated and obscured the discussions about the GEA. Indeed, silently and indirectly, Russell has fostered its propagation. But — and that is the sticking point — he never adopted it himself! On the contrary, his strange and misleading behaviour testifies to his remaining confidence in the conviction that the ToD is at variance with the very problem which gave rise to its conception. That is the second grain of truth concealed in his notorious comment on what led him to the ToD: the GEA did *not* lead him to its acceptance, on the *contrary*.

Russell's initial doubts about the validity of the ToD are based on his realizing that it is not equal to the difficulties it is supposed to avoid. For these originally and primarily bear on *in*definite descriptions, whereas the ToD is mainly concerned with definite ones. Indeed, denoting phrases containing the word "all" or "some" may be construed in Fregean fashion, as expounded in OD. But the word "any", which both in PoM §86 and in OF

§47 is associated with the variable, remains unexplained! Of course, according to OD, "the notion of the variable" is to be taken "as fundamental" [Russell (1905d), p. 480]. Nevertheless, if the variable denotes any entity whatever in virtue of its having a specific meaning, namely 'any entity' –– and as seen from the general perspective of Russell's philosophy of logic, this idea seems to be equally fundamental –– ,then the problem of reflexivity, i.e. the problem of explaining the use of inverted commas, equally applies to *that* meaning.

In OD, indefinite descriptions are largely overshadowed by definite ones. The unsuspicious reader gets the misleading impression that the GEA does not have anything to do with ambiguously denoting phrases like "anything". So, the seriousness of the problem has been considerably eclipsed; but, as appeared above, not enough completely to take away Russell's doubts.

What is more, such a reader also gets the impression, that making the distinction between primary and secondary occurrence is a privilege of the ToD. This, however, is certainly not what Russell had in mind. The part of OF preceding the discovery of the ToD, especially §23, bristles with similar distinctions. And although the notion of 'occurrence' does not play such a prominent role in Frege's logic, he nevertheless makes use of something very much the same, distinguishing between direct and indirect *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in order to cope with problems such as puzzle (1). In fact, the primary, but somewhat less obvious objective of the GEA is: to prove that the old theory is not able to effectuate such a distinction.

What the self-confident Russell probably did have in mind, is the contention that the old theory fails to do so, *because* it wrongly supposes that denoting phrases have any meaning in themselves and that therefore the ToD, denying this presupposition and focussing on the propositions in whose verbal expression denoting phrases occur, can smoothly make the distinction required to solve the puzzles.

This sounds very attractive indeed, but the trouble is, that in this way the contrast between direct and indirect discourse is ignored. The insecure Russell must have had an inkling of it, for although in OF different conflicting views are explored, one thing seems beyond doubt, namely that a proposition can only be *about* another one, if the latter occurs in a different way, namely as entity. So, instead of *That the S is P, is Q*, we could also write: '*The S is P' is Q*. Consequently, the problem of reflexivity which is concerned with the explanation of inverted commas, also applies to propositions.

What force, then, was powerful enough to bring about Russell's final self-confidence, to which OD owes its established fame? Evidently another discovery must have been effective in changing his attitude towards the ToD, namely (see above section I.1) that its main principle could be

ingeniously used in order to give the Theory of Types its required facelift. So, the desire to solve another problem, his famous paradox, lies behind Russell's final, wholehearted acceptance of the ToD.

In its later expositions, from *Principia* onwards, the discussion of puzzle (1) survives, but the misleading intimation that the distinction between primary and secondary occurrence is a privilege of the ToD, is reinforced in such a degree, that the GEA is replaced by a simplified, amputated substitute [Russell and Whitehead (1910), p. 67]. That is the decisive step that led Russell and his commentators to underestimate the value of OD itself. For that value consists in making clear what OD primarily purports to make clear, namely that the issue of denoting is more problematic than generally supposed. And that, of course, does not prevent the ToD from being honoured for what it is: a stimulating attempt to cope with an unexpected problem.

Both in the period before the conception of the ToD and in the period after its full acceptance, Russell has been confident in the conviction that there is a connection between denoting and the paradox. As far as I can see, the importance of this conviction has been obscured by his somewhat too anxious desire to get rid of the paradox. Maybe, the true value of OD consists in showing that the main *problem* of denoting is just one side of a larger problem of which the paradox constitutes the other side. After all, the two problems have, each of them, to do with reflexivity, although in mutually opposed ways, the famous one with an excess, the other with a deficit of reflexivity.

Department of Philosophy
Section History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy
Radboud University
Mailbox 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, The Netherlands
E-mail: hboukema@phil.ru.nl

NOTES

[1] OD will be cited according to the original pagination which is indicated in the margin of its reprint in Russell (1994).

[2] I'll confine myself to the two arguments occurring in the main part of the text.

[3] Although the Meinongian elment in PoM is much less significant than generally supposed, it is not, as Griffin (1996) suggests, completely fictitious. It consists in Russell's assumption that a *proper name* such as "Apollo" must stand for a non-existent entity, because the proposition expressed by the sentence "Apollo does not exist" is true. In [Russell (1905a) p.487] *this* Meinongian and un-Fregean

element is avoided by means of the proposal to construe such names as disguised denoting phrases which have a meaning, but no denotation.

[4] Having expounded the main difficulty in Meinong's view [OD, p. 483], namely that the existent present King of France has to exist in virtue of his essence, whereas in fact he does not exist, Russell wrongly suggests that Frege is able to avoid this difficulty in virtue of his distinguishing Sinn and Bedeutung. What Russell must have had in mind is rather that the awkward consequence of Frege's un-Meinongian view (namely that all sentences which seem to express a proposition about a non-existent or non-subsistent object, are – at least from a logical point of view – meaningless) is mitigated by the introduction of the said distinction. For it allows such sentences to have at least a *Sinn*, namely the *Gedanke* expressed by them. According to the ToD, of course, this mitigation is not powerful enough.

[5] As far as I can see, the view of Cassin and her followers mainly springs from misunderstanding OD's structure. An argument which only purports to attack Russell's former theory without being complemented by a similar attack to Frege would be useless in the scaffolding of OD.

[6] That is why the use of the word "all" in the passage quoted above is not legitimate. In the first section of OD the reduction is only applied to propositions in whose verbal expression denoting phrases *primarily* occur.

[7] In fact, the matter is somewhat more complicated. Puzzle (2) is mainly concerned with the said distinction as it is applied to the problem of non-being discussed in puzzle (3).

[8] But I disagree with Makin's claim that the differences between Russell and Frege are completely irrelevant to the seriousness of the problem of reflexivity. In virtue of one of the main principles of Russell's logic, namely that whatever entity must be the subject of at least some propositions, the detection of the problem is easier. In Frege's logic, which is inspired by unambiguous rigor, the problem, once detected, is much more serious and conspicuous.

REFERENCES

AYER, A. J. (1971), *Russell and Moore, The Analytical Heritage*, London, Macmillan.

BLACKBURN, S. and CODE, A. (1978), 'The Power of Russell's Criticism of Frege: 'On Denoting', pp. 48-50', *Analysis*, 38.2, pp. 65-77.

BUTLER, R. (1954), 'The Scaffolding of Russell's Theory of Descriptions', in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXIII, pp. 350-64.

CARNAP, R. (1947), *Meaning and Necessity; A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic, Chicago*, University of Chicago Press.

CARTWRIGHT, R. (1987), 'On the Origin of Russell's Theory of Descriptions', in Cartwright, R., in *Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, MIT Press, pp. 95-133.

CASSIN, C. E. (1970), 'Russell's Discussion of Meaning and Denotation: A Re-examination', in Klemke, E. D. (ed.), *Essays on Bertrand Russell*, Urbana, Chicago and London, University of Illinois Press.

CHURCH, A. (1943), 'Carnap's Introduction to Semantics', in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. LII, No 3, pp. 298-304.

COFFA, J. A. (1980), 'Russell as a Platonic Dialogue', in *Synthese*, 45, pp. 43-70.
GEACH, P. T. (1958), 'Russell on Meaning and Denotation', in *Analysis*, 19, pp. 69-72.
GRIFFIN, N. (1993), 'Terms, Relations, Complexes', in Ervine, A. D. and Wedeking, G. A., *Bertrand Russell and Analytic Philosophy*, Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, pp. 159-92.
— (1996), 'Denoting Concepts in the Principles of Mathematics', in Monk, R. and Palmer, A. (eds.), *Bertrand Russell and the Origin of Analytical Philosophy*, Bristol, Thoemmes Press, pp. 23-64.
HOCHBERG, H. (1976), 'Russell's Attack on Frege's Theory of Meaning', *Philosophica*, 18, pp. 9-34.
HYLTON, P. (1990), *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 237-275.
MAKIN, G. (2000), *The Metaphysicians of Meaning, Russell and Frege on sense and denotation*, London, Routledge.
RODRIGUEZ-CONSUEGRA, F. A., (1992), 'A New Angle on Russell's "Inextricable Tangle" over Meaning and Denotation', Russell, in *The Journal of the Russell Archives*, n.s. 12, pp. 197-207.
RUSSELL, B. (1903), The *Principles of Mathematics*, London, Allen and Unwin.
— (1905a), 'The Existential Import of Propositions', in *Mind*, n.s 14, pp.398-401, reprinted in Russell, B. (1994), pp. 486-9.
— (1905b), 'Review of Meinong et al., Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie', in *Mind*, n.s. 14, pp. 530-8, reprinted in Russell, B., (1994), pp. 596-604.
— (1905c), 'On Fundamentals', in Russell, B. (1994), pp. 360-413.
— (1905d), 'On Denoting', *Mind* n.s. 14, pp. 479-93, reprinted in Russell, B. (1994), pp. 415-27.
— (1944), 'My Mental Development', in Schilpp, P. A. (ed.), *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, Illinois, Open Court.
— (1959), *My Philosophical Development*, London, Allen and Unwin.
— (1994), The *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell,* Vol. 4, London, Routledge.
RUSSELL, B. and WHITEHEAD, A. N. (1910), *Principia Mathematica* Vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
STRAWSON, P. F. (1950), 'On Referring', in *Mind*, vol.59, pp. 320-44.