Russell, “On Denoting”

1. Denoting Terms

Three types of denotation:
1. Failed denotation: e.g., ‘the present King of France’
2. Singular denotation: e.g., ‘the present President of the U.S.A.’
3. Ambiguous denotation: e.g., ‘a man’

Not under discussion: Proper names (e.g. ‘Clare’, ‘Kentucky’, etc.)

According to Russell, a phrase is denoting solely “in virtue of its form”. This is to say, the phrase needn’t actually denote in order to be a denoting phrase. We’ll return to this.

2. Why care about such things?

Knowledge by acquaintance vs. knowledge about:

For example, 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 the denoting phrases.

3. Russell’s Theory of Descriptions

Russell’s surprising claim about denoting terms: “denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning” (231).

Background Distinction:

*Grammatical Form* of a sentence: The form most straightforwardly suggested by the surface syntax of the sentence. ‘I met a man’ has a similar surface structure to ‘I met Obama’.

*Logical Form* of a sentence: The syntactic form that best reflects the logical structure of the sentence (thus the form that is most apt for theorizing).

*E.g.*, ‘I met no one’ has the same surface form as ‘I met Obama’. But ‘Obama’ is functioning to pick something out in the world, and that’s clearly not what’s going on with ‘no one’. Perhaps ‘I met no one’ could be understood as “’I met x’ is always false”.

4. Logical Form

A propositional function $C(x)$—for example, the function ‘$x$ voted’—is a function from individuals to propositions. We call the argument of a function the thing we substitute for ‘$x$’ in the function expression ‘$C(x)$’ and we call the value of a function the thing that results from this substitution. For example, the arithmetical function $x^2$ with the number 3 taken as an argument—that is, $3^2$—yields, as value, the number 9. Similarly, the propositional function ‘$x$ voted’ yields the proposition *Obama voted* as value when Obama is taken as argument.
**Primitive Denoting Phrases:**

i. Everything is fair = ‘x is fair’ is always true.
ii. Nothing is fair = “ ‘x is fair’ is false” is always true. = ‘x is fair’ is always false.
iii. Something is fair = It is false that “ ‘x is fair’ is false” is always true. = ‘x is fair’ is sometimes true.

**Universal Descriptions:**

i. All cats are evil = ‘If x is feline, then x is evil’ is always true.
ii. No dogs are evil = ‘If x is canine, then x is not evil’ is always true.

**Indefinite Descriptions:**

‘He saw a pig’ = ‘He saw x, and x is porcine’ is not always false.

**Definite Descriptions:**

a. someone teaches this class. (‘x teaches this class’ is not always false.)

b. at most one person teaches this class. (‘if x and y teach this class, x and y are identical’ is always true.)

c. whoever teaches this class is odd. (‘if x teaches this class, x is odd’ is always true.)

Denoting terms don’t appear as such once the sentences are translated into their Logical Form. But what’s the point of translating them into their logical form?

3. **Against Meinong and Frege**

“The evidence for the above theory is derived from difficulties which seem unavoidable if we regard denoting phrases as standing for genuine constituents of the propositions in whose verbal expressions they occur.” (#)

One such alternative theory is given by Meinong:

**Meinong:** Any grammatically correct denoting phrase stands for an object.
- So ‘the present King of France’ and ‘the littlest unicorn’ refer to objects.
- These objects do not subsist, but they are objects nonetheless.

**Problem:** The existent present King of France exists, but also does not exist. The round square is round, but also not round….

**Russell:** If we can avoid these objects which seem to disobey the Law of Non-Contradiction, then we should do so! It is too high a price to pay.

Another alternative is given by Frege:

**Frege:** distinction between sense (meaning) and nominatum (denotation)

**Problems:**

a. Consider the sentence: ‘The King of France is bald.’

On Frege’s view, the reference of the sentence (i.e., its truth value) depends on the reference of the component parts. Since ‘the King of France’ doesn’t have a reference, it looks like the sentence can’t have a truth value. It’s neither true nor false. Russell thinks that it follows from this that the sentence must be nonsense.

But it isn’t nonsense, he says, it’s clearly false. So there’s something wrong with Frege’s view.

b. Consider the sentence: ‘If the Super Bowl has already taken place, then the winners of this year’s Super Bowl are the Patriots’.

On Frege’s view, it seems that the whole sentence can have a reference (truth value) only if the antecedent of the conditional is true.

Since the antecedent of the conditional is false, ‘the winners of this year’s Super Bowl’ has no reference, so it looks like the whole conditional ought to be non-sense…

But it’s not nonsense.
Frege's Response: associate terms like ‘the King of France’ with a referent, i.e., the null set.
Russell: this is “plainly artificial”.