

RUSSELL, ON DENOTING

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE · BOB BEDDOR

Denoting Phrases: The Target

Russell is interesting understanding “denoting phrases”, e.g.:

- a person
- some person
- any person
- the Queen of England
- the Queen of France

Mostly Russell focuses the last sort of example; he is interested in *definite descriptions*, that is, expressions of the form, “the *F*”. And he is mainly focused on analyzing them as they occur in sentences such as:

- (1) The *F* is *G*.

For example:

- (2) The tallest building in Singapore is in Tanjong Pagar.
- (3) The present King of France is bald.

Russell’s Analysis

A First Pass

Start by considering the sentence:

- (4) The ex-husband of Angelina Jolie is an actor.

A first stab at a “Russellian” analysis of this sentence would be:

- (5) There exists at least one person who is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie, and that person is an actor.

In quasi-logical notation:

- (6) $\exists x (x \text{ is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie} \wedge x \text{ is an actor})$.

Question: What’s wrong with this analysis?

A Refined Analysis

What seems to be missing from the previous analysis is that definite descriptions seem to convey *uniqueness*. This leads us to the official Russellian analysis of (4) (*The ex-husband of Angelina Jolie is an actor*). On Russell’s analysis, this can be analyzed in terms of three different clauses:

- There exists at least one person who is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie (*existence clause*)
- there is not more than one person who is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie (*uniqueness clause*)
- whoever is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie is an actor (*categorical clause*)

Equivalently:

- (7) There exists an *x* such that (i) *x* is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie, (ii) if any *y* is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie, then $y = x$, and (iii) *x* is an actor.

In quasi-logical notation:

- (8) $\exists x (x \text{ is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie} \wedge \forall y (y \text{ is an ex-husband of Angelina Jolie} \rightarrow y = x) \wedge x \text{ is an actor})$.

More generally, *The F is G* is analyzed as:

- (9) There exists an x such that (i) x is F, (ii) if any y is F, then $y = x$, and (iii) x is G.

Formally:

- (10) $\exists x (Fx \wedge \forall y (Fy \rightarrow y = x) \wedge Gx)$.

Exercise: Write out the Russellian analyses of the following sentences:

- The Queen of France is wise.
- The author of *Ulysses* went blind.
- The author of *Harry Potter* is wealthy.

Three Puzzles

Ok, why accept Russell's theory?

A logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science. – Russell, "On Denoting", 484-485

1. The Substitution of Identicals

If a is identical with b, whatever is true of the one is true of the other, and either may be substituted for the other without altering the truth or falsehood of that proposition. Now, George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverly*; and in fact Scott was the author of *Waverly*. Hence we may substitute "Scott" for "the author of *Waverly*" and thereby prove that George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott. Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe. – Russell, "On Denoting", 485

2. The Law of the Excluded Middle

By the law of the excluded middle, either 'A is B' or 'A is not B' must be true. Hence either 'The present King of France is bald' or 'The present King of France is not bald' must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list. Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig. – Russell, "On Denoting", 485

3. Negative Existentials

Consider sentences such as:

- (11) The planet between Mercury and the Sun doesn't exist.
(12) The round square doesn't exist.
(13) The present King of France doesn't exist.

How should we analyze such sentences?

Names

It seems all of the puzzles Russell discusses arise for names as well as definite descriptions:

- *Substitution of Identicals*: “George wondered whether Superman was Clark Kent” vs. “George wondered whether Superman was Superman”
- *Law of Excluded Middle*: “Vulcan is hot” or “Vulcan is not hot” must be true. But if we enumerated the things that are hot, and then the things that are not hot, we should not find Vulcan in either list.
- *Negative Existentials*: “Vulcan doesn’t exist.”

Russell’s Solution: Names are disguised definite descriptions!

(14) Aristotle was a decent philosopher.

is analyzed as:

(15) The teacher of Alexander the Great was a decent philosopher.

which in turn is analyzed as:

(16) There exists an x such that (i) x was a teacher of Alexander the Great and (ii) for any y , if y was a teacher of Alexander the Great, $y = x$, and (iii) x was a decent philosopher.

Difficulties for Russell’s Approach

Generics

Consider:

(17) The whale is a mammal.

What is the Russellian analysis of this sentence? Does this seem plausible to you?

Incompleteness

Strawson objects that the Russellian analysis delivers an implausible analysis for the following sentence:

(18) The table is covered with books.

Can you see what the problem is supposed to be? Is there any way for Russell to respond?

Embedding Under Desideratives

Elbourne, following Heim, objects that the Russellian analysis offers two interpretations of the following sentence, neither of which is correct:

(19) Hans wants the ghost in his attic to be quiet.

What are the two readings? Why think that neither of them is right?