

# Reviews

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## Meinong's jungle and Russell's desert

by Nicholas Griffin

Richard Routley. *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond. An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items*. Canberra: Philosophy Department Monographs, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1980. Pp. 1,035. C\$18.35.

CLASSICAL SEMANTICS, LIKE classical logic, stems in large measure from Russell, in particular from his paper "On Denoting" (1905) which was supposed to provide a recipe by means of which discourse about nonexistent objects could be translated into discourse about existent objects. The theory of descriptions, by which all this was to be achieved, was hailed by Frank Ramsey as a "paradigm of philosophy"; and if "philosophy" is taken to mean classical analytic philosophy (as it often is in Britain), Ramsey's assessment was just about right: for the theory is reductionist, eliminative, referentialist and was largely responsible for making possible a revival of empiricism (though this was not, at first, how Russell intended it to be used). It provided a model for all those attempted reductions of ontological commitments which marked the constructive phase of analytic philosophy, lasting into the 1940s. The theory displaced alternative, non-reductive and non-referential theories, in particular the noneist alternative being developed by Meinong around the turn of the century.

The central difference between the two theories lies in the Ontological Assumption, the assumption that only existent items (entities) have properties (or, in the formal mode, that only expressions designating entities can function as logical subjects). Russell's theory accepts the Ontological Assumption (its canonical expression is *PM*, \*14.21), Meinong's rejects it. The Ontological Assumption has, in fact, proved an extraordinarily stable feature of semantical thought. Even when Russell's theory began to wear a little thin, most criticism (e.g. that from Strawson and Wittgenstein) remained committed to the Assumption. Other types of criticism (e.g. that stemming from free logic) modified the

Assumption without entirely abandoning it: free logics refuse non-entities a full logical role, e.g. refuse to admit them in the domain of quantification. The tenacity with which the Ontological Assumption is held is the more remarkable because it is rarely directly argued for. In all of Russell's writings on the theory of reference, for example, I know of no passage which gives a decent, non-question-begging argument for the Assumption.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that, if the Ontological Assumption is to be defended, something like Russell's theory of descriptions is needed. For much ordinary discourse is putatively about non-entities, and, this being so, some general algorithm is required to translate such discourse into referentially kosher form. Of course, we still need some independent argument for the Ontological Assumption, for even if it were the case that non-referential discourse could be adequately translated into referential discourse, nothing has been done to show that there was anything wrong with non-referential talk. For this, the Ontological Assumption is required. Given the Assumption and the fact that ordinary language is frequently non-referential, some translation device such as Russell's is required if semantics for natural language is to be possible.<sup>2</sup> And there is no doubt that of all such devices Russell's theory of definite descriptions is by far the most sophisticated; its only trouble is that it doesn't work. As a theory of definite descriptions it does not directly secure the elimination of non-referential uses of proper names (e.g. "Pegasus", "Raskolnikov"); these can be treated only by means of the fiction that proper names are disguised descriptions—the target of much famous criticism.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, Russell's theory fails completely to provide an adequate account of fictional language: on it "Anna Karenina threw

herself under a train" is false. The referentialist opposition to Russell hardly fares any better here: compare, e.g., Strawson's dismissal of fictional uses of descriptions as "spurious".<sup>4</sup> In fact, so far as I know, Russell never attempted a semantics of fiction, and it is not unfair to say that, in general, referentialist attempts in this direction have approximated Strawson's in sophistication. Another area, where serious referentialist efforts *have* been made, is in providing semantics for intensional discourse. Russell's first efforts in this area culminated (unsuccessfully) in the unpublished book, *Theory of Knowledge* (1913). In fact, the attempt to handle *some* intensional discourse, through scope distinctions, was built into the theory by Russell. The inadequacy of such efforts is no longer surprising, for fictional and intensional discourse is irreducibly non-referential.

The multiple and inextricable failures of referentialist semantics (of one kind or another) are the starting-point for Routley's massive attempt to rehabilitate Meinong's non-referentialist (noneist) programme, which Russell's theory of descriptions replaced. The present volume is a systematization and extension of some of Routley's earlier unpublished writings on noneism together with some more recent, mainly published essays (also considerably revised) amplifying various themes raised by the earlier ones. Not surprisingly, Russell figures quite prominently as a *bête noire*. Not all the commentary is hostile, however. Russell comes fairly well out of a discussion of the Russell–Strawson debate (pp. 15–21)—a debate essentially about the formulation of the Ontological Assumption rather than its truth, as Routley points out. Indeed, in the retrospect of thirty years, Strawson's theory, his arguments for it and his criticism of Russell's theory seem rather less than the epoch-making advance they were thought to be at the time.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, Routley acknowledges that Russell's theory of descriptions is "far and away the best articulated and defended of classical theories for coping with non-referential discourse" (p. 118). Russell's theory forms the hard-core alternative to noneism, just as Russell's criticisms of Meinong were the most serious the theory of objects had to face.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is possible that Russell acquired the Assumption as part of his undergraduate training, for it was asserted by James Ward (again without argument) in lectures on metaphysics that Russell attended. It is difficult to believe that the Assumption was regarded in the late nineteenth century as simply self-evident—even though Meinong's critique was only just beginning. For Reid had long before claimed it was mere common sense to deny the assumption (cf. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay IV, Chap. II, in *Works*, ed. W. Hamilton, 8th ed. [Edinburgh: Thin, 1895], I: 368–9).

<sup>2</sup> The usual way in which this issue is fudged is to assume that Russellian translations from non-referential to referential discourse provide analyses of what the putative non-referential discourse says, i.e. that there is, properly speaking, no such thing as non-referential discourse, merely disguised referential discourse. But what is really disguised here is an appeal to the Ontological Assumption which now occurs in the claim that putatively non-referential talk is really referential talk. (Cf. Routley's account of a similar fudge on claims that all discourse [of a certain type] is extensional—p. 778n.)

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§79, 87; Searle, "Proper Names", *Mind* (1958); Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

<sup>4</sup> "On Referring", in A. Flew, ed., *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, p. 35. Strawson's later softening of terminology to "secondary", a blatant terminological steal from Russell, is not much better. Secondary uses of descriptions are not distinguished appropriately from primary ones by Strawson, who seems to rely on association of ideas from Russell's theory to make his point.

<sup>5</sup> Routley doesn't consider Russell's reply to Strawson, "Mr. Strawson on Referring", *Mind* (1957)—a paper which still deserves to be rescued from the contempt with which it was received.

<sup>6</sup> Routley provides in Chapter 4 a comprehensive rebuttal of *all* known objections to the

Against my contention (“Russell’s ‘Horrible Travesty’ of Meinong”, *Russell*, nos. 25–8 [1977–78]: 39–51) that Russell, at least in his early writings on Meinong, did not make the standard mistake of attributing to Meinong the realist view that all objects have being, Routley (p. 489n.) cites two fresh pieces of evidence from Findlay’s *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values* (pp. 84, 94). The first of these concerns the ontological status of Meinong’s objectives. Russell at one point writes that Meinong’s “Objective of the judgment is what ... I have called a proposition”.<sup>7</sup> This, as Findlay shows, immediately leads to trouble because Russell’s propositions always have being (cf., e.g., *Principles of Mathematics*, pp. 35, 49, 450), whereas Meinong’s objectives do not. However, a modicum of charity would exonerate Russell of misinterpreting Meinong on this point, for in the sentence which immediately precedes the one Findlay quotes, Russell explicitly notes that objectives “do not necessarily have being”.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Russell having identified propositions and objectives goes on (after a colon) to offer an explanation: “it is to the Objective that such words as true and false, evident, probable, necessary, etc. apply”—thereby specifying the grounds for his identification. Russell’s identification of objectives with propositions is loose talk, but not, in context, seriously misleading talk. Findlay’s second claim (pp. 94–8) is that Russell identifies Meinong’s complexes with objectives (“Meinong’s Theory”, pp. 50, 62). Yet, for Meinong, some complexes exist, but an objective can, at best, only subsist. Now, I think there are good grounds for attributing to Russell the view that all and only propositions are complex terms; and that, in consequence, he would be prepared to admit that some propositions exist (though, to my knowledge, he is nowhere explicit on this point). But there seems to be no clear textual ground for saying that Russell attributes this identification to Meinong. The textual evidence is not entirely clear at this point, but, in the first of the passages Findlay cites, Russell is expounding his own position in explicit distinction to Meinong’s, while in the second he is considering two alternative positions neither of which is explicitly attributed to anyone.

theory of objects. Most are surprisingly weak. Apart from Russell’s, only Quine’s (in “On What There Is”, in *From a Logical Point of View*)—which Routley considers separately in Chapter 3—are really serious. Russell’s explicit objections to the theory of objects will not be considered here since I have discussed the topic elsewhere (“Russell’s Critique of Meinong”, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions” (1904), reprinted in *Essays in Analysis*, ed. D. Lackey (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> “Meinong’s Theory”, p. 54. See also similar statements at pp. 57, 58, 59, 63.

Routley’s central complaints against the theory of descriptions occupy §1.12. In the first place he argues that the theory assigns intuitively wrong truth-values even to extensional uses of descriptions (e.g. “Pegasus = Pegasus” is false on the theory), and that Russell’s scope distinctions are not adequate to avoid the same problem for intensional uses. For example, “Meinong believed the golden mountain was golden” is true, but the Russellian translation is false whether the description is given primary or secondary scope (p. 119). Moreover, as Routley points out, the scope distinctions themselves leave much to be desired. They force ambiguities on natural-language sentences which appear univocal—often exceedingly numerous ambiguities (especially with nested intensional functors)—without much justification. Furthermore, no effective procedure is given by Russell for deciding when an occurrence of a description is primary and when it is secondary.<sup>9</sup>

Much of Routley’s criticism is directed against Russell’s theory of logically proper names. The distinction between descriptions and (logically) proper names is essential to Russell’s theory, since on the theory (unlike noneism) descriptions cannot serve as substitution values for variables. Routley shows, in some delightfully sharp argument, that Russell’s arguments for this claim (*My Philosophical Development*, pp. 84–5; *PM*, p. 67), rest either upon conflating the claim that descriptions are not proper names with the claim that descriptions are incomplete symbols, or upon an equivocation on “means the same as” (pp. 122–7). Against logically proper names Routley argues that there can be no such things, because the conditions Russell imposes on them are inconsistent. On the one hand, Russell requires (a) that logically proper names are used to designate entities with which the user is directly acquainted at the time of use; on the other, (b) that the entity is designated without saying or implying anything about it. But, Routley argues (p. 121), from (b) it follows that if “*a*” is a logically proper name, neither “*a* exists” nor “*a* does not exist” is significant. For if either were significant, than “*a*” would be used in a way which implies something about *a*, thus contradicting (b). But by (a), “*a* exists” must be true.

There seem to me to be two things wrong with this argument: (i) It mistakes Russell’s reasons for claiming that neither “*a* exists” nor “*a* does not exist” is significant. Russell’s argument (*PM*, pp. 174–5; *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, p. 179) is not that to say “*a*

<sup>9</sup> This problem has been noted by C. E. Cassin who attempts to do something about it in “Russell’s Distinction between the Primary and the Secondary Occurrence of Definite Descriptions”, in E. D. Klemke, ed., *Essays on Bertrand Russell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 273–84. The result, however, though clarifying, is still not effective.

exists" would be saying something about  $a$ , which is impossible, but that the meaning of " $a$ " is its reference. Thus, if " $a$ " has no reference, sentences in which it occurs have no meaning, so " $a$  does not exist" is meaningless when  $\sim E!(\iota x)(x=a)$ . Of course, this argument does not in itself explain why " $a$  exists" should not be regarded as a contextually self-verifying truth (like "I exist")—presumably, Russell requires here a significance principle such as that negations of non-significant propositions are non-significant. Russell can still maintain that, even though use of " $a$ " as a logically proper names implies  $E!(\iota x)(x=a)$ , nothing has been said or implied about  $a$ , since "E!" is not a predicate (though it is, of course, predicate-like). (ii) The non-significance of " $a$  exists" and its negation does not, contra Routley, follow from (b). For what (b) asserts is that the use of " $a$ " to designate  $a$  does not in itself assert anything about  $a$ , not that any sentence (in particular, the sentence " $a$  exists") in which " $a$ " is used to designate  $a$  asserts nothing about  $a$ . This latter claim would amount to an ineffability thesis about the denotations of logically proper names. What yields the assertion in " $a$  exists" is "exists", just as what yields the assertion in " $a$  is a red sensum" is the predicate "is a red sensum". By contrast, on Russell's theory, "The president of France is bald" yields, not the assertion that the president of France is bald, but the assertion that there exists uniquely a president of France who is bald, an assertion which supposedly follows from the use of the description to designate Mitterand. " $a$  is a red sensum" does not yield a corresponding assertion that  $a$  uniquely exists and is a red sensum, for " $a$  exists" is meaningless. Russell's view (b) is more like Mill's old claim that proper names lack connotation. All this, of course, should not be taken to confer credibility upon the theory of logically proper names. For, in view of (a), we can argue that " $a$  is a red sensum" ought to imply " $a$  exists", for the object being referred to exists. We have " $a =$  the object being referred to" and "E!(the object being referred to)" from which "E!( $a$ )" ought to follow by substitutivity. The only ground Russell gives against the conclusion rests on the principle that  $a$  is the meaning of " $a$ ". But this principle is surely false, as a moment's reflection will show. If  $a$  is a red sensum then  $a$  may diminish or vanish, but the meaning of " $a$ " cannot diminish or vanish—thus  $a$  and the meaning of " $a$ " must be distinct.

The failures of referential theories to deal adequately with fictional and intensional discourse, when acknowledged, typically result in a referentialist retreat to the fall-back position that the reference theory (in particular, Russell's theory of descriptions) works adequately for scientific and mathematical discourse, which are entirely extensional and referential. (The only types of discourse worth worrying about, it is usually implied.) These claims, also, are soundly criticized by Routley.

Theoretical science, in fact, is very often essentially concerned with non-entities (idealizations), and very often is essentially intensional. For any scientific theory must distinguish between accidental generalizations and universal laws, the latter having a modal status (supporting counterfactuals, e.g.) not accorded the former. The case of mathematics, commonly taken to be an extensionalist stronghold, is more difficult. Russell, in the second edition of *PM* (p. 659), says that "mathematics is essentially extensional rather than intensional". But the issue is not so clear cut, as Routley points out (pp. 769–79), for mathematics includes those mathematical theories developed before the pronounced drive towards extensionalization of the late nineteenth century. Thus mathematics, actual mathematics, includes Cauchy's notion of a variable which approaches a limit, as well as Weierstrass's extensionalization of the variable as a collection of values, and it is not clear that Cauchy's concept is an extensional one (cf. *Oeuvres*, 2nd series, III: 4). In fact, a lot of what passes for quite ordinary elementary mathematics is intensional, as the following delightfully simple argument (p. 777) shows: "The denominator of  $\frac{2}{4}$  is 4. But  $\frac{2}{4} = \frac{1}{2}$ . So by transparency, the denominator of  $\frac{1}{2}$  is 4." Thus "is denominator of" is not extensional. Of course, it can be replied that "is denominator of" is implicitly quotational, and extensionalization reimposed through a levels of language doctrine. Similarly, it can be maintained that Cauchy was merely gesturing towards what Weierstrass precisely defined, and that anything in the calculus that Cauchy wanted to express can be said extensionally following Weierstrass. But what this amounts to is not a defence of the thesis that mathematics is extensional, but of Carnap's extensionality thesis, that for any non-extensional system there is an extensional system into which it can be translated. This is quite a different proposition, and one which (as Carnap noted, *Meaning and Necessity*, p. 142) does not show in itself that there is anything wrong with the original non-extensional system.

All in all, Russell's post-1905 desert fares rather badly in comparison with Meinong's jungle. The promised oases of the former are little compensation for the lost riches of the latter. And yet there is in Routley's book something that might have gladdened Russell's heart. For if we take Russell's radically realist system of *The Principles of Mathematics*, in which just about all of Meinong's non-existent objects turn up as subsistent beings, dispense with the underlying Ontological Assumption, upgrade the early classical logic to a relevant, ultramodal logic, and (what the last move permits) keep the paradoxes without trivializing the system, then we get somewhere near the dizzying heights that Routley surveys in his appendix, "Ultralogic as Universal?" Routley's programme there is essentially Russell's programme at the turn of the

century, to provide a universal logic capable of handling reasoning in all forms of discourse, about all types of situation (including inconsistent and paradoxical situations). This paper, originally published in 1977, surveys the work already carried out on the ultralogical programme, as well as outlining hopes for the future. In the foundations of mathematics, to take an area close to Russell's interests, as things stand, Gödel's theorem is in doubt and logicism remains an open question. It seems altogether possible that Russell was much closer to the truth in his first attempt at the foundations of mathematics than he was after he'd invented the doctrines that have made him such an influential figure in twentieth-century logic and philosophy.

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