G. F. STOUT AND THE THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

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Russell's famous essay "On Denoting" is rightly considered one of the fundamental sources of modern analytic philosophy. The literature of commentary and exegesis devoted to this one short paper is vast. The present note discusses the background to the writing of the paper, and some questions connected with its reception.[1]

I. HOW "ON DENOTING" WAS WRITTEN

We know more about the writing of OD than about most of the other short works from the early period of Russell's career. Russell chronicled his progress on the paper very clearly in his manuscripts and correspondence. The first indication of the new theory is in the unpublished manuscript "On Fundamentals" (*Papers* 4: 359–413). This manuscript is dated 1905, to which the note "Begun June 7" has been added; a marginal note on the first leaf of the manuscript reads: "Pp. 18ff. contain the reasons for the new theory of denoting." This note refers to the series of numbered paragraphs beginning on folio 18, in which the new theory gradually emerges (*Papers* 4: 369f.). On 13 June, Russell wrote Lucy Donnelly about his new ideas, and presented her with the famous puzzle about George IV and the author of *Waverley* (*Auto.* 1: 177).

The article itself was written at the end of July 1905, under peculiarly trying circumstances. On 23 July 1905, Russell wrote in a letter to Louis

Couturat: "As for existence, I shall be able to explain my opinion better when I have written my article 'On Denoting Phrases'." On 3 August he reported to Lucy Donnelly that she would be able to find the answer to the puzzle in his new paper: "I have written an article on George IV for *Mind*, which will appear in due course; there you will find the 'answer'" (*Auto.* 1: 178).

We can conclude from this that the article was written within a twelve-day period towards the end of July. This is not surprising in itself, given Russell's facility in writing. It becomes surprising if we put it together with the other events in Russell's life at that time.

On Tuesday 25 July, one of Russell's closest friends, Theodore Llewelyn Davies, drowned in a pool on the fells near Kirkby Lonsdale, where his father was vicar. He had apparently struck his head on diving in, while on his way to the railway station. He was thirty-four years old. His brother Crompton, who had been particularly close to Theodore, sent the news to Russell in a note dated 27 July 1905 (*Auto.* 1: 195). Theodore and Crompton were among the first friends Russell made at Cambridge; his reminiscences of the two brothers overflow with admiration and affection (*Auto.* 1: 57-63).

Russell had intended to visit Ireland for two weeks with Alys, where they had planned a visit with the Monteagles.[2] On 27 July, Russell wrote in a letter to Louis Couturat that he and Alys would be in Ireland from 29 July to 10 August.

The news of Theodore's death altered these plans. After accompanying Alys to Ireland, Russell returned to London to be with Crompton. In his note of 27 July, Crompton had told Russell: "I shall be back in London on Monday. Let me see you some time soon." On Tuesday, 1 August, Russell wrote again to Couturat from 1, Barton Street,[3] the quiet out-of-the-way street near Westminster Abbey where Crompton had lived with Theodore: "I just received your letter and postcard (in

[2] Thomas Spring-Rice (1849–1926), 2nd Baron Monteagle, had literary and political interests and was the brother-in-law of the historian, Sir George Prothero, whom Russell also knew. The next year *The Limerick Chronicle* for 28 August noted the Russells' presence at a house party given by the Monteagles and attended by various battleship captains.

[3] The home of Mary Sheepshanks, who was then away. A late note on her correspondence, in Russell's handwriting, identifies her as "daughter of Bp. of Norwich. Lived opposite Crompton & Theodore Ll. Davies".

Ireland, where I spent three days).... One of my closest friends has just been drowned, and I have to look after his brother, an equally close friend, who is suffering almost more than it is possible to bear." If we assume that Russell left with Alys for Ireland on 28 July, as planned, then it seems likely that Russell returned on Tuesday 1 August, the same day that he wrote Couturat. Russell remained with Crompton for several weeks, spending a fortnight with him in Normandy from 10 to 24 August.

The period after his return from Ireland was harrowing. The following passage from the *Autobiography* makes clear what he went through:

Crompton, who loved his brother above everyone, suffered almost unendurably. I spent the weeks after Theodore's death with him, but it was difficult to find anything to say. The sight of his unhappiness was agonizing. Ever since, the sound of Westminster chimes has brought back to me the nights I lay awake in misery at this time. On the Sunday after the accident, I was in church when his father, with determined stoicism, took the service as usual, and just succeeded in not breaking down. (*Auto.* 1: 58)

The last sentence of this quotation seems to be a rare case of Russell's memory failing him, since he must have been in Ireland on Sunday 30 July. It seems more likely that the Sunday remembered by Russell was that of 6 August.

It is hard for most people to imagine writing a technical philosophical article under such circumstances. Yet everything indicates that "On Denoting" was indeed written during this agonizing time. Russell seems to have been following a recurrent pattern, that of immersing himself in work to forget his emotional troubles. What Russell was capable of in this way can be gathered from the entry of 18 May 1903 in his private journal, referring to the events of the year before:

In June came May Shuckburgh's tragedy, which was very overwhelming; and the next day came Alys's return, the direct question, and the answer that love was dead; and then, in the bedroom, her loud, heart-rending sobs, while I worked at my desk next door. (*Papers* 12: 22–3)

Russell elevated his habits of escape into mathematics and philosophy in the purple prose of "The Study of Mathematics"; behind the grandiloquent phrases of this essay, we can sense how Russell found relief

from his troubles in the drug of intellectual work:

Remote from human passions, remote even from the pitiful facts of nature, the generations have created an ordered cosmos, where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world. (*Papers* 12: 86)

Kenneth Blackwell has suggested a less dramatic, though still interesting possibility for the timing of the events of July and August 1905. It may be that Russell wrote his paper and sent it to *Mind* by 28 July, before leaving to visit Ireland. If that is so, the famous paper that has evoked mountains of commentary was written in the space of perhaps five days.

Given the surrounding circumstances, it is hardly surprising that "On Denoting" shows signs of hasty composition. The paper is very hard to read. In part this is due to the fact that in writing for a philosophical audience, Russell had to replace formulas of symbolic logic with clumsy English transcriptions. But not all the difficulties can be explained in this way. The notorious passages in which Russell attempts to criticize Frege's theory of meaning and denotation are impenetrably obscure, and have furnished grist for the mills of numerous commentators. Famous though it is, "On Denoting" is badly written, and it is surprising to find that current commentary on the theory of descriptions is often confined to the paper, largely ignoring the superior exposition of the theory in *Principia Mathematica*, Vol. 1.

2. HOW THE PAPER WAS RECEIVED

What was the contemporary reception of the paper? In later years, Russell tended to emphasize the incomprehension that greeted the paper's appearance. In particular, he was fond of telling the anecdote of how the editor of *Mind*, G. F. Stout, resisted publishing the article:

This doctrine struck the then editor as so preposterous that he begged me to reconsider it and not to demand its publication as it stood. I, however, was persuaded of its soundness and refused to give way. It was afterwards generally accepted, and came to be thought my most important contribution to logic. (*MPD*, p. 83)

A similar account is given in Alan Wood's biography of Russell, a book written with Russell's help and approval:

The editor of *Mind*, Professor Stout, thought poorly of the article; and would undoubtedly have rejected it if it had come from some unknown young philosopher. Russell's international standing was now such that anything he wrote had to be accepted automatically. But according to G. E. Moore, when the article was finally published 'Nobody could make head or tail of it.' Moore told me that he himself never understood the Theory of Descriptions until Russell gave a clearer statement of it in the Introduction to *Principia Mathematica*. (*Bertrand Russell, the Passionate Sceptic*, Chap. 6)

In the case of Moore, there is some reason to think that he exaggerated his lack of understanding of the paper when it first appeared. On 23 October 1905, Moore wrote to Russell:

I was very interested in your article in 'Mind', and ended by accepting your main conclusions (if I understand them) though at first I was strongly opposed to one of them. What I should chiefly like explained is this. You say '*all* the constituents of propositions we apprehend are entities with which we have immediate acquaintance'. Have we, then, immediate acquaintance with the variable? and what sort of entity is it? (RA1 710.052987)

This very perceptive and penetrating comment of Moore shows that he certainly understood more of the theory at the time than his later remarks suggest.

As for Stout, there seems to be no contemporary source against which to check Russell's anecdote. However, a very interesting letter of Stout to Russell survives, although it was written about two years before the publication of the Theory of Descriptions. The letter is undated, but has the date "[1903]" pencilled on the first page in Russell's hand. It confirms Russell's stories about Stout's hostility to his ideas about denoting, although the ideas in this case are those of his earlier theory of meaning and denotation.

Stout quotes from Russell in several places, apparently from a letter. The two full sentences quoted in the seventh paragraph of Stout's letter are echoed in Russell's unpublished manuscripts of 1903. The first sentence ("In some cases we can prove that something is denoted but not what.") occurs, slightly rephrased, as the first sentence of the rough notes "Points about Denoting" (*Papers* 4: 306). The second sentence (giving

the example about the centre of the material universe) occurs in a somewhat different formulation in the manuscript draft "On Meaning and Denotation" (*Papers* 4: 322–3). These parallels confirm the date of 1903 for Stout's letter; the manuscript notes were probably written in the latter part of 1903.

Stout's rambling and diffuse comments form a stark contrast with Moore's incisive remarks. Even after several readings, it is hard to make out what Stout describes as his "position". It is easy to understand that Russell may have felt a good deal of irritation in 1905 in the face of Stout's obtuse and pertinacious criticism.

3. STOUT'S LETTER OF 1903[4]

Dear Russell

It is no *admission* on my part that immediate cognition does and must occur. I have never dreamt of denying this. It is to me self-evident that a proposition as such is necessarily complex and must contain elements which are not themselves propositions and that these must ultimately be known immediately and not through "denoting" characters. But it seems a waste of time to discuss such points before we have come to an understanding about "denotation".

I reject your view that, except in a peculiar case, a denoting characteristic cannot imply the existence of what it denotes. Your doctrine rests on the assumption that the denoting characteristic must always be a mere concept,—a Platonic idea. I agree that a mere concept or a merely conceptual instance can only describe a mere concept or a merely conceptual instance. But the denoting characteristic need not be merely conceptual. It is a verbal *petitio principii* to speak of it habitually as the denoting *concept*. When I speak of "Yonder blue sea," the adjective, "blue," does not name the abstract concept or Platonic idea "blueness"; it names a particular existent instance of blueness, and this existing particular is a constituent of the denoting characteristic. Similarly, "yonder" does not name the abstract concept "yonderness" but a particular existent relatedness to my own particular existent body at the present moment. In general, I hold that whatever being or existence belongs to

4 RA1 710.056648.

the whole of the denoting characteristic must belong to what it denotes. It is true that when I think of a thread such as would exactly fit the eye of a particular needle, there may be no such thread actually existing. But the relatedness expressed by "exactly fitting" is not known as actual: it is only known as, in a certain definable sense, possible.

You admit that in one case, which you suppose to be quite exceptional, conceptual being is implied by what is for present purposes equivalent to a denoting characteristic. The concept "half of 12" may be initially unknown except as what is comprised of halfness and other concepts. I should like to know how you draw the line of demarcation between such conceptual synthesis and some other forms of synthesis which are not merely conceptual. For example, there are laid out before me on the table the scattered pieces of a puzzle which are to be put together so that they shall fit into each other and form a continuous whole. This particular whole is initially determined for thought more as that which will be constituted by the particular union or a certain manner of the particular parts of the puzzle, just as the complex concept (or meaning) is initially determined merely as that which will result from the union of the particular concepts. I admit that the parts of the puzzle may be incapable of the required combination. But this holds good also of some purely conceptual constructions. In such cases the initial question, when fully stated, logically includes two parts:—(1) Are the given elements capable of a certain kind of combination; (2) If so, what whole is constituted by their union. The merely psychological fact that the second part of the question may preoccupy a person's attention to the exclusion of the first is logically irrelevant.

Explicitly recognizing the logically prior question, the denoting characteristic becomes, "these bits of wood (or these concepts) capable or incapable of a certain combination". When the question has its meaning determined by context and circumstances so as to be relevant, the incapacity contemplated is of a specific kind, presupposing the possibility of other combinations or relations which can be definitely compared or contrasted with the required combination. And whatever being or existence belongs to the denoting characteristic must also belong to what is denoted. The bits of wood or the concepts must have a determinate constitution, which need not be otherwise known, such that they are capable or in a specific manner incapable of the required synthesis.

There is yet another important analogy between the puzzle map and

conceptual construction. Each separate piece of the puzzle has a certain shape which is congruent only with a corresponding shape. Each piece in relation to the others constitutes a question capable of a positive or specifically relevant negative answer. The like is true of conceptual synthesis. The particular concepts essentially include relatedness. They come in questionable shape. When we think of halfness the total object of our thought is "halfness (of what?)" or "halfness (of anything capable of being halved)". In conceptual construction we start from relatedness in the data and proceed to seek for something capable of satisfying the relation.

I have yet to consider your special arguments against my position. You say:—"the denoting concept *per se* never assures us that itself denotes anything; this fact always involves the proposition that so and so is denoted by the concept." Suppose that I admit this. When the admission is made, the old problem recurs in such a form that your proferred solution is plainly irrelevant. Given the concept "the King of England", and given the actual existence of a man who is "the King of England," there may still be a question concerning this man's actual state as regards the possession or non-possession of hair on his actual head. Even if I am shaking hands with him, his actual head may be covered by an actual hat, so that I cannot see how he is off for hair. The actual existence of a determinate state of the King as regards possession of hair is implied in my datum—the actual existence of an instance of the concept, "the King of England". It is apprehended by me as that which is related in a certain way to this datum and it need not be otherwise and independently apprehended. I would add that it cannot be apprehended *merely* otherwise and independently. To apprehend a bald head, though in fact it belongs to the King of England, is not to apprehend the bald head as that of the King in question. For this it is necessary that the King shall be known to be in question. His baldness must be apprehended as related to himself as otherwise characterised or "denoted". To know the objective answer we must know the objective question. The psychological process which we call "asking the question" is of course by no means essential.

You say:—"in some cases we can prove that something is denoted but not what." Now this "something" is not "anything". It is determined as characterised by the denoting characteristic. When this is pointed out, you seem to be explicitly admitting what I contend for. You virtually assert that something can be known merely as related to certain data which imply its existence, without its being at all known independently of this relatedness. You go on to deny that as so known, it can be a constituent in any proposition concerning it. But you cannot make the denial without contradicting yourself. "The actual point which is the centre of the material universe at the beginning of the 20th century is not a constituent of any of the propositions which we can discover concerning it." Is it not a constituent of this very proposition itself? Surely this proposition is true or false of it, and not of anything which might be substituted for it. Again is it not a constituent of the proposition that "there are certain propositions concerning it which are not discoverable by any man." On your own view, how the devil can you know that there are such propositions since *ex hypothesi* you have no direct acquaintance with them. Again is not the actual centre etc. a constituent of the proposition "the actual centre etc. is a certain particular point of space."

You will perhaps persist in saying that these and other propositions do not really concern the actual centre. They ought, you will urge, to be rather formulated as follows:—"If x is the actual centre, then x is so and so." I regard this as an impossible subterfuge. For (1) the truth or falsity of the proposition "If x is a, it is b" presupposes the independent truth or falsity of the proposition "a is b". You can't know that anything is true or false of x merely on the supposition that it is the actual centre, unless you know independently that something is true or false of the actual centre. (2) In supposing x to be the actual centre, you must really be thinking of the actual centre and not of anything else instead of it. Otherwise you would be making a different and logically irrelevant supposition.

With apologies for the length of this document and in the ardent hope that one of us may put the other right or at least show that he is wrong,

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Yours ever,

G. F. Stout
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