

## THE DENOTING READER

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Gary Ostertag, ed. *Definite Descriptions: a Reader*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT P, 1998. Pp. xii, 411. US\$32.95 (cloth); US\$30.00 (pb).

Russell's theory of definite descriptions has been widely and continuously debated in the half century since Strawson published "On Referring".<sup>1</sup> Given the number of important papers written on the topic in that time—not to mention the even larger number of unimportant ones—it is more than a little surprising that there has been, until Ostertag's book, no substantial collection of readings on the topic. Ostertag's *Definite Descriptions* fills this gap admirably—though, as he admits at the outset, many important papers and some important topics have been left out. Among the latter he mentions descriptive pronouns (p. xi); I shall mention some others below.

The papers can be divided into two main groups: four selections in which Russell's original theory is expounded and a group of eight papers taking sides on various current controversies over the adequacy of Russell's theory. In between are three more miscellaneous papers: Strawson's "On Referring", which couldn't well be omitted and, in any case, set several of the current controversies going; an extract from Carnap's *Meaning and Necessity* giving a version of Frege's conventional denotation proposal; and Karel Lambert's "A

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<sup>1</sup> *Mind* (1950); reprinted here as Chap. 6.

Theory of Definite Descriptions”, which represents free logic.<sup>2</sup> Lambert’s paper is a decent introduction to free logic, but it was written too early to capture the important link between Strawson’s paper and free logic which emerged with the development of supervaluational semantics for free logic. Sadly, there is nothing on Meinongian theories of descriptions, which have had a substantial revival since the 1970s. Nor is there anything on more purely linguistic work on definite descriptions.

Rereading Strawson’s paper after all these years, one is struck first by how beautifully written it is. One is also struck by the fact that although it pointed to all sorts of fruitful developments, it does hardly anything to bring them about. An amusing case in point is the “very special and odd sense of ‘imply’” (p. 145) in which, Strawson wants to say, “The king of France is wise” implies that there is a king of France. Strawson repeatedly invokes this sense and toward the end of his paper even refers to the sense as “by now familiar” (p. 157). But repeatedly calling something “strange” does not make it familiar, and Strawson says not one thing about it—except that it does not mean either “entail” or “assert”. It is, of course, the useful notion of presupposition, given formal articulation by van Fraassen,<sup>3</sup> against every warning by Strawson who maintained that “ordinary language has no exact logic” (p. 159). Here, and elsewhere, Strawson’s paper proved seminal in spite of his best efforts.

The four expository selections include three by Russell: “On Denoting” (of course), the much more accessible chapter on descriptions from *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*,<sup>4</sup> and the relevant sections of *Principia Mathematica* (pp. 30–2 and 66–71 from the Introduction, and the Summary of \*14). These are well-nigh essential, but the dotty notation of *Principia* does pose problems for using the text in the classroom. Perhaps because I had assumed that the students would get the hang of it relatively quickly, I found myself continually obliged to stop and translate into a notation that used more brackets and fewer dots. Fortunately, Ostertag himself gives a lucid summary in more modern notation in his Introduction.<sup>5</sup> The fourth paper in

<sup>2</sup> From his *Philosophical Applications of Free Logic* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1962; New York: Oxford U. P., 1991)—wrongly cited in the bibliography as “Philosophical Foundations of Free Logic”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Presuppositions, Supervaluations, and Free Logic”, in K. Lambert, ed., *The Logical Way of Doing Things* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale U. P., 1969); and *Formal Semantics and Logic* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 153–63.

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted complete with typos: “a propositional function  $x$ ” (towards the foot of p. 74) should read “a propositional function  $\phi x$ ”. The manuscript (RA REC. ACQ. 412p) reads correctly, but the “ $\phi$ ” evidently dropped out in Allen and Unwin’s printshop and was never missed.

<sup>5</sup> Ostertag suggests there that there was some substantial development of the theory from *OD*

the collection is Stephen Neale’s “Grammatical Form, Logical Form, and Incomplete Symbols”, which paves the way for some of the contemporary material, introducing the restricted quantifier account of descriptions, for example.

The current material begins with Keith Donnellan’s distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions in “Reference and Definite Descriptions”, one of many papers which, in some sense, elaborate on points Strawson raised. Suppose, to use Donnellan’s example, I say at a party,

(1) “The man drinking a martini is drunk.”

On Russell’s theory, (1) is true just in case one and only one man is drinking a martini and that man is drunk. This is what Donnellan calls an attributive use of the definite description. However, this account of (1) may well fail to capture what I wish to communicate. For I may well have in mind an object-dependent thought about a particular man and merely use the definite description to pick him out. This would be a referential use of the description.<sup>6</sup> The two uses may come apart, for the man to whom I intend to refer may not be the only one who is drinking a martini or might not be drinking a martini at all, but water out of a martini glass. Nonetheless I successfully refer to him by uttering (1) in that the person to whom I’m speaking immediately picks out the right man. It seems plausible to maintain that the truth-value of the statement I make by uttering (1) depends solely upon whether that man is drunk or not. It certainly does not seem to depend upon whether there is another man at the party, unseen to my companion and myself, who is unique in drinking a martini. Yet this last is just what a Russellian analysis would have us believe.

Donnellan’s claim is that while Russell’s theory may handle attributive uses well, it fails for referential ones. The reply from the Russellian side (provided

to *PM* (p. 5). It is worth noting, however, that a letter from Russell to Jourdain on 13 January 1906 makes it clear that Russell already had all the main formal details of the theory by that date (cf. I. Grattan-Guinness, *Dear Russell—Dear Jourdain* [London: Duckworth, 1977], p. 70). Admittedly, scope is not mentioned in the letter, but it already appears in *OD*. I think Ostertag makes too much of the switch from the metalanguage account in *OD* (“the propositional function  $\phi x$  is true for some/all/no values of  $x$ ”) to the object-language quantifiers of *PM*. Russell was operating without a sharp object/meta distinction, and the formulation used in *OD* was likely chosen because his audience in *Mind* would not be familiar with Peano’s symbolic logic.

<sup>6</sup> In an interesting footnote in the Introduction, Ostertag points out that this distinction was known to the Port-Royal grammarians in the seventeenth century. Cf. Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *The Art of Thinking*, ed. and trans. Jill Vance Buroker (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996), p. 46.

in Ostertag's collection by pieces by Grice and Kripke) is to distinguish between what I intended to say and what I actually said. What I intended to express was an object-dependent proposition about a particular man—the one my companion and I have in view. Whether this proposition is true or false depends solely upon whether that man is drunk. But what I actually say is that one and only one man is drinking a martini and that man (whoever he is) is drunk. Thus Russell's analysis holds for the proposition actually expressed, but fails for the proposition intended. Russell was not unaware of this distinction. In a nice, though dated, example he considers a charlady accused of theft who protests: "I ain't never done no harm to no one." What she intends is clear enough, but what she actually says could be expressed by "There was at least one moment when I was injuring the whole human race."<sup>7</sup> On the whole, however, he thought that the distinction was of little relevance to philosophy.

But now consider another problem, this one raised explicitly by Strawson (p. 144). Suppose I say,

(2) "The table is covered with books."

On a Russellian analysis (naively applied), this would be true just in case there is one and only table and it is covered with books. But there are any number of tables in the world, and so (2) should be false by failure of the Russellian uniqueness condition. The obvious Russellian response is to claim that the description in (2) is elliptical, that what is understood when (2) is uttered is some sentence of the form "The table  $\phi$  is covered with books", where the addition of " $\phi$ " yields a description which is unique. Howard Wettstein and Stephen Schiffer argue against this, in Chapters 12 and 15 respectively, on the ground that it may well be impossible for either speaker or hearer to identify a unique completion and, even if they can, it would be unlikely that they both picked the same one.

The Russellian, this time represented by Schiffer, can reply instead that what is asserted by (2) is indeterminate. Although a range of completions is possible, this does not matter because (2) does not express a single proposition but is ambiguous among several. This is a response Russell anticipated.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he faced the problem in an even more extreme form, for, as is notorious, he held at one time that sense-data were the only particulars with which we could be acquainted. In conjunction with his principle of acquaintance—

<sup>7</sup> "Mr. Strawson on Referring", *Papers* 11: 633.

<sup>8</sup> "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918), in *Papers* 8: 174.

that every proposition we can understand consists wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted—and the fact that no two people have the same sense-data, it follows that, even in a world in which there was exactly one table, (2) would remain ambiguous between different sense-data constructions of the table.

These responses, however, are in tension with the Russellian responses to Donnellan's objection. There the Russellian argued that what was intended differed from what was actually said, and that the Russellian treatment of descriptions should be applied only to the proposition that was actually expressed. In the present case, however, a comparable distinction is presupposed. On the one hand, there is the question of which proposition I intended to assert by uttering (2), or whether my utterance was ambiguous between a range of propositions; and, on the other, the proposition which was actually expressed by what I said. In this case, however, the Russellian analysis is taken to apply only to the proposition (or propositions) intended, and not to the one actually expressed. It is difficult to allow the Russellian to have it both ways.

These issues are discussed clearly in Ostertag's long and lucid Introduction to the volume.<sup>9</sup> He begins the Introduction with an account of the origins of Russell's theory of descriptions in the position Russell held in *The Principles of Mathematics*. In the account he gives of Russell's first theory of denoting I think he is mistaken. He adopts the standard view that, in the *Principles*, Russell embraced a view very similar to Meinong's, namely, that every significant referring expression denotes an object, whether existent or not. Moreover, it is claimed, Russell holds that all such objects (which Russell called "terms") have being, whether or not they exist (a view which was not Meinong's). This yields what Quine has famously stigmatized as "an intolerably indiscriminate ontology".<sup>10</sup> Ostertag does not buy the whole of the standard account, which goes on to claim that Russell had to wait until he discovered the theory of descriptions before he could dispense with the ontology. There is, as Ostertag notes, irrefutable textual evidence from "The Existential Import of Propositions" (written some months before the theory of descriptions was discovered) that Russell had already abandoned the ontology (if he ever held it).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, there is clear evidence from a letter to Meinong

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting, however, that on p. 24 (line 6) where Ostertag refers to numbered sentences (2) and (3), he intends to refer to (5) and (6): an error less easy to diagnose than my mistake about the martini.

<sup>10</sup> W. V. Quine, "Russell's Ontological Development", in R. Schoenman, ed., *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher of the Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 305.

<sup>11</sup> "The Existential Import of Propositions", *Papers* 4: 487.

that Russell already rejected the ontology by the end of 1904.<sup>12</sup>

This leaves the problem of explaining what caused such a major change in Russell's metaphysics, if not the theory of descriptions. Ostertag speculates that it was his discovery of Frege's sense–reference distinction (p. 5), but this is hard to sustain. Russell was aware of this distinction before the *Principles* was published. Moreover, he notes there, in the appendix on Frege, that Frege's distinction "is roughly, though not exactly, equivalent to my distinction between a concept as such and what the concept denotes" (*PoM*, p. 502), and he goes on associate Frege's account of sense with his own treatment of identity at *Principles*, §64. Evidently, Russell did not find Frege's theory at serious odds with his own. It seems to me that Russell never abandoned the indiscriminate ontology because he never held it in the first place. The *Principles* theory was, in fact, much more like Frege's theory than Meinong's. There are too many contrary passages in the *Principles* to sustain a Meinongian reading of that work.<sup>13</sup>

Ostertag includes a large but selective, categorized bibliography. His book, altogether, is a very welcome contribution to the literature on definite descriptions. It is the best work available for bringing someone up to date with the current debate about the adequacy of Russell's theory.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Russell to Meinong, 15 December 1904, in Douglas Lackey, "Three Letters to Meinong", *Russell*, no. 9 (spring 1973): 15–18 (cited by Ostertag, p. 29).

<sup>13</sup> I have argued for this at length in "Denoting Concepts in *The Principles of Mathematics*", in R. Monk and A. Palmer, eds., *Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1996), pp. 23–64.

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