DEALING WITH MEANINGS:
A NEGLECTED STEP IN THE
GRAY'S ELEGY ARGUMENT

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It is universally agreed that in the "Gray's Elegy Argument" (GEA) Russell raises a difficulty for the attempt to "speak about" meanings (the phrase is Russell's) and that the difficulty, assuming it to be genuine, shows the very notion of meaning to be unintelligible. In this paper I try to show that in the GEA Russell considers and rejects an alternative way of manifesting an understanding of meanings—namely, by "dealing with" them (also Russell's phrase). This step in the GEA has not, so far as I am aware, been noticed before.

*I*n the vast and meticulous literature generated by Russell's "Gray's Elegy Argument" (GEA), one textual detail has remained unexplored—the italicized phrase in the following statement: "when we distinguish meaning and denotation, we must be *dealing with* the meaning."[1]

The reason for this lack of attention is not hard to see. It is universally agreed that in the GEA Russell raises a difficulty for the attempt to "speak about" meanings ("speak about" is Russell's phrase) and that the difficulty, assuming it to be genuine, shows the very notion of meaning to be at best "mysterious" or "obscure" and at worst "incoherent."[2] At first glance, "dealing with" appears to be nothing more

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[1] RUSSELL, "On Denoting", in *Papers* 4: 422. A minor exception is PAKALUK, "The Interpretation of Russell's 'Gray's Elegy Argument" (1993), p. 53, who devotes a sentence to it.

[2] The first charge is levelled by BLACKBURN AND CODE, "The Power of Russell's Criticism of Frege" (1978), pp. 27, 31; the second by MAKIN, *The Metaphysicians of Meaning* (2000), p. 23.

than a synonym for "speaking about". Thus, Russell is merely restating the basic premiss of the GEA: if the distinction between meaning and denotation is valid, then it must be possible to speak about the former. His use of "dealing with" to express that premiss introduces a trivial terminological complication and nothing more.

I argue that this judgment, though understandable, neglects an important step in the GEA. My argument has three parts. The first places Russell's use of the phrase "dealing with" in the context of the preceding stretch of the GEA. Doing so makes clear that dealing with meanings cannot be folded into the project of speaking about them. The second unpacks the distinction between speaking about and dealing with. The third explains why Russell thinks it is no more possible to deal with meanings than it is to speak about them.

§1

I begin by reproducing the paragraph in which the expression "dealing with" occurs. (Following the convention introduced by Blackburn and Code 1978 I shall label the eight paragraphs of the GEA with the letters "(A)" through "(H)". I shall also divide the paragraph under consideration into two parts.)

> **(E1) The difficulty in speaking of the meaning of a denoting complex may be stated thus: The moment we put the complex in a proposition, the proposition is about the denotation; and if we make a proposition in which the subject is "the meaning of *C*", then the subject is the meaning (if any) of the denotation, which was not intended.**

> **(E2) This leads us to say that, when we distinguish meaning and denotation, we must be *dealing with* the meaning: the meaning has denotation and is a complex, and there is not something other than the meaning, which can be called the complex, and be said to have both meaning and denotation. The right phrase, on the view in question, is that some meanings have denotations.**
>
>   (*Papers* 4: 422; my italics, Russell's omitted)

As I noted above, there is general agreement that Russell's goal in the GEA is to raise a difficulty for the attempt to speak about meanings. Certainly this is the goal of paragraphs (A)–(D). The following summary of them will, I think, be relatively uncontroversial. In (A) Russell

states that the target of the GEA is any view that distinguishes between a definite description's "meaning" and its "denotation."[3] (B) announces that the GEA will proceed by attempting to "speak about" meanings and introduces some representational devices for doing so. (C) asserts that the only way to speak about meanings is by using definite descriptions. (D) then considers an attempt to fulfil the programme sketched in (C) and shows that it fails. Thus, (A)–(D) state, if not the entirety of the GEA, at least a discrete component of it.[4]

This reading is confirmed by the phrasing of the first sentence of (E1) which suggests that Russell is *summing up* a line of argument, not developing it or embarking on a new one. Further confirmation comes from the second sentence which is, indeed, a fair summary of what has gone before. To bring out the meaning of (E1) as a whole it will help to rewrite it, replacing the expressions "denoting complex" and "proposition" with terms that clearly indicate linguistic items.[5]

> (E1*) The difficulty in speaking of the meaning of a definite description may be stated thus: The moment we put the definite description in a sentence the sentence is about the denotation; and if we put it in a sen-

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[3] Whom Russell has in mind here and whether his target matches the description have been a source of debate since GEACH, "Russell on Meaning and Denoting" (1959). Regarding the first issue there can be little doubt (despite the efforts of commentators such as CASSIN, "Russell's Discussion of Meaning and Denoting", pp. 267, 270–1, and PAKALUK, pp. 39–40). Russell attributes the view expressed in (A) to Frege, as the following passage makes clear: "Frege's theory… distinguishes, in a denoting phrase, two elements, which we may call the *meaning* and the *denotation*" (*OD*, p. 418; Russell's italics). The second issue is more fraught, and my approach to it here is indirect. In §3 of this paper I show that Frege's "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" presents us with an example of the attempt to deal with meanings, thus supporting the view that the GEA does, indeed, hit its mark. I argue the case directly in ROSEN-KRANTZ, "A Reconstruction of Russell's Gray's Elegy Argument" (2017). For a recent canvassing of the positions on both issues and an attempt to provide yet another alternative, see SALMON, "On Designating" (2005), pp. 1,075–82.

[4] My judgment here accords with MAKIN, p. 23.

[5] A number of writers (for example, JAGER, "Russell's Denoting Complex" [1960], pp. 55, 58–9; PAKALUK, pp. 52–3; MAKIN, p. 42, and LEVINE, "On the 'Gray's Elegy' Argument and Its Bearing on Frege's Theory of Sense" [2004], p. 275) hold that the denoting complexes Russell refers to in (E) are not words but entities. There is little of substance at stake in the issue, as is shown by the fact that (E1*) surely captures the gist of Russell's argument. For a similar interpretation as well as sensible advice on how to handle the kindred issues that crop up throughout the GEA, see HOCH-BERG, "Russell's Attack on Frege's Theory of Meaning" (1976), pp. 72–4.

tence in which the subject [term] is "the meaning of C", then the subject [what is spoken about] is the meaning (if any) of the denotation, which was not intended.

It will also help to supply replacement instances for Russell's infamous C-variable so that we have genuine subject terms. As Russell points out, the resulting terms give us "the meaning (if any) of the denotation". The parenthetical refers to the case where the denotation of the term replacing the C-variable has a meaning; that is, where the denotation is a linguistic item. The specific case he has in mind is the one taken up in (D) and from which the GEA gets its name. What Russell has to say about this case may be stated as follows:

> Our aim is to speak about the meaning expressed by the definite description "the first line of Gray's Elegy". But the moment we put that definite description in a sentence the sentence is about the definite description's denotation; and if we put the definite description in a sentence in which the subject term is "the meaning of the first line of Gray's Elegy" then the sentence is about the meaning expressed by the sentence "the curfew tolls the knell of parting day", which was not intended.

In the more typical cases, however, the denotation of the replacement for the C-variable will not have a meaning. The following illustrates the situation that results:

> Our aim is to speak about the meaning expressed by the definite description "the centre of mass of the Solar System". But the moment we put that definite description in a sentence the sentence is about the definite description's denotation; and if we put the definite description in a sentence in which the subject term is "the meaning of the centre of mass of the Solar System", then the sentence is not about anything since regions in space are not the sort of thing that have meanings.

At this point it is necessary to bring into view an element of the GEA that I passed over in my summary above. In (C) Russell states that "the relation of meaning and denotation is not merely linguistic through the phrase." Here too there is general agreement amongst the commentators that Russell is issuing an injunction against speaking

about meanings by mentioning the definite descriptions said to express them.[6]

The reasons for his injunction need not concern us here.[7] The important point is that, keeping it in mind, we see that Russell pursues a strategy in (A)–(D) which is, on its own terms, complete. Briefly, we start with a definite description and attempt to speak about its meaning. We are prevented from mentioning it, and using it fails.[8] It is that failure which is summed up in (E1).

This brings us to (E2). Note that it begins as follows: "This leads us to say that, when we distinguish meaning and denotation…." It is not, of course, Russell but his opponent who distinguishes between meaning and denotation. Thus, Russell's purpose in (E2) cannot be to introduce a new step in *his* argument. To the contrary, his decision to pause and restate his opponent's position immediately after having summarized his own critique of it suggests that (E2) expresses the opponent's response to what has gone before.[9] To bring out this response I reproduce the relevant portion of (E2), this time with roman numerals for ease of reference in what follows.

> **(i) we must be *dealing with* the meaning: (ii) the meaning has denotation and is a complex, (iii) and there is not something other than the meaning, which can be called the complex, and be said to have both meaning and denotation. (iv) The right phrase, on the view in question, is that some meanings have denotations.** (My italics)

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[6] HOCHBERG, pp. 63–4; BLACKBURN AND CODE, pp. 71–2; PAKALUK, pp. 44–5; KREMER, "The Argument of 'On Denoting'" (1994), pp. 280–3, NOONAN, "The Gray's Elegy Argument—and Others" (1996), pp. 93, 95, and DEMOPOLOUS, "The Theory of Meaning of 'On Denoting'" (1999), p. 449. Russell does not contradict himself in using the forbidden expressions to mount his argument. For it is his opponent who holds that definite descriptions "express a meaning and denote a denotation" (*OD*, p. 419). Russell allows the opponent to introduce meanings in this way, but insists that if they exist it must be possible to speak about them without this crutch.

[7] I have explained and defended them in ROSENKRANTZ, "A Reconstruction of Russell's Gray's Elegy Argument", pp. 26–8.

[8] As I shall bring out shortly matters are, in fact, more complicated. Those complications do not affect the fundamental interpretive point, namely that (A)–(D) represent a discrete piece of argumentation.

[9] It is worth comparing my interpretation of (E) with those of MAKIN, pp. 23, 42–3, and LEVINE, "On the 'Gray's Elegy' Argument", p. 267. The former deems it to be merely transitional between the two arguments he finds in the GEA. The latter thinks it part of a single argument running from (D) to (F). Both fit poorly with (E)'s most salient feature—that in it Russell's opponent reasserts the correctness of his view.

The most obvious obscurity in the passage lies in Russell's use of the word "complex". In (ii) it is used to characterize meanings. In (iii), however, it is used to pick out an entity "other than the meaning [we intended to speak about]." Each use raises a question. First, what is the significance of the assertion that meanings are complex? Second, what might this other entity be?

The first question has a simple answer. The word "complex" has no significance at all. Russell's use of it is merely an artifact of his (bad) habit of using terms for linguistic categories to designate ontological ones. Thus, in "On Denoting" Russell sometimes uses "denoting complex" as a synonym for "meaning" as, for example, in paragraph (B) of the GEA:

> When we wish to speak about the meaning of a denoting phrase as opposed to its denotation, the natural mode of doing so is by inverted commas. Thus we say:
>
> The centre of mass of the solar system is a point, not a denoting complex;
>
> "The centre of mass of the solar system" is a denoting complex, not a point.

But he sometimes uses "denoting complex" as a synonym for "definite description" as, for example, in the following:

> Frege distinguishes the two elements of meaning and denotation everywhere, and not only in complex denoting phrases. Thus it is the *meanings* of the constituents of a denoting complex that enter into its *meaning*, not their *denotation*.   (*OD*, *Papers* 4: 419 n. 9; Russell's italics)

Since Russell explains neither what he means in asserting meanings to be complex nor how their complexity figures in the GEA, we are forced to conclude that his assertion comes to nothing more than that meanings are expressed by complex expressions; i.e., by definite descriptions.[10]

The second question can be answered straightforwardly, though not quite so simply.[11] In paragraph (D) Russell is led to consider the

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[10] The supposed complexity of meanings, though often noted, has not in general figured substantively in the literature. An exception is KREMER.

[11] The answer introduces the complication mentioned in n. 8.

possibility of speaking about meanings by using definite descriptions of the following form:

the denotation of *C*.

Russell develops this possibility in a peculiar way. For in (D) he considers (and rejects) a definite description created by replacing the *C*-variable with a sign that denotes the meaning we are trying to speak about. That description, as Russell notes, "does not mean the denotation we want, but means something which, if it denotes at all, denotes what is denoted by the denotation we want." Russell's procedure is peculiar for two reasons. First, if the replacement for the *C*-variable denotes the meaning we want, then the full definite description is unnecessary. Second, Russell uses the following example to show that the description "denotes what is denoted by the denotation that we want":

the denotation of "the first line of Gray's Elegy".

In the passage from paragraph (B) just quoted, Russell stipulates that he uses double quotation marks to fashion signs that denote (or at least are intended to denote) meanings. Thus, in lieu of the double-quotes Russell might also have written

the denotation of the meaning....

And clearly the only way to complete the description is as follows:

the denotation of the meaning expressed by the definite description "the first line of Gray's Elegy"

In other words, Russell proposes as a replacement for the *C*-variable precisely the sort of expression he has forbidden.

The second peculiarity has the merit of removing the first. For as it turns out, the sign which "means something ... [that] denotes what is denoted by the denotation we want" is not a valid replacement instance for the *C*-variable. This entails that descriptions of the form "the denotation of *C*" will succeed only if the *C*-variable is replaced by a sign that denotes an entity which in turn denotes "the meaning

we want." These entities can be called "second-level" meanings.[12] Second-level meanings are the only plausible candidates for the "other" entities Russell's opponent refers to in (E2).[13]

There is one remaining obscurity in (iii) that must be clarified. Russell writes, "there is not something … which can be called the complex and be said to *have* both meaning and denotation" (my italics). If the complex in question is a second-level meaning, then it makes no sense to speak of it as *having* a meaning; rather it *is* a meaning that *has* a denotation—a denotation which is itself a meaning.[14] The reasonable conclusion is that Russell has slipped from talking of entities to talking of expressions; and the appropriate response is to amend the passage accordingly:

> There is not something other than the meaning [we are attempting to speak about]. That is to say, there is no definite description that has both [second-level] meaning and denotation [the meaning we are attempting to speak about].

Read this way, in (E2) Russell is guilty only of regrettably, but understandably, running together the denial that there is a need for a second-level meaning with a denial that there is a need for a definite description to express it.

The picture of (E2) that emerges is the following. Russell's opponent accepts that using a definite description will not allow us to speak about its meaning and rejects the olive branch of second-level meanings extended to him in paragraph (D). Nevertheless, the opponent is

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[12] The term "second-level" originates, I believe, with MAKIN, p. 27, but the concept goes back to SEARLE, "Russell's Objections to Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference" (1958), p. 140, and has figured prominently in the literature since then.

[13] There are some who hold the view (first put forward by JAGER 1960 and most ably defended by PAKALUK, pp. 46–9, 53) that Russell does not have in mind an additional layer of meanings but entities of someother kind. So far as matters here are concerned this issue is of not significant. On either characterization the two points that are fundamental for understanding (iii) remain: The purpose of the entities is to allow us to speak about meanings; and Russell's opponent refuses to consider them. In light of this I shall continue to speak of second-level meanings in what follows.

[14] It does not help matters to use a different phrase such as "denoting concept" or "denoting complex" for the entities in question. One still faces the challenge of explaining what it means for those entities to have both meaning and denotation—a challenge that writers who embrace this proposal (PAKALUK, pp. 46–57, and LEVINE, "On the 'Gray's Elegy' Argument …", p. 274) fail to meet.

unpersuaded that the distinction between meaning and denotation is untenable, for (E2) concludes with a restatement of his position: "The right phrase, on the view in question, is that some meanings have denotations."[15] All of this is mere stubbornness unless (E2) also contains a response to the argument presented in (A)–(D).[16] Since (ii)–(iv) concede the force of that argument while denying that it overturns the distinction between meaning and denotation, the response must be confined to the opponent's assertion in (i) that "when we distinguish meaning and denotation, we must be *dealing with* the meaning." And, as I trust is obvious, there is no hope of distilling a response from (E2) if "dealing with" is taken to be synonymous with "speaking about".

§2

A clue as to what "dealing with" means is provided by Russell's use of it in *The Principles of Mathematics* (I have italicized the occurrences of "deal with"; all other italics are Russell's):[17]

> … if we take [a purely extensional view of classes], our class is defined by enumeration of its terms, and this method will not allow us to *deal*, as Symbolic Logic does, *with* infinite classes. Thus our classes must in

[15] The use of "some" accommodates definite descriptions such as "the king of France".

[16] That Russell intends to depict a reasonable rather than a stubborn opponent is shown by comparing (E2) with its correlate in "On Fundamentals" (RUSSELL, *Papers* 4: 382, lines 25–30). The correlate occurs immediately after an argument (lines 20–5) with the same content as (E1) and is reproduced almost word for word in (E2). The differences are therefore most illuminating. The passage in "On Fundamentals" begins rather blandly with, "When we distinguish meaning and denotation, in fact, we must be dealing with the meaning". (E2), by contrast, has the more forceful, "*This leads us to say that*, when we distinguish meaning and denotation we must be dealing with the meaning" (my italics). The point of the added phrase is to make clear that what follows is a response to the critique that precedes. Russell further emphasizes the dialectical character of (E2) by concluding, "The right phrase, *on the view in question*, is that some meanings have denotations" (my italics). "On Fundamentals" has only, "The right phrase is that some meanings have denotations." These differences reflect the tentative, exploratory character of the first half of "On Fundamentals", where the predecessor to (E2) is found (and where, we should recall, Russell has not yet discovered the theory of descriptions) and the polemical character of the GEA. (I am grateful to the editor of this journal for helpful suggestions regarding the differences between (E2) and its predecessor.)

[17] §66, §106 and §141 were called to my attention by LEVINE, "Acquaintance, Denoting Concepts and Sense" (1998), p. 422. The repetition of the phrase "deal with" in those passages was the stimulus for the ideas expressed in this paper.

general be regarded as objects denoted by concepts.…   (*PoM*, §66)

With regard to infinite classes, say the class of numbers, it is to be observed that the concept *all numbers*, though not itself infinitely complex, yet denotes an infinitely complex object. This is the inmost secret of our power to *deal with* infinity. An infinitely complex concept, though there may be such, can certainly not be manipulated by the human intelligence; but infinite collections, owing to the notion of denoting, can be manipulated without introducing any concepts of infinite complexity.
(*PoM*, §72)

[In Chapter V] it was shown that certain concepts, derived from predicates, occur in propositions not *about* themselves, but about combinations of terms, such as are indicated by *all*, *every*, *any*, *a*, *some*, and *the*. Concepts of this kind, we found, are fundamental in Mathematics, and enable us to *deal with* infinite classes by means of propositions of finite complexity.   (*PoM*, §106)

… the logical purpose which is served by the theory of denoting is, to enable propositions of finite complexity to *deal with* infinite classes of terms.… Now, for my part, I see no possible way of deciding whether propositions of infinite complexity are possible or not; but this at least is clear, that all the propositions known to us (and, it would seem, all propositions that we *can* know) are of finite complexity. It is only by obtaining such propositions about infinite classes that we are enabled to *deal with* infinity; and it is a remarkable and fortunate fact that this method is successful.   (*PoM*, §141)

In all four passages dealing with infinity means being able to understand it or make it intelligible but in a way that is forced upon us by our epistemic limitations. That meaning meshes neatly with the thrust of the GEA. To say that we are unable to speak about meanings is to say, in effect, that they are unintelligible. The opponent's reply concedes that we are unable to speak about meanings—thus acknowledging our epistemic limitations—but denies that they are beyond our understanding; though we are not be able to speak about them, we are able to deal with them.

This is not to say, however, that the phrase "deal with" picks out the same capacity in the *Principles* and the GEA. On my interpretation, Russell uses the term in order to emphasize our epistemic limitations; but the nature of those limitations varies from case to case. Thus, in

the *Principles*, dealing with infinite classes is obviously not an alternative to speaking about them. For example, one who says, "*Any number is a variable conjunction*", both speaks about and deals with an infinite class.[18] Here dealing with infinite classes is a way of speaking about them, but a way that is forced on us by our epistemic limitations—in this instance our inability, as finite intelligences, to enumerate all of the members of an infinite class. Because of those limitations we have only indirect access to infinite classes, access that is mediated by denoting concepts such as *any number*. By contrast, omniscient beings would be able to speak about infinite classes directly, by naming all their members.

One additional aspect of my gloss on Russell's use of "deal with" requires attention. My claim is not that he *always* uses it as a theoretical term but that he *sometimes* does; indeed, given the pedestrian nature of the phrase it could hardly be otherwise.[19] Thus, I can happily acknowledge innocent uses such as the following in "On Denoting" and the *Principles*:

> A logical theory may be tested by its capacity for *dealing with* puzzles …
> (*OD*, p. 420; my italics)

> But unless we are *dealing with* one absolutely particular line, say the line from a particular point in London to a particular point in Cambridge….
> (*PoM*, §6, my italics)

But plainly Russell's use of "deal with" in the GEA is not of this innocent sort. It is either a synonym for "speak about" or it has a different theoretical meaning. My argument so far has ruled out this first possibility. It has also shown that the specific meaning "deal with" has depends on the context within which it is used. And for the context proper to (E) we must turn to the first half of (F):

(F1) But this only makes our difficulty in speaking of meanings more

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[18] *PoM*, §65. Russell uses italics to indicate that he is talking about a denoting concept. This is, of course, a version of the procedure he rules out in the GEA.

[19] It is for this reason that it is important to examine the version of (E2) found in "On Fundamentals". As I have tried to show (n. 16), the content of the two passages is the same but is more clearly expressed in (E2). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing out to me the importance of this interpretive issue.

evident. For suppose C is our complex; then we are to say that C *is* the meaning of the complex. Nevertheless, whenever C occurs without inverted commas, what is said is not true of the meaning, but only of the denotation, as when we say: The centre of mass of the Solar System is a point.[20]

As I have glossed (E), the opponent concedes that we are unable to speak about meanings and, in response, proposes that we are able to deal with them. Yet at the beginning of (F1) Russell appears to be concerned with the original goal of "speaking of [about]" meanings. This calls into question whether that goal has been abandoned, as my interpretation requires. Scepticism is warranted at this point, but the examination of (F1) to follow should be sufficient to overcome it.

The second sentence of (F1) is obscure: "For suppose C is our complex; then we are to say that C is the meaning of the complex." Taken literally it says, "Suppose C is our complex, then we are to say that C is the meaning of itself." Since the literal construal makes no sense we must provide another. As I noted above, Russell sometimes uses "denoting complex" as a synonym for "denoting phrase". In addition, he sometimes mentions expressions by explicitly stating that he is doing so. A particularly clear case is found in (B) where he writes, "taking any denoting phrase, say, C…." In (F1) "complex" performs the same function as "any denoting phrase" does in (B). Thus Russell's point can be put more clearly as follows:

For suppose C is our definite description, then we are to say that C is the meaning of that definite description.

Making the appropriate substitutions for the C-variable yields the following:

For suppose "the centre of mass of the solar system" is our definite description, then we are to say that the center of mass of the solar system is the meaning of that definite description.

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[20] (F1) is taken from "On Fundamentals" (*Papers* 4: 382, lines 30–4). The later version differs from the earlier in referring to the notational conventions introduced in (B) (the "inverted commas") and adding the last, illustrative sentence. So far as matters here are concerned those differences are unimportant.

And this leads naturally to what Russell says in the last sentence of (F1), which I paraphrase thus:

> But this won't do because when we make the statement "The centre of mass of the Solar System is a point", what is said is not true of the meaning of the definite description "the centre of mass of the Solar System" but rather of its denotation.

On this interpretation the point of (F1) is murky indeed. For in it Russell makes the obviously correct point that when we use a definite description we speak about the expression's denotation, not its meaning. So far as interpreting the GEA is concerned, the problem lies not with the point's obvious correctness but with the fact that Russell has already stated it in (E1). As repetition the point surely does not make "our difficulty in speaking of meanings more evident", and thus (F1) seems to be idle.

We can find a purpose for (F1) if we take Russell to be expressing himself loosely. To understand how this looseness comes about we must return to a point I made earlier. In (D) Russell raises the possibility of speaking about meanings via second-level meanings. That possibility is not, however, taken up until the second half of (F) and not definitively rejected until (G).[21] In other words, the attempt to speak about meanings has not been abandoned but merely interrupted by the opponent's proposal in (E2). In (F1) Russell delivers an argument against that proposal; and it is natural for him to be tempted, in anticipation of the argument's success, to include an assessment of its significance. The failure of the proposal leaves the opponent no choice but to show how it is possible to speak about meanings. This makes the difficulties surrounding that possibility all the more pressing or, as Russell says, "more evident". Thus in (F1) Russell is not returning to the attempt to speak about meanings but looking forward to his reengagement with it in connection with second-level meanings.

A more careful Russell would have confined himself in the first sentence of (F1) to an assertion that his opponent's reply fails. Having done so he would have gone on to explain the reasons. And, as I shall now try to show, if we take the first sentence of (F1) to be making this

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[21] More precisely, Russell returns to second-level meanings in paragraph (F), lines 20ff., and does not dispatch them until paragraph (G), lines 31–2.

simple declaration then the rest of it can be read as providing just those reasons.

The first order of business is to fill in a rather obvious lacuna in (F1). As I read it, Russell denies that we are able to deal with meanings and then explains why. He does not, however, explain what it is to deal with meanings in the first place. My attempt to remedy matters proceeds in two steps. First I supply a candidate for the missing explanation. Having done so, I justify it as an interpretation of (E) and (F1) by showing how it fits the anti-Fregean intentions of the GEA.

In the GEA, speaking about has a grammatical dimension. The entity spoken about is the denotation of the subject term of a sentence.[22] In this respect, Russell is simply using "speak about" with its ordinary meaning. Thus, suppose I say, "Socrates is wise". Anyone hearing my utterance would say that I had spoken about Socrates. No one would say that I had spoken about wisdom. Despite this, the statement shows that I understand what wisdom is. Importantly, this is true even if it is made in a language more impoverished than our own; for example, one consisting solely of proper names and adjectives such as "wise", "courageous", "pale", and so on. Most importantly, this language does not contain words such as "virtue" or "colour". In this impoverished language statements about wisdom are impossible. Yet no one would deny that the speakers of that language understand what wisdom is.

My contention is that when the opponent states that we are able to deal with meanings, he is suggesting that we, as speakers of natural language, are in the same situation with respect to those entities as the speakers of the impoverished language are with respect to wisdom. The speakers of the impoverished language are able to deal with wisdom, but not to speak about it. The speakers of natural language are able to deal with meanings, but not to speak about them. Just as we would say that the speakers of the impoverished language understand what wisdom is, we should also say that we, as speakers of natural language, understand what meanings are.

This interpretation of "dealing with" receives support from an instructive source, for we can see the concept (though obviously not the words) in Frege. In "Über Sinn und Bedeutung", immediately after having made and explicated the eponymous distinction of that paper,

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[22] This aspect of the GEA figures prominently in PAKALUK and LANDINI.

Frege writes:

> If words are used in the ordinary way, what one intends to speak [*sprechen*] of is their *Bedeutung* [denotation]. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk [*reden*] about the words themselves or their *Sinne* [meanings]. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One's own words then first designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual *Bedeutung* [denotation]. We then have signs of signs. In writing, the words are in this case enclosed in quotation marks. Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary *Bedeutung*.
>
> In order to speak [*reden*] of the sense of an expression "*A*" one may simply use the phrase "the sense [*Sinn*] of the expression '*A*' ". In indirect speech one talks [*spricht*] about the sense [*Sinn*], e.g. of another person's remarks. It is quite clear that in this way of speaking [*Redeweise*] words do not have their customary *Bedeutung*, but designate [*bedeuten*] what is usually their sense [*Sinn*].[23]

The texts exhibit an interesting drift. Frege begins by noting that one may wish to speak about signs or their meanings. He then introduces a device for achieving the former and shows how it allows one to achieve the latter. He concludes by turning to an analysis of indirect speech. There he makes two points: in indirect speech one speaks about the meaning of another's words, and the signs used in indirect speech denote meanings.

Frege's discussion overlaps in a significant way with the GEA. Most notably he, too, is of the opinion that it ought to be possible to speak about meanings. He proposes doing so by means of precisely the type of signs Russell finds objectionable. In a full discussion of the GEA and its force against Frege, this issue would require extended discussion. For present purposes, however, it can be set aside.[24] Of more moment is that, having introduced those signs, Frege does not use them. In his analysis of indirect speech he says "in this way of speaking words do not have their customary *Bedeutung*, but designate what is usually their *Sinn*." But "the way of speaking" Frege has in mind must be speech

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[23] FREGE, "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" (1892), pp. 153–4. I have consulted the German version in ANGELELLI, ed., Frege, *Kleine Schriften* (1967). It bears emphasizing here that "meaning" and "denotation" are the terms Russell uses to render Frege's "*Sinn*" and "*Bedeutung*"; see n. 3.

[24] I take them up in the material cited in n. 7.

reports made using the signs of ordinary language, not the signs Frege has introduced to denote meanings. For it would be highly misleading to speak of the meta-linguistic signs he has crafted as having a "*customary* denotation"; and, even if one were to allow that misleading formulation, the denotations in question would be the meanings of the mentioned signs. In sum, Frege asserts that there are two types of signs that can be used to speak about meanings.

That Frege employs two types of signs suggests that he considers two ways in which we speak about meanings. And, as I shall now try to show, the second way—exhibited in the analysis of indirect speech—is identical to what I have described as dealing with them.[25] Thus consider the following sentence:

(1)   Antony said that the most honourable Roman stabbed Caesar.

Frege holds that in (1) "the most honourable Roman" denotes a meaning. He also appears to hold that a plebeian who uses (1) in giving an account of Antony's funeral oration speaks about that meaning. That is, Frege appears to hold that the plebeian's use of "the most honourable Roman" to speak about a meaning is on a par with Antony's use of it to speak about Brutus. This appearance may be quickly dismissed. First, if this were Frege's position then he would have to take (1) to be elliptical for

(2)   Antony asserted the meaning expressed by "the most honourable Roman stabbed Caesar".

But this, of course, is precisely what Frege does not do. If it were, then his claim that in speech reports words denote their customary meanings would either be wrong (they do not, the meta-linguistic signs do) or wildly misleading (they would do so only if they are treated as elliptical for the meta-linguistic signs). Moreover, Frege is surely correct in not holding that the plebeian speaks about a meaning. To the contrary, in uttering (1) the plebeian speaks about Brutus just as surely as Antony does. This is perhaps best seen if we look at matters from the

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[25] A complete discussion would require an analysis of the first way. Such an analysis outside the scope of this paper, but I have presented it in ROSENKRANTZ, "From the *Begriffsschrift* to 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'" (2016).

perspective of the one to whom the plebeian makes his report. That person is told something about Brutus (namely that he was accused by Antony), but nothing about the meaning expressed by "the most honourable Roman".

The point is even clearer in other intensional contexts, which it is appropriate to consider since there is nothing in the text of "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" to suggest that speech reports raise any problems unique to them. For example, consider a statement like the following:

(3)   King George is thinking about the author of *Waverley*.

(3) is not about the meaning expressed by the definite description but about Scott since that, after all, is who King George is thinking about.

Thus, according to Frege, in reporting what another says or believes we do not speak about meanings, but we do use expressions that denote them. In other words, we deal with them. Indeed, the Fregean examples bring out the particular relevance of the distinction to the case of meanings and thus to the GEA. For, in the case of wisdom we are prevented from speaking about it only under the artificial conditions of the impoverished language. But in the case of intensional contexts our failure to speak about meanings does not result from any such restrictions. It is thus appropriate that in the GEA Russell imputes to his opponent a response that simultaneously accepts and attempts to defang the charge that the nature of meanings precludes speaking about them.

<div align="center">§3</div>

Russell's critique of the opponent's response begins in the second sentence of (F1). That sentence is transitional. It asks us to consider a specific meaning. Russell's argument that we are unable to deal with that meaning is confined to the third sentence:

> Nevertheless whenever *C* occurs without inverted commas, what is said is not true of the meaning, but only of the denotation, as when we say: The centre of mass of the solar system is a point.

Or, in other words, when "the centre of mass of the Solar System" is used it denotes a region in space, not a meaning. Despite the point's obviousness it is sufficient to show that the opponent's claim to deal

with meanings is empty. To see this, consider (3) in comparison with the following:

(4)   Socrates is wise.

(4) is expressed in the impoverished language, (3) is expressed in ours. Russell's opponent contends that each is a case where the speaker deals with something that she cannot speak about. But notice that a necessary condition for dealing with something is that there be a sign denoting it. That condition is met in the case of (4). Russell's opponent asserts that it is also met in the case of (3). Implicitly, the last sentence of (F1) denies that.

The denial is a straightforward entailment of Russell's uncontroversial assertion that "when C occurs without inverted commas what is said is true not of the meaning but only of the denotation." That is, when a definite description is used it denotes a denotation, not a meaning. Importantly, there is no suggestion in Russell's assertion that an exception is to be made in the case of intensional contexts. And, as a comparison of (3) with

(5)   The author of *Waverley* was born in 1771.

shows, no exception should be made. Russell's opponent must accept the truism that in (5) "the author of *Waverley*" denotes a person and not a meaning. However, in turning to (3) he holds that it denotes a meaning. The unacknowledged consequence of this is that, despite appearances, the same expression does not occur in the two sentences. To be sure, the same ink-mark does, but on each occurrence it denotes a different entity.[26]

One might conclude from this that we have a case of homonymy. In fact, matters are far worse. In ordinary cases it is an easy matter to explain the different senses of the two homonyms. Disambiguation amounts to specifying the different denotations of the two expressions. The challenge then for Russell's opponent is to explain what

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[26] FREGE, *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (1980), p. 153, acknowledges this in a letter to Russell: "In indirect speech … every word has not its ordinary (direct) Bedeutung but, as I put it, its indirect Bedeutung, which coincides with what is otherwise its Sinn … To avoid ambiguity we really ought to have different signs in indirect speech."

the denotation of "the author of *Waverley*" is as it occurs in (3). And since there is no hint as to how this challenge is to be met—at least not without using the forbidden descriptions—it is a definite description in name only.[27] Russell is therefore correct to hold that his opponent has no basis for asserting that definite descriptions denote meanings inside of intensional contexts and denotations outside of them. A definite description denotes only its denotation, never its meaning. Or, in Russell's laconic formulation, "when *C* occurs without inverted commas, what is said is not true of the meaning, but only of the denotation."

There is one remaining point that needs to be addressed. In introducing Frege's view Russell speaks of definite descriptions as "expressing" meanings and denoting denotations (see n. 3); and in developing the argument of this paper I have followed him in this.[28] One may well wonder whether this notion of "expressing" offers a way of making sense of the claim that we are able to deal with meanings. For example, a person who utters (5) speaks about Scott and deals with the meaning expressed by "the author of *Waverley*".[29]

The response is empty unless it is possible to specify the meaning that is said to be expressed by the definite description.[30] The texts from Frege indicate two ways in which this might be done. The first is by means of meta-linguistic expressions. The GEA prohibits that strategy. The second is to hold that the meaning expressed outside of intensional contexts is denoted inside of them. (F1) demonstrates that such a strategy is unworkable. Thus, Russell successfully argues that dealing with meanings is not a viable alternative to speaking about

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[27] DUMMETT, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (1981), p. 227, concedes the point, admitting that "we cannot directly state what the sense of an expression is."

[28] Frege, it should be noted, does not use this terminology when he first makes the distinction. He says in "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*", p. 153, only "that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense [*Sinn*] and to that in turn a definite *Bedeutung*." The canonical terminology is introduced later (p. 156), and there without the slightest suggestion that anything of philosophical importance is marked by it.

[29] This seems to be what LEVINE, "On the 'Gray's Elegy' Argument …", pp. 284ff., has in mind when he says that meanings are given to us through language. He repeats the point in "Aboutness and the Argument of 'On Denoting'" (2005), pp. 77–8.

[30] It is tempting to argue, as e.g. GEACH, pp. 203–4, does, that in using a definite description one manifests an understanding of its meaning. That argument is not empty but irrelevant. The sense of "meaning" it employs is the ordinary one, not the one that is at issue in either the GEA or "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" where meanings are entities.

them. In order to deal with an entity, we need a sign that denotes it. Russell's opponent has failed to meet that requirement.

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