Frege and Russell on Names and Descriptions. Part IA Meaning.

Lecture IV, *Tussle with Russell, 12th March.*

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Last week, we outlined and discussed Russell's theory of descriptions, talked about some issues it supposedly solves, and talked briefly about Russell's view of names. Here's a brief summary:

- Russell rejects Frege's notion of sense. Initially, then, Russell faces a series of issues with descriptive phrases, e.g., 'The present King of France'. This does not refer, yet it figures in meaningful sentences.
- Russell analyses sentences featuring descriptions as being quantificational claims. Roughly, 'An X is F' is 'There is an X which is F', and 'The X is F' is 'There is exactly one X and it is F'.
- Russell considered his theory of definite descriptions capable of dissolving several significant problems: the problem of empty definite descriptions, problems arising from the law of the excluded middle, and problems involving informative identity statements.
- Russell does not deny that there are names. However, Russell argues that descriptions have only an illusory similarity to names—they do not really refer and only appear to be of the same kind as names due to misleading grammatical form. Descriptions are not in the same class as referring expressions.

This week, we'll look at some ways in which we might challenge Russell's theory of descriptions and it's purported use in dissolving these problems, particularly Strawson and Donnellan on descriptions.

1. Strawson 'On Referring'

1.1. Strawson central aim in 'On Referring', see (Strawson, 1950), is to argue that sentences like

(1) The present King of France is bald

are *neither true nor false*. In this respect, Strawson is taking a broadly Fregean approach. What's distinctive about Strawson's position, however, is that Strawson holds that a sentence like (1) is not true or false by itself. Instead, Strawson thinks that this sentence can be *used* to say something true at a certain time—(1) could be used to say something true at one time, or occasion, and another occasion, something false.

1.2. Recall that Russell argued that because (1) is meaningful we must think that 'The present King of France' refers to something *or* 'The present King of France' is not a referring expression at all. Of course, Russell took the latter option. What Strawson claims, however, is that thinking that 'The present King of France' is a referring term simply means that it could be used at some time to say something true or false, e.g., it could be used in (1) to say something true in 840 AD of the present King, Charles II *the Bald*.

1.3. The reason that (1) uttered today says something which is neither true nor false is crucially because the presumption involved in uttering (1) is that there is a unique King of France. This presumption fails presently—what we call presupposition failure—and so you haven't said anything true, but nor have you said anything false. Rather, you haven't said anything at all: your utterance of (1) is neither true nor false. Note that this claim departs sharply from Russell's view. Consider:

(2) The Present King of France is wise

(3) There exists a unique Present King of France

For Russell, (2) *entails* (3). Thus, (2) cannot be true unless (3). For Strawson, (2) *presupposes* (3). That is, (2) cannot be either true or false, unless (3). (3), for Strawson, is precondition for having a truth value at all.

1.4. Russell thought very little of Strawson's criticisms, see (Russell, 1957). He was scathing:

> I may say ... that I am totally unable to see any validity whatever in any of Mr. Strawson's arguments.

One immediate problem with Strawson's argument is that there seem to be many sentences containing empty definite descriptions which are most plausibly false. Last week, we discussed, 'The Loch Ness monster exists' as an example. Russell considers a different, much more amusing example:

> Suppose, for example, that in some country there was a law that no person could hold public office if he considered it false that the Ruler of the Universe is wise. I think an avowed atheist who took advantage of Mr. Strawson's doctrine to say that he did not hold this proposition false, would be regarded as a somewhat shifty character.

In these cases, at least, we should not want to say that the relevant sentence is neither true nor false. For instance, what is the crucial difference between, say, a sentence like (1) and the following?

(4) The present King of France is in The Raised Faculty building

1.5. A further issue that Russell objects to is Strawson use of so-called egocentric descriptions. In other words, Strawson focuses on sentences like (1) and here the word 'present' is an *indexical* expression. That is, what the word picks out is highly context sensitive. Thus, focusing on (1) certainly makes it seem that different utterances of (1) can be, at certain points true, and other points false. But should we think that these considerations extend to all empty descriptions? Russell thinks not:

> As regards "the present King of France", he fastens upon the egocentric word "present" and does not seem able to grasp that, if for the word "present" I had substituted the words "in 1905", the whole of his argument would have collapsed.

That is, the following sentence appears meaningful, but there is no occasion in which it could be true or false:

(5) The King of France in 1905 is bald

But if there is no occasion where ' The King of France in 1905' can be used to make a true or false statement, how can we say, following Strawson, that it is a referring expression?

1.5. There is a much more fundamental disagreement between Russell and Strawson. Strawson takes as a stable backdrop ordinary language—assuming that what we should be doing in giving an analysis of descriptions is giving an analysis of our ordinary ways of talking—what we mean when we speak that way.

> This brings me to a fundamental divergence between myself and many philosophers with whom Mr. Strawson appears to be in general agreement. They are persuaded that common speech is good enough not only for daily life, but also for philosophy (Russell, 1957: 387)

Russell completely disagrees; or at least, he is emphatic that his theory of descriptions is not an analysis of 'the state of mind of those who utter sentences containing descriptions'. For Russell:

> common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy and that any attempt to be precise and accurate requires modification of common speech both as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax (Russell, 1957: 387).

Rather, it is a technical innovation and the value of that innovation was in exposing the logical form of sentences involving descriptions to better serve the precision required for philosophy. Russell emphasises:

> Suppose (which God forbid) Mr. Strawson were so rash as to accuse his char-lady [cleaner] of thieving: she would reply indignantly, "I ain't never done no harm to no one". Assuming her a pattern of virtue, I should say that she was making a true assertion, although, according to the rules of syntax which Mr. Strawson would adopt in his own speech, what she said should have meant: "there was at least one moment when I was injuring the whole human race". Mr. Strawson would not have supposed that this was what she meant to assert, although he would not have used her words to express the same sentiment. Similarly, I was concerned to find a more accurate and analysed thought to replace the somewhat confused thoughts which most people at most times have in their heads (Russell, 1957: 388)

3. Donnellan on Descriptions

3.1. Recall that a crucial element of Russell's deployment of his theory of descriptions in (Russell, 1905) is the claim that descriptions do not refer at all. As such, it is a logical mistake to take them to be of the same kind as expressions like names. Better attention to logical form, and not just mere grammatical form, dissolves many of the puzzles which were mistakenly taken to be substantive philosophical issues.

3.2. However, it is not clear that definite descriptions should always be thought of as non-referring expressions, see (Donnellan, 1966). For instance, consider a scenario in which someone utters:

(6) The man in the corner of the room drinking champagne is annoying

Further suppose that (6) is uttered with someone particular in mind. Here's the twist: the man in the corner of the room *drinking champagne* is not, in fact, annoying. The person the utterance was used to pick out—the annoying man in the corner—is drinking sparkling water, not champagne. Donnellan distinguishes between the attributive—correctly describing—and referential use of a definite description. In this case, (6) is referential *without* being attributive, successfully picking out the right man, without describing him correctly.

3.3. Is this a big problem for Russell? The best response to this problem distinguish between what the *speaker* refers to and what the sentence is *saying*, see (Kripke, 1977). What the speaker is referring to and what the speaker is saying of someone is different from what the sentence, considered in isolation from the context, is saying. The speaker of (6) correctly refers to the annoying individual and says something true of him, but the sentence *alone* is false. This is quite plausible: the sentence (6) in isolation has some false consequences, e.g., the other man in the corner who we didn't realise is actually drinking champagne might not be annoying; but no true sentence has false consequences.

References

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