

FREGE AND RUSSELL LECTURE 4

1. Strawson's paper 'On referring' (*Mind* 1950) presents a broadly Fregean criticism of Russell's theory of descriptions. Consider the sentence 'The King of France is wise'. Strawson says that this sentence isn't true or false by itself; rather, this very sentence can be *used* to say something true (e.g. perhaps in the year 1700) and, on another occasion to say something false (e.g. maybe in 1789). Similarly, one might use the expression 'The King of France' to refer to one thing in 1700 (Louis XIV) and to another thing in 1789 (Louis XVI).
2. Strawson thinks that once we are clear on this distinction we shall have to abandon Russell's theory. Just because the sentence 'The king of France is wise' is now meaningful, we needn't infer (Strawson thinks) that 'The king of France' either refers to something now or is never in the market for being a referring expression. Rather, all that it means, that 'The King of France is wise' is meaningful now, is just that it could possibly or at some time be used to say something true or false; and in particular that 'The king of France' could possibly or at some time be used to refer to something (for instance, as uttered in 1714).
3. Accordingly, Strawson thinks that if, today, you uttered the sentence 'The king of France is wise', you haven't said anything true *or* false. The existence of a unique king of France is a presumption of the utterance; but if the presumption is falsified then you haven't yet said anything. The question, of whether the King of France is or is not wise, 'doesn't arise'.
4. Russell has plenty of fun with this ('Mr Strawson on Referring', see *Mind* 1957). For one thing, there are sentences involving empty descriptions that appear to be blatantly false. '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.' We might add examples like 'The King of France is sitting in this room' etc.
5. Besides this, Strawson's account forces upon us a three-valued logic that complicates truth-tables. Presumably we still want the inference, from 'The King of France is wise', to 'Either the King of France is wise or he is foolish' to be valid: but how is Strawson to account for its validity if, as he claims, the premise has no truth-value?
6. The second issue is to do with egocentricity. The whole problem, for Strawson, arises from the existence of terms whose reference varies depending on the circumstances of their utterance: 'The Present King of France' might refer to one or another person depending on when you say it. But this creates no problem for Russell: he can simply say that the range of the quantifiers varies in the same way (as in e.g. 'The table is covered with books').
7. Moreover, Strawson's distinction, between the meaningfulness of a sentence and the meaningfulness of its uses, collapses if we consider descriptions that are not egocentric: if, instead of 'The present King of France' Russell had written 'The King of France in 1905', Strawson could not have made his main point.

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8. Another criticism, due to Donnellan ('Reference & definite descriptions', *Philosophical Review* 1966), distinguishes between referential and attributive uses of the definite description. The attributive use is the one Russell had in mind e.g. 'The person who wrote this is a genius', said by e.g. someone who hears the C Minor Mass for the first time without knowing its composer. The referential use is where I use the definite description to pick out someone, but the main point of the sentence is to say something about that person, e.g. 'The person in the corner holding a glass of champagne is a free-mason', which may be true of the person in the corner, but in fact he is holding a glass of sparkling water. Russell's theory reckons the second sentence false; but intuitively it seems to be true.

9. The best response is to distinguish between the person that the *speaker* is referring to, and what the *sentence* is saying. The speaker is referring to the individual in the corner, and saying something true of him; but the sentence is saying something that is indeed false. (Cf. Kripke, 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference, in Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling Jr & Howard K. Wettstein (eds.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, University of Minnesota Press. pp. 255-296, 1977). And this is plausible, because the sentence has uncontroversially false consequences, that you might upbraid me for having got you to believe. Clearly no true sentence has false consequences.

10. Russell's theory has been contrasted with Frege's, and we *can* contrast them, but it is also possible to hold elements of both at once. You could take the view, for instance, that the sense of an ordinary proper name is a definite description (like Frege) but also that the analysis of this description is Russellian, so that this isn't really a genuine proper name. This is something like the 'Frege-Russell view' criticized by Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*.