

RUSSELL ON ORDINARY PROPER NAMES

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**Abstract:** On the orthodox interpretation of Russellian semantics, Bertrand Russell is said to have held that the meaning of ordinary proper names is given by associated definite descriptions. In this article, I present a challenge to this interpretation. I offer textual grounds for the alternative view that Russell was actually quite ambivalent on the issue. It will be seen that Russell is most often quite willing to treat proper names as directly referential devices, while occasionally presenting the view that proper names function as disguised definite descriptions. This creates a tension in Russell's published writings. My contention in what follows is that we can gain release from this tension as soon as we realize that Russell's thesis that proper names abbreviate definite descriptions arises from his epistemological concerns and pertains to *privately associated propositions*, whose constituents satisfy the 'fundamental epistemological principle' proposed in Russell's article "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description". I further argue that when it comes to the intersubjectively accessible public semantics of sentences containing proper names, Russell does in fact regard proper names as simply standing for their bearers.

**Key words:** Russell; proper names; definite descriptions; direct reference; Russell's epistemological principle

**Resumo:** De acordo com a interpretação ortodoxa da semântica russelliana, Bertrand Russell teria sustentado a tese de que o significado de nomes próprios comuns nos é dado por descrições definidas a eles associadas. Neste artigo, apresentamos um desafio a tal interpretação. Oferecemos fundamentos textuais para a interpretação alternativa de que, na verdade, Russell foi bastante ambivalente no que concerne a esta questão. Veremos que predomina em Russell a tendência de tratar nomes próprios como mecanismos de referência direta, embora ele ocasionalmente alegue que os nomes próprios operam como descrições definidas disfarçadas. Isto cria uma tensão nos textos publicados por Russell. Minha proposta, no que se segue, é a de que tal tensão pode ser superada tão logo nos demos conta de que a tese russelliana de que nomes próprios abreviam descrições definidas é fruto de suas inquietações epistemológicas e dizem respeito a *proposições privadas*, cujos constituintes satisfazem o 'princípio epistemológico fundamental' enunciado por Russell em "Knowledge by Acquaintance and

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Knowledge by Description”. Além disso, argumentamos que, no que concerne à semântica pública e intersubjetivamente acessível de orações com nomes próprios, Russell, na verdade, atribuía aos nomes próprios o papel de simplesmente designar os objetos nomeados.

**Palavras chave:** Russell; nomes próprios; descrições definidas; referência direta; o princípio epistemológico de Russell.

## **RUSSELL ON ORDINARY PROPER NAMES**

On the orthodox interpretation of his thought, Bertrand Russell is said to have held that ordinary proper names are disguised descriptions, by which he meant definite descriptions, phrases of the form ‘the so-and-so,’ as he would have put it. In fact, his writings contain a few passages in which he appears to have expressed that view quite literally.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall argue that those passages ought not to be taken at face value and that a number of qualifications are called for if we are to make sense of what Russell had to say in this connection.

As far as I know, Mark Sainsbury is the only important commentator who directly opposes the standard interpretation of Russell’s views on proper names, though Howard Wettstein appears not to feel entirely happy about it, either. As will become apparent later, these two authors have had a considerable influence on my thinking about this matter. However, I believe that my own presentation can be said to have a legitimate claim to originality.

Before I can proceed any further, I believe that a few preliminary comments are in order. Following Neale (1990) and Lycan (2000), I adopt the premise that Russell’s Theory of Descriptions, thought of as a theory about the underlying logical form of sentences containing definite descriptions, is largely independent from the claim that proper names abbreviate definite descriptions, the Name Claim, as Lycan has it. One might adduce logical grounds for accepting Russell’s Theory of Descriptions, without thereby feeling compelled to subscribe to a descriptivist theory of proper names. In what follows, I plan to address only Russell’s contention that “Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions” (Russell, 1910), and not the merits of the Theory of Descriptions as such. However, a brief review of the theory will help us set the stage for an assessment of Russell’s views on ordinary proper names.

It is further necessary to note that Russell was a highly versatile philosopher, whose thinking ranged widely across a number of different philosophical problems. In

writing about names and descriptions, he was no less concerned with epistemology and communication than he was with logic. This is a fact which appears to have often been neglected. In particular, it would seem that some commentators have presented an oversimplified account of Russell's views on ordinary proper names, because they have failed to do justice to Russell's epistemological concerns.

On a simpler level, I also believe that it is regrettably the case that not enough attention has been paid to some of the textual evidence which is found in Russell's writings. The importance of some passages has seemingly been overemphasized at the expense of other passages which, to my mind, are no less relevant.

In considering Russell's views on proper names, I shall adopt the following strategy: I shall continually refer to the texts themselves, never straying too far away from them. It will be seen that in his treatment of names and descriptions Russell presents us with some conflicting passages and apparent contradictions. I hope to show that these apparent contradictions can be resolved as soon as we realize that Russell very often addressed the same issues from different standpoints and that he did not always bother to indicate precisely what perspective it was that he was arguing from.

The passages which I shall examine are drawn from *On Denoting* (1905), *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description* (1910), *Descriptions* (1919) (Chapter 16 of *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*) and *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918). The more heavily epistemological *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description* will figure in a specially prominent way in my account. This article brings together, in a more explicit fashion than does any of the others, all the various strands of Russell's thought on names and descriptions.

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Taken together, the texts referred to above clearly show Russell's profound dissatisfaction with the theories which, in his day, proposed to address the subject of denotation. In particular, the views of Meinong and Frege are singled out for penetrating criticism.

It is not my intention here to go into too much detail about the more general reasons behind Russell's deep-rooted opposition to the theories of both Meinong and Frege. For my present purposes, it will suffice to note that Russell regarded his own Theory of Descriptions as capable of doing a far better job of handling definite descriptions, which he considered to be "by far the most interesting and difficult of denoting phrases" (Russell, 1905, p 200).

Among the merits which Russell claims for his theory is its success in dealing with some long-standing logical puzzles. For the sake of convenience, I shall adopt Lycan's way of labeling the four puzzles which so vexed Russell<sup>2</sup> (Lycan, 2000). We can be said to have: (1) the problem of apparent reference to nonexistents, in sentences like "The present King of France is bald," (2) the problem of negative existentials, in, for instance, "The greatest prime number does not exist," (3) Frege's puzzle about identity<sup>3</sup>, found in comparing sentences like "Scott is Scott" and "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" and the problem of substitutivity: how are we to account for the different truth-values of "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*" and "George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott"?

Russell eventually came to think that the grammatical form of sentences containing definite descriptions do not provide a sure guide to their underlying logical form, or rather, to the logical form of the propositions expressed by means of those sentences. For Russell, the right way to analyse a proposition like "The present King of France is bald" is to regard it as a complex sort of proposition involving quantifiers. In fact, the proposition really expressed by "The F is G" is given by the joint assertion of the following three propositions: i) There is at least one F, ii) There is at most one F and iii) Whatever is F is G.

Whether or not we ultimately accept Russell's Theory of Descriptions, with its peculiar way of 'rewriting' sentences containing definite descriptions, it is fair to say that it does a rather elegant job of dealing with the above mentioned puzzles.

However, it is important to bear in mind that, as pointed out by Lycan, the puzzles "arise just as insistently for proper names as they did for descriptions" (Lycan, 2000, p. 36). Russell's solution to the four puzzles in the cases involving definite descriptions would seem to apply to just one restricted class of referring expressions. It is perhaps tempting and natural enough to inquire into the possibility of generalizing further.

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<sup>2</sup>As noted by Lycan, there is a fifth puzzle involving the 'Problem of Excluded Middle'. I will neglect this puzzle in what follows, as I consider Russell's solution to it to follow naturally from his solution to the first puzzle presented above, along with considerations having to do with the notion of scope.

<sup>3</sup> I shall, however, present my grounds for thinking that Russell was unconcerned with Frege's puzzle in its application to ordinary proper names. Though Russell was no doubt concerned with identity statements, he does not appear to have attached too much importance to the difference in cognitive value between identities such as 'Hesperus is Hesperus' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus.'

Descriptivist theories of proper names, which take the meaning of a proper name to be given by some description or cluster of descriptions, do indeed offer some hope for a solution to the puzzles we have just met (This is not to say, of course, that such theories do not run into other difficulties).

It is also tempting to think, given the surface look of some much quoted passages, that Russell held his own version of descriptivism and that he hoped it could be used to provide solutions to the four puzzles in the cases which involve proper names rather than definite descriptions. This is Lycan's position and, as I believe, the position taken by most commentators. As against Lycan and the orthodox interpretation of Russell's views on proper names, I shall maintain, however, that Russell's reasons for regarding ordinary proper names as disguised descriptions have in most cases little, if anything, to do with the need to come up with a solution for these puzzles in the case of ordinary proper names.

Specifically, I hope to show that, as far as logic is concerned, Russell would have been quite willing – in most cases at least – to regard names as simply standing for the objects which they denote. It was primarily in his capacity as an epistemologist that Russell was led to think that ordinary proper names are disguised descriptions. In his 1990 article *Frege-Russell Semantics?*, Wettstein seems to have hinted at the possibility that something close to that may be right.

But now it's high time I let in the texts themselves.

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In his early article *On Denoting* Russell is primarily concerned with denoting phrases, laying special emphasis on definite descriptions. Hardly anything at all is said concerning the logical or epistemological status of ordinary proper names. But then one finds a revealing passage, in which Russell points to an advantage of his theory:

The whole realm of non-entities, such as 'the round square', 'the even prime other than two', 'Apollo', 'Hamlet', etc. can now be satisfactorily dealt with. All these are denoting phrases which do not denote anything. A proposition about Apollo means what we get by substituting what the classical dictionary tells us is meant by Apollo, *say* 'the sun-god'. All propositions in which Apollo occurs are to be interpreted by the above rules for denoting phrases (pp. 205-206) [my emphasis].

This passage strongly suggests that Russell did see bearerless names as disguised descriptions. How else could sentences containing bearerless names be meaningful?

Since the bearers of those names do not exist, they cannot be logical constituents of the propositions of which they are a part. For Russell, the only way to rescue sentences containing bearerless names from meaninglessness is to regard names of this sort as standing for descriptions. But even here it should be seen that Russell is not saying that a bearerless name ought to be equated with any *one* specific description. Russell's reasoning in this connection is made a great deal clearer in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Taking as an example 'Romulus', the name of one of the legendary founders of Rome, Russell says that it is "not really a name but a sort of truncated description. It stands for a person who did such-and-such things, who killed Remus, and founded Rome and so on" and then adds:

If it were a name, the question of existence could not arise, because a name has got to name something or it is not a name, and if there is no such person as Romulus there cannot be a name for that person who is not there, so that this single word 'Romulus' is really a sort of truncated or telescoped description, and if you think of it as a name you will get into *logical* errors. (p. 243) [my emphasis].

It seems clear then that 'the problem of apparent reference to non-existents' and 'the problem of negative existentials' do arise in the case of bearerless names and that, as soon as we start thinking of such names as disguised descriptions, we might be on our way to solving these problems.

But, then, what about the proper names of *existents*, names like 'Marlon Brando', 'London' and 'Sputnik'? It might be argued that such names name, among other things, persons, places and objects and that these are the *types* of things whose existence can be called into question, as opposed to the sense-data of Russell's epistemology, which may be brought into discourse by the so-called 'logically proper names' *this* and *that*. Parity of form might, perhaps, lead one to think that the meanings of the proper names of existents are likewise given by definite descriptions. *This* latter contention is the one I am anxious to qualify.

I do not think that Russell really held on to that view, if what is meant by *meaning* is a relatively stable, intersubjectively accessible property of words which goes into communication and, indeed, makes communication possible. I hope that my reasons for thinking so will become clear as this essay unfolds.

At any rate, the name-as-disguised-description view would seem to be at odds with some passages where Russell is very keen on drawing attention to a number of

ways in which names *differ* from descriptions. The picture which emerges from those passages is one in which names and definite descriptions are clearly set apart. Thus one finds in *Descriptions*:

We have, then, two things to compare: (1) a *name*, which is a simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words; (2) a *description*, which consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the “meaning” of the description. (p. 211)

It bears noting that the context clearly shows that Russell has ordinary proper names in mind here. In addition to being simple rather than complex, names can be assigned by stipulation, while descriptions normally cannot. The fact that Scott was the author of *Waverley* “was a physical fact, the fact that he sat down and wrote it with his own hand, which does not have anything to do with what he was called. It is in no way arbitrary” (p. 245). Also, names and descriptions differ at the level of understanding:

If you understand the English language, you would understand the meaning of the phrase ‘The author of *Waverley*’ if you had never heard it before, whereas you would not understand the meaning of ‘Scott’ if you had never heard it before because to know the meaning of a name is to know who it is applied to. (p. 245)

I must now turn to the most important feature of the above mentioned passages. As we have just seen, Russell says that a name is a “simple symbol, directly designating an individual *which is its meaning and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words*” and that “to know the meaning of a name is to *know who* it is applied to” (italics added). Now one would be hard put to reconcile these statements with the claim, explicitly made in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, that proper names are somehow to be equated with descriptions. As a matter of fact, Russell sounds a bit like a direct referentialist in the passages just quoted (and elsewhere).

For all the apparent contradictions, I believe that one may find a reasonably coherent pattern emerging from Russell’s writings on proper names and definite descriptions: Russell’s views on the relation obtaining *between* names and descriptions

is only given serious attention in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, an article where epistemological considerations are at the forefront. But wherever Russell is primarily concerned with logical matters – notably in *Descriptions* and *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* – he is usually quite willing to regard the ordinary proper names of existents as simple symbols standing for the objects which they denote. In those texts, suggestions to the effect that proper names are not simple after all – and that, strictly speaking, they are not even names – are presented as afterthoughts, and almost reluctantly, one feels.

The pattern I have just alluded to may be exemplified by reference to some specific passages. In the course of talking about identity statements, Russell says in *Descriptions* that “The identity in “Socrates is a man” is identity between an object named (*accepting “Socrates” as a name, subject to qualifications explained later*) and an object ambiguously described” (p. 210) (my emphasis). The reader is left to wonder what the “qualifications” might be. There follow a few paragraphs in which Russell elaborates, among other things, on the *different* logical behavior of names and descriptions. One comes then to another interesting passage:

Suppose, for example, that  $\phi x$  [a propositional function] is “always true”; let it be, say, the “law of identity,”  $x = x$ . Then we may substitute for “ $x$ ” any name we choose, and we shall obtain a true proposition. *Assuming for the moment that “Socrates,” “Plato,” and “Aristotle” are names (a very rash assumption)*, we can infer from the law of identity that Socrates is Socrates, Plato is Plato, and Aristotle is Aristotle. But we shall commit a fallacy if we attempt to infer, without further premisses, that the author of *Waverley* is the author of *Waverley* [ ... ] In fact, propositions of the form “the so-and-so is the so-and-so” are not always true: it is necessary that the so-and-so should *exist*” (p. 212) [my emphasis]

In what sense could “Socrates,” “Plato,” and “Aristotle” not be names? Hopefully, Russell will soon go into some detail in order to make clear what the “qualifications” are which he talked about earlier. But his readers will have to wait almost until the very end.

It seems clear that the passage just quoted is important in another way, too. It looks as if Russell will not countenance the possibility that the bearers of names like “Socrates,” “Plato” and “Aristotle” could turn out not to have existed. Seemingly, he



finds no reason at all to doubt the historical record in this connection. Neither will he have any reason to think that, say, G. E. Moore or Ludwig Wittgenstein might not have existed. This is all very natural. One could hardly attribute to Russell a skeptical position as regards the existence of the external world (including other people).

This being the case, the first two puzzles mentioned by Lycan, that of apparent reference to nonexistents and that of negative existentials, would never arise for a very large number of cases (indeed most) involving proper names. In view of this fact, two of the logical problems which allegedly led Russell to hold that the meaning of a proper name is given by a definite description were not really problems for him at all, if by *proper names* we mean the names of persons or things whose existence we have no reason to doubt.

Now, this is arguably the passage in *Descriptions* where Russell's qualifications on the status of ordinary proper names like "Socrates", "Plato" and "Aristotle" are to be found:

We may even go so far as to say that, in all such *knowledge* as can be expressed in words, with the exception of "this" and "that" and a few other words of which the meaning varies on different occasions – no names in the strict sense occur, but what seem like names are really descriptions" (p. 213) (italics added)

It seems clear that Russell's reservations about the claim of the proper names mentioned to be regarded as genuine names revolve around the sort of knowledge we can be said to have concerning the propositions involving those proper names.

To anticipate a bit: my working hypothesis is that Russell would not see any problem at all in regarding the name 'Aristotle' as found in "Aristotle taught Alexander" as simply standing for Aristotle. But "Aristotle taught Alexander" is a proposition which each individual language user does not really know or understand in the strict sense envisaged by Russell. And this is so on account of the user's lack of acquaintance with Aristotle. Since the individual language user can only have knowledge of propositions with whose components he is acquainted, the name-as-disguised-description view might turn out to be necessitated by purely epistemological considerations. It may help us in determining the sort of *privately associated* propositions which the individual language user can be said to really know or understand, as opposed to the *publically accessible* proposition which goes into discourse, a proposition of which Aristotle himself is a

constituent. This interpretation will be presented more fully when I come to consider some vital passages in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*.

But before moving on to the truly decisive passages found in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, it might be worthwhile to have a closer look at Russell's views concerning proper names, as presented in *Descriptions* and *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*.

As it turns out, the same argumentative strategy found in *Descriptions* is also to be seen in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. In the latter text, Russell is generally willing to regard ordinary proper names as simply standing for their bearers. Suggestions to the contrary are hinted at in passing, but never fully developed. In addition to the passage already quoted, one finds:

We will take 'the author of *Waverley*'. That is a definite description, and it is easy to see that it is not a name. A name is a simple symbol (i. e. a symbol that does not have any parts that are symbols), *a simple symbol used to designate a certain particular or by extension an object which is not a particular but is treated for the moment as if it were, or is falsely believed to be a particular, such as a person.* (p. 244) (italics added)

and after a few more pages:

There are a great many sorts of incomplete symbols in logic, and they are sources of a great deal of confusion and false philosophy, because people get misled by grammar. You think that the proposition 'Scott is mortal' and the proposition 'The author of *Waverley* is mortal' are of the same form. You think that they are both simple propositions attributing a predicate to a subject. That is an entire delusion: one of them is (*or rather might be*) and one of them is not. These things, like 'the author of *Waverley*,' which I call incomplete symbols, are things that have absolutely no meaning in isolation but merely acquire a meaning in a context. 'Scott' taken as a name *has a meaning all by itself. It stands for a certain person, and there it is.* But 'the author of *Waverley*' is not a name, and does not at all by itself mean anything at all, because when it is rightly used in propositions, those propositions do not contain any constituent corresponding to it (p. 253) (italics added).

It is interesting to note how self-contradictory Russell is liable to become. In the paragraph right after the preceding one (a paragraph in which Russell says that the meaning of 'Scott' is Scott), Russell asserts that a name like 'Socrates' is among the things which do not have any meaning in themselves.

Interestingly, Russell's stance as a direct referentialist is also illustrated in connection with the problem of identity statements. Lycan claims that Russell brought the name-as-disguised-description view to bear on the solution of the problem of identity statements in the case involving proper names. Frege, one might recall, was seriously concerned with the difference in cognitive value found in comparing such sentences as "Hesperus is Hesperus" and "Hesperus is Phosphorus."

But Lycan's claim will sound a great deal less plausible if we pause to consider Russell's own words in *Descriptions* and *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. In fact, Russell does not appear to have attached too much importance to the difference in cognitive value found in sentences such as the ones seen above.

In comparing the propositions expressed by "Scott is Scott" and "Scott is Sir Walter", Russell says in *Descriptions*:

When a name is used directly, merely to indicate what we are speaking about, it is no part of the *fact* asserted, or of the falsehood if our description happens to be false: it is merely part of the symbolism by which we express our thought. What we want to express is something which might (for example) be translated into a foreign language; it is something for which the actual words are vehicle, but of which they are no part. On the other hand, when we make a proposition about "the person called 'Scott'," the actual name "Scott" enters into what we are asserting, and not merely into the language used in making the assertion. Our proposition will now be a different one if we substitute "the person called 'Sir Walter.'" But so long as we are using names *as* names, whether we say "Scott" or whether we say "Sir Walter" is as irrelevant to what we are asserting as whether we speak English or French. *Thus so long as names are used as names, "Scott is Sir Walter" is the same trivial proposition as "Scott is Scott."* (p. 212) (italics added).

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It is, of course, true to say that Russell's chief concern in the passage just quoted is to put aside a possible metalinguistic reading of the identities "Scott is Scott" and "Scott is Sir Walter." But, quite apart from that matter, one finds Russell saying in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (in an attempt to show that 'the author of *Waverley*' is not a name):

If you were to try to substitute for 'the author of *Waverley*' in that proposition [Scott is the author of *Waverley*] any name whatever, say 'c', so that the proposition becomes 'Scott is c', then if 'c' is a name for anybody who is not Scott, that proposition would become false, *while if, on the other hand, 'c' is a name for Scott, then the proposition will become simply a tautology. It is at once obvious that if 'c' were 'Scott' itself, 'Scott is Scott' is just a tautology. But if you take any other name which is just a name for Scott, then if the name is being used as a name and not as a description, the proposition will still be a tautology. For the name itself is merely a means of pointing to the thing and does not occur in what you are asserting, so that if one thing has two names, you make exactly the same assertion whichever of the two names you use, provided they are really names (and not truncated descriptions)* (p. 245) (italics added)

and even more explicitly:

The ordinary use of names is as *a means of getting through to things*, and when you are using names in that way the statement 'Scott is Sir Walter' is a pure tautology, exactly on the same level as 'Scott is Scott' (p. 246) (italics added)

Of course, one might argue that Russell's position is rendered untenable by Frege's argument in *On Sense and Nominatum*. But I am not concerned at this point – nor anywhere else in this essay – to hold that Russell's positions are correct. My sole concern is with what Russell really meant to say, as opposed to what he is often believed to have said.

It looks as if I have already had some success in calling attention to those passages which, for the most part, seem to give us a portrait of Russell as a direct reference theorist, who appears to have been perfectly willing to regard proper names as

simply standing for their referents— despite some reservations which are never fully presented in the articles I have examined thus far. Now the time has come for a close examination of Russell's position as it is formulated in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*. In what follows, I shall present my own interpretation of Russell's views on the relation between names and definite descriptions. If I am right, this interpretation will enable us to really understand those passages in which Russell appears to be suggesting that proper names abbreviate definite descriptions.

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Since in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description* Russell is primarily concerned with epistemology, it would seem that his apparent contention that ordinary proper names can be equated with descriptions should be considered against the backdrop of his more general epistemological views. To see how this important strand of Russell's thought is brought to bear on the subject of the relation obtaining between proper names and definite descriptions, we must start by focusing on a principle which he enunciates as follows:

The fundamental epistemological principle in the analysis of propositions containing descriptions is this: *Every proposition which we understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.* (p. 159)

I believe that this will provide us with the key to an understanding of the very special sense in which Russell can really be said to have held the 'name-as-disguised-description view.' For it is clear that Russell applies precisely the same principle in the analysis of propositions containing ordinary proper names.

The all-important epistemic question which arises for Russell in connection with ordinary proper names is this: to what extent, if at all, can we be said to have acquaintance with the bearers of those names? It is important to bear in mind that Russell placed very stringent demands on what should count as having acquaintance with an object of perception or thought. According to Russell, we only have acquaintance with the things of which we have unmediated presentations. These would include sense-data and certain universal concepts, and maybe the Self.

So, in considering statements about Bismarck, for instance, Russell says that contemporary readers of history cannot be said to have acquaintance with Bismarck. This would seem to be a more or less commonsensical view. More radically, Russell maintains that not even Bismarck's friends were really acquainted with him. Bismarck's

friends were only acquainted with the sense-data which they rightly associated with Bismarck's body – and, more indirectly, with his mind. Only Bismarck himself – and even here Russell expresses some doubts – can be said to have been acquainted with Bismarck.

In assessing Russell's views on the relation between ordinary proper names and definite descriptions, we should, as already stressed, take heed of Russell's fundamental epistemological principle. In fact, as I shall attempt to show, Russell's name-as-disguised-description view, which I interpret in a way other than the one which prevails among commentators, stems largely from epistemological considerations. But even in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, an article where those considerations are at the forefront, Russell's readers are presented with certain passages which give them a sense of an underlying conflict. On the one hand, Russell's epistemology seemingly leads him to conclude that names are descriptive in character; on the other hand, one finds a number of suggestions to the effect that names are directly referential, after all. This was clearly noted by Wettstein (1990):

If not for what we know about the epistemic conditions for real naming, we can imagine Russell musing, it would be tempting to treat all names, ordinary ones included as directly referential. Russell, if I am not mistaken, felt a conflict between the dictates of his semantic ear, according to which names are directly referential, and his epistemological conscience.

I see in Russell's discussions of ordinary names, then, a tension between two conflicting pictures of the semantics of ordinary names. (p. 11)

It is my intention to propose an interpretation which may offer some release from this tension. In fact, I hope to show that the two pictures referred to above are not really opposed to one another. Rather, it would be more apt to describe them as complementary.

In support of this claim, I will now examine Russell's initial formulation of the name-as-disguised-description view. It occupies a whole paragraph, which I reproduce below:

Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a

description. Moreover, the description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times. The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies. But so long as this remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears. (p. 156)

The first two sentences appear to be sufficiently unequivocal: it really does look as though Russell is saying that the semantic contribution of a proper name to the propositions in which it occurs is given by a definite description. However, the rest of the paragraph is clearly meant to qualify Russell's initial claim. As I see it, the relevant qualifications are nowhere more apparent than in the crucial "Bismarck" passage to which I shall shortly draw attention.

As regards the paragraph reproduced above, a few comments are in order. It is obviously not the case that by 'thought' Russell meant in this context anything like 'a stream-of-consciousness item'. Clearly enough, the words 'teacher of Aristotle' do not have to pop up in my mind whenever I use the name 'Plato'. So, it is perhaps natural enough to interpret Russell as saying that the meaning of a proper name is given by a definite description and that proper names are somehow synonymous with descriptions. Or, as Kripke would have put it, that descriptions give their meaning or fix their reference.

However, we have good reason to doubt that Russell really meant to say that. For our purposes, we may consider meaning to be a public, relatively constant, intersubjectively accessible property of words – ordinary proper names included. Yet Russell says in the passage just quoted that proper names are not invariably associated with any one specific description in the minds of different people or even as used by the same person. One interesting consequence of this is that if I utter and you hear the words "Aristotle was the greatest philosopher of antiquity," the 'thoughts' in our minds need not coincide. On the usual interpretation of the name-as-disguised description view, people could easily find themselves talking past one another, as Lycan aptly notes.

Now, I do not think, as Lycan certainly does, that this possibility presents a problem for Russell's alleged Name Claim, because there really was no Name Claim, in Lycan's sense. It would be more correct to say that Russell's words show him to have been well aware of the difficulties inherent in the position which takes the meaning of a proper name to be given by a definite description. For in the same paragraph, he goes on

to say that “The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies. But so long as this remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears”

It would seem to be much more natural to interpret Russell as saying that the competent use of proper names in communication involves mastery, on the part of language users, of the name’s associated descriptions – the ‘thoughts’ in the minds of persons using the name.

Having said that, I would not hesitate to express my agreement with Mark Sainsbury’s unorthodox interpretation of Russell’s theory:

So, Russell’s theory is that a name is associated with a variety of different descriptions: the descriptions which are needed explicitly to report the thoughts of those who use names. This variability shows that the descriptions cannot, for Russell, give the public meaning of the name, for meaning should be common through the linguistic community. (Sainsbury, 1994, p. 8)

Like Sainsbury, I do not accept the orthodox interpretation of Russell’s views on ordinary proper names, according to which he intended to say that the meaning of a proper name is given by a description. As I see it, Russell was perfectly willing, even in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, to regard names as directly referential. Now, it is true to say that in a couple of passages he appears to be saying that names *are* descriptive. My intention is to make sense of those passages. Russell’s epistemology will enable me to do just that.

Although I shall argue that Russell nowhere really said that the meaning of a proper name is given by a definite description, the fact remains that Russell certainly saw names and descriptions as being related in interesting ways.

A recurrent theme in Russell’s treatment of ordinary proper names, as noted by Wettstein, is Russell’s insistence that a person’s use of a proper name involves *knowing who* the name applies to. Thus, Bismarck’s friends knew who he was in the plainest sense possible, because they met Bismarck in person. Those of us who have only read about Bismarck in the history books can still be said to know who Bismarck was, though we are further removed from acquaintance with Bismarck than his friends were. But in either case there is a need for language users to have identifying knowledge of the



bearers of the proper names they employ. Definite descriptions are precisely the sort of linguistic device which can provide language users with such knowledge. Unlike Wettstein, I have no intention to dwell on the question as to whether the identifying descriptions Russell had in mind are bound to be hybrid, rather than purely qualitative, though the former is far more likely. Be that as it may, it seems beyond a doubt that Russell did envisage such an identifying role for descriptions

Even more importantly, the definite descriptions associated with the proper names employed by language users give Russell precisely what he needs to ensure that his fundamental epistemological principle is not infringed.

To see why this is so, let us consider the paragraph reproduced below. I take it to be crucially important for an understanding of Russell's position.

It would seem that, when we make a statement about something only known by description, we often *intend* to make the statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgment which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgment in which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. *But we know that there is an object B called Bismarck and that B was an astute diplomatist. We can thus describe the proposition we should like to affirm, namely, 'B was an astute diplomatist,' where B is the object which was Bismarck. What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know that there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that, however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know it, though we know it is true.* (p. 158) (italics added).

This, of course, is a difficult and somewhat puzzling paragraph. And the interpreter's task is made all the more difficult as a consequence of Russell's usual terminological laxity. It is, at any rate, once again apparent that Russell's views on the relation obtaining between names and descriptions stem from epistemological

considerations. If the name-as-disguised-description view had been meant to deal with the logical puzzles already mentioned, there seems to be no reason why Bismarck would be any less compelled to use his own name as a disguised description – say, speaking about himself in the third person as Julius Caesar did – than anyone else would.

Now I would like to draw attention to the underlined passages. It can be seen that there is, according to Russell, a proposition, namely ‘B was an astute diplomatist’ – where this very much object-evoking B stands simply for Bismarck – such that one may know something important about it: one may know *that* it is true. It is my intention to show that it is the above proposition – having the object B, which was Bismarck, as a constituent, quite apart from any of the name’s associated descriptions – that actually goes into discourse.

Russell says that what makes it possible for us “to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that, however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same.” How are we to construe the variability of descriptions in this context?

If Russell had ever held that a proper name abbreviates a single description, he would not have to worry about the way in which people succeed in communicating when they use proper names. And if, though a number of valid descriptions are in fact normally available, one could magically ensure that the description actually employed by the parties to *a given communicative event* is one and the same description for the duration of the event, for example, that, whenever I say and you hear “Bismarck was an astute diplomat,” we would, somehow, be bound to have the same associated description in our minds, then, in this case too, there would be no reason for Russell to be worried about how communication might occur. Since Russell is clearly concerned with what makes communication possible in this context, it is immediately obvious that Russell is well aware of the fact that the parties to a communicative event may indeed associate any given name with different descriptions even as the communicative event unfolds. But, this being the case, one is left with the question: how is communication at all possible?

The question can have a simple answer once we realize that for Russell the meaning of a proper name is quite simply the object it stands for. By the *meaning* of a proper name, I mean that property which actually goes into the propositions expressed. On my interpretation of Russell, the meaning of a name is not some private associated

item, which may vary more or less arbitrarily from person to person. Meaning goes public.

To put it in another way: the semantic contribution of a name to the proposition of which it is a part is the object the name stands for, rather than any associated descriptions in people`s minds. This was beautifully expressed in Sainsbury`s words:

For example, suppose I utter the words ‘Bismarck was an astute diplomat’. As I use the name ‘Bismarck’, the thought in my mind may be best described as that *the first Chancellor of Germany* is an astute diplomat. However, I realize that you may associate the name with a different description, perhaps ‘the most powerful man in Europe’. So when I utter my sentence, I am not trying to get you to share my thought; rather I am trying to get you to have a thought, concerning Bismarck (however you think of him), that he is an astute diplomat. My intentions would be satisfied if you realized that I had tried to say, of the most powerful man in Europe, that he was an astute diplomat. (p. 8)

Here Sainsbury makes a fine point about communication, but we still have to come to terms with Russell`s epistemology. What is it so special about the definite descriptions one associates with a proper name?

To begin with, the descriptions are such as to provide identifying knowledge of the name`s bearer, as was noted by Wettstein. But I believe that this does not exhaust the epistemic possibilities of descriptions. On my view, definite descriptions are important for Russell because they make it possible for him to remain true to his fundamental epistemological principle.

Let us go back, for the last time, to the ‘Bismarck’ passage reproduced above. Russell says something very interesting about ‘B was an astute diplomatist’. He says: “This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know *it*, though we know it is true.”

What is Russell`s point? In philosophical parlance, people are often said to have knowledge *that p*, where *p* stands for an arbitrary proposition. But what could Russell have meant by *knowing* (or not *knowing*) *p*, as opposed to *knowing* (or not *knowing*) *that p*? What is it about a proposition *p* containing a proper name which makes it possible for one to *know that p*, but impossible for one to *know p*?

Let us consider the proposition “*This is red*”, where *this* stands for some sense-datum of which one is directly aware. It would be natural for Russell to say that this is the sort of proposition with which one may be acquainted. He would have said that one may be acquainted with ‘the-redness-of-this’. We have unmediated presentations of propositions having a sense-datum in subject position, in much the same way as we have unmediated presentations of the sense-data themselves. In such cases, we are not confined to *knowledge that p*. Here we may actually *know p*, in Russell’s sense.

Now, this is the sort of knowledge which language users cannot have concerning propositions involving proper names. According to Russell, language users do not have unmediated presentations of ‘the-astuteness-of-Bismarck’, because they do not have unmediated presentations of Bismarck himself, though they may know it for a fact *that* Bismarck was astute, where, as I have attempted to show, ‘Bismarck’ stands simply for Bismarck.

The true significance of Russell’s fundamental epistemological principle can now be fully displayed: descriptions are needed because they can lay bare the sort of privately associated propositions that individual language users are, in fact, acquainted with. As opposed to the proposition which goes into discourse, these private propositions never go public. They remain very much a private matter.

Of course, a number of descriptions could do the trick. Ultimately, however, all that Russell really needs to bring peace to his epistemological conscience is what I shall term a ‘non-describing description’. In fact, one finds suggestions to that effect in *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*: according to Russell, a description like ‘the man whose name was *Julius Caesar*’ is as good as any other.

Though an individual language user may know that “Julius Caesar was assassinated”, this proposition cannot possibly be an object of acquaintance. After letting the machinery of the Theory of Descriptions do its job, one can finally get at a proposition which the individual user does understand, that is to say, a proposition that the individual language user is acquainted with: “one and only one man was called *Julius Caesar*, and that one was assassinated,” where “*Julius Caesar* is a noise or shape with which we are acquainted” (p. 161).

If my interpretation is correct, one very important consequence is that Russell’s views on proper names become at once immune to one of Kripke’s sharpest criticisms. Given that Russell did not really take the meaning of a proper name to be given by an associated description, there is no reason to think that his theory is wrong on the grounds that proper names are rigid designators, while definite descriptions usually are not.

I do not have the least intention to suggest that this is all very simple and that there are no problems left in the investigation of Russell's views on proper names. Far from it. Russell's writings do not form an entirely coherent whole. They remain open to a number of interpretive possibilities. But I do think that my approach holds promise.

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