

### Gray's Elegy Argument

This is a notoriously tortuous argument Russell gives midway through “On Denoting” against Frege. But it is probably best understood as levied against an earlier version of Russell himself. The rough argument is that one can't have a Denoting concept/Denotation distinction because it leads to expressive limitations: you can't talk about Denoting concepts themselves. Here is a reworking of how the argument goes (NB: this is very controversial as an interpretation of Russell).

The basic (tacit) principle which creates trouble is this: **if a denoting concept  $DC_O$  denotes  $O$ , then the truth value of the proposition  $\langle DC_O, P \rangle$  is the same as that of the proposition  $\langle O, P \rangle$ .**

Consider “The guy with superpowers flies”. For Russell the proposition expressed by this sentence is made up of a denoting concept expressed by “the guy with superpowers”, let's call it  $DC_S$ , and the property of *flying*. I.e.

$\langle DC_S, \text{flying} \rangle$

This denoting concept has both a meaning and a denotation. Its meaning is the denoting concept itself:  $DC_S$ . Its denotation is Superman. Now suppose you want to talk about the denoting concept's meaning (that is, the denoting concept  $DC_S$  itself) rather than its denotation (Superman). What would you do? You might try to say “the denoting concept expressed by “the guy with superpowers” is a denoting concept”. But you've just used another denoting phrase. What is *its* meaning? Presumably another denoting concept. Call it  $DC_{DC_S}$ . So when we say something like “the denoting concept expressed by “the guy with superpowers” is a denoting concept” we're expressing a proposition that might be noted

$\langle DC_{DC_S}, \text{is a denoting concept} \rangle$

But by the above principle, and the fact that  $DC_{DC_S}$  denotes  $DC_S$  we know that

$\langle DC_{DC_S}, \text{is a denoting concept} \rangle$  has the same truth value as  
 $\langle DC_S, \text{is a denoting concept} \rangle$

But since  $DC_S$  denotes Superman we know that

$\langle DC_S, \text{is a denoting concept} \rangle$  has the same truth value as  
 $\langle \text{Superman}, \text{is a denoting concept} \rangle$

So we've said something false (or nonsensical). But we were trying to say something *true*. It looks like the problem is *systematic*: it looks like any denoting concept we pick is going to 'reach through' to the final denotation, rather than to the denoting concept.

Q: is this kind of argument a problem for Frege?

## Russell's Three Puzzles about Denoting

### Puzzle 1: Intensionality of belief contexts

- (1) George IV wondered whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*.
- (2) George IV wondered whether Scott was Scott.

How can (1) be true while (2) is false, despite the fact that Scott is the author of *Waverley*?

The next two puzzles are for expressions like “Santa Claus” or “The present king of France” which do not seem to pick out any individual. We can call these *non-referring expressions*.

### Puzzle 2: Securing the Law of Excluded Middle

Law of Excluded Middle: Every expression of the form “p or not p” is true. For example

- “Sarah has been to Jamaica or it's not the case that Sarah has been to Jamaica”
- “Mark is six feet tall or Mark isn't six feet tall”

Russell takes this logical law to hold *universally*. But then, he asks, we should maintain that the following are true.

- “Santa Claus lives at the North Pole or it's not the case that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole”
- “The present king of France will reign another year or the present king of France will not reign another year”

But then we have to say one of the disjuncts (one of the clauses separated by “or”) is true. Which one, and why? (Note: This is only a puzzle for those who want the law of excluded middle to cover these statements)

Q: Should we let the plausibility of the logical law arbitrate these cases, or should we instead conclude from these cases that there is something wrong with the logical law in its unrestricted form?

Q: What does Frege say about these cases?

### Puzzle 3: Puzzle of Negative Existentials

Russell: “how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?”

Especially, how can these sentences be true:

- “Santa Claus doesn't exist”
- “The present King of France doesn't exist”

All Russell's puzzles are about *definite descriptions*—expressions of the form “the \_\_\_\_\_” where the blank is filled in with a noun phrase. (And equally often, about names). So why does Russell bill these as puzzles for theories of *denoting phrases* more generally?