a new definite description. We could say, "the most famous philosopher of ancient Greece," but then the question would arise as to what the name "Greece" means. The point is that the uniquely identifying definite descriptions themselves contain another name. To explain what that name means, the descriptions continue to regress to descriptions containing other names. This issue raises serious problems for the description theory, since names are supposed to depend ultimately on descriptions for their reference.

One type of description that can be used embeds a demonstrative, such as "the owner of that dog." Here we secure reference to the owner by referring demonstratively to her dog. No name is used. So such a description might give the sense of a name without itself containing a name. Demonstratives such as "this" and "that" are very important in language and are often used to provide descriptive reference without the use of names. Without this use of demonstratives, reference by means of descriptions would be crippled. So descriptive reference depends upon and presupposes demonstrative reference. That means that demonstrative reference is basic. It cannot be analyzed in terms of purely descriptive reference. Therefore, demonstratives are not short for demonstrative-free descriptions. We will be considering demonstratives in detail in later chapters; for now we must note that the description theory of names is not applicable to demonstratives.

Our conclusion, then, is that though it may be true that proper names are equivalent to descriptions, those descriptions always in the end embed demonstratives. Since demonstratives cannot be explained in terms of descriptions, reference is not fundamentally descriptive. Even if the description theory is true of names, this does not show that the way we basically refer to things in the world is through descriptions. The basic way we refer to the world is by means of demonstratives, which are not equivalent to descriptions. The victory of the description theory over Kripke's attack is therefore a Pyrrhic one. In the end, we must accept that some referential terms function nondescriptively.

3 Russell on Definite Descriptions

3.1 Indefinite and Definite Descriptions

In the previous chapter we considered the description theory of names, but we didn't say much about the analysis of descriptions themselves. Frege treats definite descriptions as belonging to the same category as proper names—they are "singular terms," whose function is to denote a particular object for the rest the sentence to comment on. They have both sense and reference. Russell, however, disagrees: he denies that definite descriptions are singular terms, analogous to proper names. He thinks they belong to a quite separate semantic category. In particular, he denies that they have reference. He thus believes that their surface grammatical form is misleading. In this chapter we will see why he says these things.

In the text we will be discussing—a chapter from Russell's *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (written while he was in prison during the First World War for treason)—Russell builds up to his theory of definite descriptions by first considering indefinite descriptions. Once he establishes the right logical analysis of indefinite descriptions, his analysis of definite descriptions comes out as a simple addition. Though he does not use this terminology, his essential thesis is that definite descriptions are *quantifiers* (if you are not familiar with this concept already, it will be explained as we proceed). His first example in the text is the sentence "I met a man." An indefinite description is one formed with the indefinite article "a," whereas a definite description is one formed with the definite article "the." His famous example of a definite description is "the king of France"; an indefinite description would be "a king of France." The sentence "I met a man," then, is formed using the indefinite description "a man" attached to the verb "met" and the indexical singular term "I" (indexical terms are

discussed in later chapters). Another example of a sentence using the same indefinite description is "Socrates is a man."

Frege believed that an expression of the form "the *F*" is a proper name that functions as the subject of a subject-predicate sentence. It is possible to substitute an indefinite description in its place and preserve grammaticality. This makes it natural to suppose that "an *F*" is also a proper name that constitutes the subject of a sentence. Russell addresses himself to the question of whether "a man" in "I met a man" is a proper name. In the following passage, Russell wonders if in the sentence "I met a man," "a man" refers to Jones:

> Our question is: What do I really assert when I assert "I met a man"? Let us assume, for the moment, that my assertion is true, and that in fact I met Jones. It is clear that what I assert is *not* "I met Jones." I may say "I met a man, but it was not Jones"; in that case, though I lie, I do not contradict myself, as I should do if when I say I met a man I really mean that I met Jones. It is clear also that the person to whom I am speaking can understand what I say, even if he is a foreigner and has never heard of Jones.[1]

Russell here makes a simple objection to "I met a man" being synonymous with "I met Jones": suppose I met Jones, but I lie and say, "I met a man who was not Jones." Or maybe I forgot I met Jones and do not lie, but just say something false. Regardless of my motivation, though I make a false statement, it is not the case that I am contradicting myself. If "I met a man" meant the same thing as "I met Jones," then I would be saying "I met Jones but I did not meet Jones." This would be a very poor way of lying. Russell rightly claims that I am not contradicting myself when I say, "I met a man but it was not Jones," even if I did meet Jones. So it cannot be that "a man" means the same thing as "Jones" in this sentence, even though Jones was the man I met. The meaning of "a man" cannot be given by the meaning of a name for the man I met. This is Russell's first proof to show that an indefinite description is not a name of an individual. The relation between "a man" and "Jones" cannot be a synonymy relation, or else I would be contradicting myself when I said, "I met a man who was not Jones."

Looking at the matter grammatically, one would not suppose that "a man" is a proper name, since grammatically it is quite a different expression from "Jones." However, when thinking in terms of reference, it would be natural to think this way about how to determine the truth conditions of the sentence. For example, for the sentence to be true, there has to be a

meeting relation between someone referred to as "I" and someone referred to as "a man." This statement would express a relational proposition relating me to the person I met. It should have the form "*a R b*"—but if that is true, and "*a*" and "*b*" are names, then contrary to appearances, "a man" should be a name. Thus we might suppose that *logically* "a man" is a name, though grammatically it clearly is not. But Russell thinks that this reasoning is incorrect; otherwise, as he says, the statement "I met a man but it was not Jones" would be a contradiction, on the assumption that I met Jones.

The second point Russell makes is to the same end. Consider the sentence "I met a unicorn." If we thought that indefinite descriptions were names, then there must be something that the name names in order to make the name meaningful. In this case, there are no unicorns to name, so the phrase "a unicorn" cannot function in that sentence as a name of something, or else it would be meaningless instead of merely false. In the previous example ("I met a man") there was an actual man being met who could possibly be the bearer the name. With the unicorn example, nothing in reality can bear that name, so it would have to be a meaningless sentence. You could never meet a unicorn, because there aren't any unicorns to meet. Russell's point here is that if "a unicorn" were a name of something then the name could be meaningful only if something were named. Since nothing is named, it would lack meaning; but it does not lack meaning. The only way the sentence can be false is if it is meaningful. Therefore, it cannot be that "a unicorn" is a name of something. The thing that enters into the proposition expressed by these words is not an object named. Instead, it is the *concept* of a unicorn that is the constituent of the proposition expressed by the sentence "I met a unicorn." With respect to the "I," what enters into that proposition is not a concept but an object, because I am not a concept. However, sentences like "I met a unicorn" or "I met a man" bring the concept of a unicorn or a man into the proposition, not an actual man or unicorn. According to Russell, then, in the example "I met a man," "a man" refers to a general concept, not to a particular man.

Russell uses the term *propositional function* to describe what is left in a proposition when part of it is deleted. If I say, "I met Jones," this is an ordinary proposition whose constituents are me and Jones. However, if we delete the name and put in its place the letter "*x*," then the letter "*x*" does not refer to any individual at all. It is a placeholder that indicates a part of the sentence has been deleted and left blank. The phrase "*x* is a

man" is called a propositional function, because when something specific is added to replace "*x*" (usually called a *variable*) the entire sentence expresses a proposition. In essence, it is the abstract form of a proposition, without being a particular determinate proposition. In ordinary logic, "*x*" here would be referred to as a free variable. The phrase with "*x*" will not become a proposition until a name is plugged in to replace the variable.

Propositional functions can be simple or complex. Russell discusses the sentence "I met *x* and *x* is human," and takes it to mean "I met someone or something and that someone or something is human," or, more simply, "I met something and it is human." He explains that such a propositional function is "sometimes true" if a proper name is inserted to replace "*x*." He suggests that we replace the relational form ("*a R b*") with the form of this propositional function ("I met *x*"). Thus the propositional function "I met *x*" is said to have an instance in which the resulting sentence is true. If I met Jones and plug "Jones" in to the propositional function, the sentence would be true. When someone says, "I met a man," he is not really talking about a particular man, according to Russell. Instead, Russell thinks that when someone says, "I met a man," he is talking about a propositional function and saying that it has an instance—though he may not know what this instance is. It is important to note that any name could be plugged into this propositional function. As long as the name refers to a real person, the function has an instance, and is therefore true. Therefore, there are two relations that Jones can have to a proposition to make it true. One is that Jones can be named by a name in that proposition. But in the other relation, Jones can be an instance of a propositional function—without being named by it. To put it differently, Jones can either be explicitly named or he can fall under a general term or predicate like "man I met." Falling under a predicate is not the same kind of relation as being named. If I say, "Everyone in this room is a philosopher," I have not *named* anyone, even though several people fall under the predicate "person in this room who is a philosopher."

If we put it in more contemporary terms, Russell's view is that indefinite descriptions are quantifiers. Now we realize that quantifiers and names are semantically not at all the same. For example, take the quantifier phrase "no one": that cannot be a name of someone! If it were, "no one is over ten feet tall" would entail "someone is over ten feet tall." But neither is "someone" a name for a person—for if so, who? Even if someone is out there making

true what the speaker is saying when he says, "someone stole my bike," the speaker is not naming that villain; if he were, he'd know who did it.

All of this has to do with the revolution in traditional logic that stretched all the way back to Aristotle. In the old days, everything was just terms and predicates. Russell rejects this traditional logic, just as Frege argued that quantifier expressions ("something," "everything," etc.) should not be assimilated to names. Frege's position is that a quantifier word is a "second-level concept." He thought that these words were neither names of objects nor concept expressions like "is a man." A second-level concept applies to a first-level concept. When a person says, "Someone is a man," the quantifier word is like a second-order propositional function: it is a comment *about* the first-level concept expressed by "man." If a person says, "Jack is a man," then he is speaking of Jack and stating that he is a man. But if someone says, "Someone is a man," he is now talking about a propositional function, stating that it has an instance. He is saying this: "The first-level concept expressed by 'is a man' has at least one instance." In Russell's example of "I met a man," the correct analysis is this: "the propositional function 'I met *x* and *x* is human' has at least one instance." In this there is no mention of Jones by name, even if he is the instance in question.

This has a bearing on statements about existence. When an atheist says, "God does not exist," what he is really saying is "The propositional function '*x* is a god' has no instance." He is not saying about some individual named "God" that *he* does not exist—that would be self-defeating. Russell argues that a person cannot make a true negative existence statement about a named individual because he was never talking about any individual in the first place. Instead, the speaker was really talking about a propositional function and asserting that it has no instances. By paraphrasing the statement into a statement about a propositional function, we are not misled into believing that terms like "a man" or "someone" or "no one" are somehow functioning like names that require a reference. The only thing referred to with a propositional function is a concept, about which we state that it has, or lacks, instances. The point that Russell is ultimately building up to is that a definite description is also a quantifier, not a name. In adopting this approach, Russell thereby resolves many puzzles that arise with definite descriptions, particularly when they are empty.

Russell had previously held Alexius Meinong's view. This is the view that in addition to the ordinary objects that exist, there are things that *subsist*, or

have a peculiar quasi existence. Things that people normally do not think exist, such as unicorns and golden mountains, have this quality of subsistence. Because of this subsistent category, Meinong thinks that expressions like "the golden mountain" do refer to things, and because they have reference they also have sense. This view is in contrast to Frege's view that such terms have sense but not reference. With Meinong's view, "the golden mountain" is meaningful because it refers to the golden mountain, which is a subsistent thing. In his system, such expressions can be endowed with reference, so long as we accept this expanded ontology of subsistent entities. Russell now avoids this view by developing a theory of descriptions that does not postulate any Meinongian ontology in order to give meaning to empty definite descriptions. Russell believes that such phrases do not *denote* anything, even when they have an existent correlate. It is the same point he makes about the phrase "a man"—the definite description is not a phrase that functions like a name at all. Cases where there is no entity to denote (e.g., "the golden mountain") do not require an extra ontology like Meinong's. Rather, we say that the expression is not a denoting phrase to start with, but something completely different from that, just as "a man" is not a denoting phrase. Russell argues that definite descriptions also express propositional functions that do not refer to or denote or name objects. As Frege would put it, they function as quantifiers. Therefore, since quantifiers are different from names, definite descriptions are different from names. Russell's new theory is developed against the background of Meinong's theory, which is also a version of Frege's theory in assuming that definite descriptions function as proper names.

3.2 Three Theories of Definite Descriptions

Before continuing with a thorough analysis of Russell's theory, it is important to note that Russell does not follow the rules on when things should be quoted or not. Indeed, Russell is notorious for his misuse of quotations. We should be more careful.

There are three theories about definite descriptions relevant to Russell's "Definite Descriptions." We can use Russell's first example, "the king of France," to explain these three theories. The description "the king of France" is an empty description—one with no reference—because at the time Russell used the example, France had no king. Although this description is

empty, it is just as meaningful a description as "the queen of England," though that description does have reference. The fact that there are meaningful empty descriptions refutes the idea that the meaning of a definite description is identical to its reference. If reference and meaning were identical, then our first example would have no meaning.

Frege's theory is consonant with this fact, because it allows that such expressions have sense but no reference. Of course, the sense is where the meaningfulness lies. As far as we can tell from Frege, he believes that every meaningful expression has a sense, and there are no expressions whose meaning is simply their reference. Every expression that exists in natural language is something whose meaning consists in its sense, where the sense is independent of the reference. Russell, in his discussion, never takes into account Frege's view. Some readers could potentially be confused reading this excerpt alone, because Russell is constantly making assertions that contradict Frege's theory. Russell presupposes that Frege's theory is wrong without overtly stating his rejection of the theory of sense and reference. Instead, Russell holds a referential theory of meaning, where he believes that the meaning of an expression must be its reference.

Meinong's view is that "the king of France" has a reference to a peculiar, subsistent entity. Its reference is not something that exists in the same way that the reference of "Queen Elizabeth II" exists. In Meinong's ontology, the world is divided into existent things and nonexistent things, and nonexistent things also have a kind of being. Given his distinction between existence and subsistence, it is possible for Meinong to argue that "the king of France" refers to a subsistent being. By considering fictional characters, Meinong's view becomes easier to understand. According to him, the name "Hamlet" refers not to any existent Prince of Denmark but to a fictional character. In Meinong's theory, such fictional characters have being without existence—subsistence. Therefore, a name like "Hamlet" refers to a subsistent entity. With this theory, a referential theory of meaning can be maintained, without adopting Frege's distinction between sense and reference. If an expression is meaningful because of its reference, we have no need to bring in sense to establish meaning, because we always have subsistent references when existent references are lacking.

According to Russell, every proper name or singular expression has a meaning determined by its reference. He does not accept a two-level theory of reference *and* sense; he thinks he can get by with reference alone.

Contrary to appearances, he argues, a definite description is not a singular term at all and does not denote an object. Frege thinks that empty descriptions like "the king of France" have no reference but that such expressions are meaningful because they have a sense. Meinong thinks they refer to subsistent entities and are meaningful that way. Russell thinks they are not referential expressions, so their emptiness isn't a problem.

As mentioned above, Russell was a Meinongian in his earlier years. But since he liberated himself from trying to find a reference for empty descriptions, he does not have to reconcile himself to accepting shady subsistent entities. He thinks that ordinary language is logically misleading, because it makes definite descriptions occupy the place of names. For example, in ordinary language, the sentences "The king of France is bald" and "Bertrand Russell is bald" are both subject-predicate sentences. The first one has a definite description as the subject while the second has a name for the subject. Ordinary language makes it seem as though definite descriptions function as proper names, even though logically they do not.

Quantifier expressions also illustrate this point. The sentence "Someone is bald" appears to express a subject-predicate proposition in the same way that "Bertrand Russell is bald" does. These two expressions look grammatically and syntactically the same. However, it would be very strange to think that "someone" is a name ("Someone, come here!"). Consider the claim that "someone" denotes Jones in the sentence "Someone is bald," where Jones is in fact bald. But "someone" cannot be the name of Jones, because the statement "Someone is bald but it's not Jones" is not a contradiction, even though Jones may be the only bald person. The appearance of subject-predicate status for "Someone is bald" has to be misleading.

At the same time, it is not plausible to think that "someone" refers to some shadowy, ideal, possible bald individual, as Meinong supposes. Russell argues that terms like "someone" are logically not singular terms. Part of his purpose is to explain what their logical role is. Since we have seen that these sorts of terms are not referring expressions at all, their meaning cannot be constituted by reference. Because of the defectiveness of ordinary language, these sorts of statements are misinterpreted as having subject-predicate form. However, the fact that such terms lack a singular reference does not mean that they lack meaning.

Frege and Meinong have their own explanations as to why such terms as "the king of France" lack an existent reference but have meaning. Frege

uses his sense–reference distinction, and Meinong postulates an existence–subsistence distinction. Russell rejects both of those ideas. He thinks that every expression that is referential has a meaning that is determined by its reference, but these sorts of expressions are not referential at all. However, Russell accepts that these sorts of expressions *appear* to be referential, owing to the deceptiveness of natural language. This point about the deficiencies of natural language was very important to Russell, because it showed that ordinary language can be logically misleading and bears on the question of constructing an ideal logical language. In *Principia Mathematica*, Russell and Alfred North Whitehead formed an ideal language that is essentially the same as predicate logic. The formation of this logical language led to the idea that natural language was adequate for practical purposes but deficient for logical ones. This view was the standard one for a long time and shaped philosophy for the first half of the twentieth century—until Ludwig Wittgenstein came along and argued against this view, which he had also held in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. So this issue about descriptions had wide philosophical implications.

It is important to understand the context within which Russell produced this work. Much of the correct methodology in twentieth-century philosophy and expectations about language hung on the theory of descriptions, in addition to its contributions to pure logic. Russell's theory practically shaped the whole of twentieth-century analytical philosophy. The resulting dialogue of twentieth-century philosophy revolved around whether philosophers agreed with it or were against it. So, the theory was of massive importance at the time Russell developed it.

3.3 Indefinite Descriptions and Identity

Russell's position is that statements containing descriptions like "a man" must be paraphrased to reveal their meaning. This will involve changing their form quite dramatically, and also introducing logical symbols. To paraphrase such statements, he uses propositional functions to take particular expressions out of a sentence and substitute a variable "*x*." In this case, he would insert an "*x*" into "a man," creating the propositional function "I met *x* and *x* is human." This propositional function is then said to have at least one instance, meaning that it applies to at least one thing in the world. Jones is the instance out of all those things in the world that might

make that propositional function true. Although the sentence appears to refer to a certain individual in the world with the expression "a man," the original sentence's form is logically misleading. For Russell, what the sentence really says is that the particular propositional function has at least one instance. He uses this apparatus of explanation to make it philosophically clear that this sentence is about a propositional function.

Today we routinely use quantifiers to express Russell's point. Take, for example, the long logical form:

(1) There is an *x* such that I met *x* and *x* is human.

The same propositional function can have several variations. It could also be read existentially:

(2) There exists an *x* such that I met *x* and *x* is human.

Different theories of the quantifiers correspond to the ways in which such a statement is read. A useful thing to remember about interpreting existential quantifiers is that the variable "*x*" can be replaced by a name. After such a substitution, there will be at least one instance where the substitution will make the statement true. In our particular case, "Jones" would make the statement true. Such an analysis is often called the "substitutional interpretation" of the existential quantifier, because a particular substitution into the open sentence expressing a propositional function makes the resulting sentence true. Russell tends to assume the substitutional interpretation. The best way to understand his interpretation is with the sentence "I met something and that something is human." The only term in this sentence that refers to an individual is "I." The phrase "a man" becomes a part of the existential quantifier. Then, there is a conjunction of the predicates giving us the assertion about my meeting a human. The only things that are brought in by the quantifier phrase are concepts. To better illustrate this point, we can use a statement involving a nonexistent entity: "I met a unicorn." Since there are no unicorns, I could not have met a unicorn. However, when using Russell's apparatus to analyze this sentence, we see that the proposition contains only me and the property of being a unicorn. The sentence is actually saying (falsely) that there is an instance of that property and that I met that instance. In this form, no unicorn is named.

The advantage of Russell's theory is that we can explain how to speak of nonexistent things without creating an entirely new ontology. In Meinong's view, we need subsistent golden mountains to analyze "I climbed

the golden mountain." Russell avoids creating an entirely new ontology of subsistent things, because he thinks that the statement is really about a propositional function. Russell argues that genuine names that are empty are indeed meaningless, but "the golden mountain" is not a genuine name. Russell just assumes that Frege is wrong, because he assumes that the meaning of a name comes from its reference if it really is a name. In contrast to Frege, Russell also sharply distinguishes between names and descriptions. He thinks that descriptions, definite and indefinite, do not function in the way that names do.

Russell includes a few paragraphs on the important distinction between the "is" of predication and the "is" of identity, which we shall briefly pause to explicate. Although these points are not really essential to his main line of argument, they have major significance in analytic philosophy. He says there are two kinds of "is": the "is" of identity and the "is" of predication. The "is" of identity is used in sentences that could be paraphrased as "$a = b$," like "Hesperus is Phosphorous." Russell points out that we do not always use "is" in the sense of identity. Take the statement "This table is brown." The table has the *color* brown, but the *identity* of the table is not brown. There are a great many things in the world that are brown and not just this table. It would be absurd to claim that this table is *identical* to the color brown! According to Russell, the "is" that is present in "this table is brown" is the "is" of predication. The "is" used in the sentence "Socrates is human" is thus entirely different from the "is" used in the sentence "Socrates is a man." The former is the "is" of predication, and the latter is the "is" of identity. He gives us the following paraphrase of the sentence with the identity "is":

(3) There is an x such that Socrates is identical to x and x is human.

His general point is that we must be aware of the two different forms of "is" in language. Also, the ambiguity of "is" adds further evidence to his point that ordinary language is logically misleading, because this one word—"is"—is used in both statements of predication and statements of identity. Russell believes that an ideal language would not have such ambiguities.

3.4 Russell's Rejection of Meinong's Ontology

Russell's stalwart rejection of the Meinongian ontology can be found in the following impassioned passage:

For want of the apparatus of propositional functions, many logicians have been driven to the conclusion that there are unreal objects. It is argued, e.g., by Meinong, that we can speak about "the golden mountain," "the round square," and so on; we can make true propositions of which these are the subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being, since otherwise the propositions in which they occur would be meaningless. In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features. To say that unicorns have an existence in heraldry, or in literature, or in imagination, is a most pitiful and paltry evasion. What exists in heraldry is not an animal, made of flesh and blood, moving and breathing of its own initiative. What exists is a picture, or a description of words. Similarly, to maintain that Hamlet, for example, exists in his own world, namely, in the world of Shakespeare's imagination, just as truly as (say) Napoleon existed in the ordinary world, is to say something deliberately confusing, or else confused to a degree which is scarcely credible. There is only one world, the "real" world: Shakespeare's imagination is part of it, and the thoughts that he had in writing Hamlet are real. So are the thoughts that we have in reading the play. But it is of the very essence of fiction that only thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers are real, and that there is not, in addition to them, an objective Hamlet. When you have taken account of all the feelings roused by Napoleon in writers and readers of history, you have not touched the actual man; but in the case of Hamlet you have come to the end of him. If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him; if no one had thought about Napoleon, he would have soon seen it that someone did. The sense of reality is vital in logic, and whoever juggles with it by pretending that Hamlet has another kind of reality is doing a disservice to thought. A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects.[2]

We can clearly see the force of Russell's point here. To say that Hamlet is an existent in Shakespeare's imagination or our own imaginations is a confused way of speaking. Hamlet, Russell argues, does not have the same existence in our imaginations as you have as you are reading the text. At most, the sentence "Hamlet has an existence in Shakespeare's imagination" can mean that Shakespeare invented the fictional character of Hamlet. The sentence does not mean that we can go to a place called "Imagination" and find Hamlet skulking there, existing like one of us does in reality. Herein lies another misleading aspect of ordinary language. The sentence "There exists a dog in the next room" allows the listener or reader to understand its meaning—she will see a dog in the next room if she goes into that room. However, the sentence "There exists a dog in my imagination" makes it

seem as though imagination is a place to which people can travel and, upon arriving there, we will find a dog, barking and wagging its tail. This notion, Russell argues, is ludicrous; a dog or a unicorn does not exist in one's imagination in the same way that a horse exists in a paddock.

As to whether the passage above refutes Meinong's position, we cannot yet say. Meinong never says that phrases like "the golden mountain" refer to things that have an existence. His whole argument is based on the thesis that they have only subsistence. Meinong never states that things exist in the imagination in the way normal people exist in towns and cities. Really, Russell is arguing against what he thinks Meinong is proposing, not what Meinong is actually proposing. However, for the sake of understanding Russell's theory, we will assume that he is correct about how we should deal with definite descriptions that refer to these nonexistent entities—that is, they have no reference at all.

3.5 The Details of Russell's Theory of Descriptions

The theory of descriptions is now quite simple. An indefinite description like "a man" is equivalent to the existential quantifier. The reader may now be wondering how Russell distinguishes a definite description from an indefinite one. Suppose we start with the indefinite description in "A present king of France is lucky." We could paraphrase that sentence in the following way: "There exists someone x such that x is a present king of France and x is lucky." Russell then asks us to consider a case where the sentence has "*the* king of France" as a component. The difference lies in whether uniqueness is implied. In the sentence "I met a man" the speaker of the sentence does not logically imply that he met just one man. Such descriptions with "a" can apply to many men. On the other hand, a definite description with "the" (e.g., "the king of France) can only apply to one individual if it applies to any. Therefore, uniqueness is what is added when "a" is replaced by "the." Russell thus argues that definite descriptions should be analyzed in basically the same way that indefinite descriptions are analyzed; the only difference in the analysis of definite descriptions is that uniqueness is added. Keeping these considerations in mind, we will first examine an analysis of an indefinite description; then we will examine an analysis of a definite description. So consider "An F is G" and "The F is G." The former is true if and only if at least one thing is both F and G. The

latter is true if and only if at least one thing is *F* and that thing is *G and* at most one thing is *F* and that thing is *G*. Both imply existence, expressed by "at least," but only the second implies uniqueness, expressed by "at most." If we analyze the sentence "The queen of England is happy," we would say that there *is* a queen of England, and that there is only *one* queen of England, and that she is happy.

There are three conjuncts in this analysis of "The *F* is *G*": (1) there exists something that is *F*, (2) there is only one thing that is *F*, and (3) that thing is *G*. Therefore, if you uttered the sentence "The king of France is bald," you would be saying that there exists something that is a king of France and that there is at most one thing that is a king of France and that thing is bald.

That is Russell's general form for the analysis of the statement "The *F* is *G*." His theory is fairly straightforward. The basic idea is that the word "the" means existence and uniqueness. Existence means at least one, but uniqueness means at most one, and then the particular predication ("is bald") follows. Thus, Russell's interpretation of definite descriptions begins in grammatical form with the simple phrase "the *F*." It is then paraphrased as a conjunction of existence and uniqueness, thus producing a more complex linguistic form. This logical form is quite different from the apparent form in ordinary language, where "the *F*" is not a conjunction at all. The definite description disappears as a singular term in this analysis, and so it has no reference assigned to it.

A side note on a slightly technical part of the Russellian analysis: there are two ways of logically analyzing uniqueness. One is with this notation: "$\exists!x$ (Fx and Gx)," read "There is a unique x such that Fx and Gx." This is a very easy and convenient way to build uniqueness into the quantifier. In that way, we have specified uniqueness without an analysis: we just use "!" as a primitive symbol expressing uniqueness. But there is also another nice way of analyzing uniqueness in logical vocabulary. Consider the following:

(4) There is an x such that Fx and for all y if Fy, then $x = y$ and Gx.

In plainer language, this analysis is saying the following: "There is an x such that x is a king of France, and for any object y, if y is a king of France then y is identical to x, and x is bald." This is a way of saying that someone is uniquely king of France and bald. We are saying, intuitively, that if there is anything else in the world that is a king of France, then it is identical to the first thing. That implies that there is not more than one thing, because

anything else that is a king of France is just the first thing. Such is the standard way for expressing uniqueness using ordinary quantifier logic with identity. It is not essential to understanding the theory. Rather, it is one way to analyze what uniqueness means. Uniqueness just means "at most." This part of the theory, using standard logic, is not essential to Russell's basic idea—it is just one explanation of what uniqueness is.

As we have seen, Russell thinks that definite descriptions are not proper names, despite the fact that in some ways they appear to be proper names. Once the philosopher of language realizes that grammar is logically misleading, he or she can then have a theory that is not logically misleading. According to Russell, we do not need to postulate in our theory of meaning anything more than the reference of terms, once our sentences have been fully analyzed. Russell is a kind of Millian about genuine proper names, because he believes that ultimately expressions mean what they do in virtue of referring to what they refer to.

If Russell does not believe that definite descriptions are proper names, we may wonder what proper names are for him. Russell does think there are proper names, but he has a peculiar set of criteria for them. As before, one of his points is that the words that appear in language to be proper names are not actually proper names, because language is logically misleading. Therefore, a name like "Bertrand Russell" will occur in a language though it is not a proper name at all. Russell advocates the description theory of names and considers such names to be the equivalent of a description. He takes a name and gives a paraphrase of it, turning it into a description (e.g., "the author of *Principia Mathematica*"), and then analyzes the description by his theory of descriptions, thereby eliminating the name as a name. According to Russell, none of the names of ordinary language is a logically proper name. They are all fake names—they all appear to be names, but they are not actually names. His view is that all the standard words we consider to be proper names in natural language are all disguised definite descriptions, and those descriptions are all analyzed away by the theory of descriptions. Following his theory, these descriptions do not have their meaning in virtue of their reference; so neither do ordinary proper names.

Russell does believe that there are words that can have meaning in virtue of their reference, but those are what he calls *logically proper names*. Logically proper names are meaningful in virtue of what they refer to. Our ordinary names are not logically proper names, however, because they do not

have meaning in virtue of what they refer to. There is the logical category of proper names, but none of the ordinary expressions called names belong in that category. Russell's view is rather peculiar when compared to the more grammatically conservative views of Frege and Meinong. He thinks that language is so misleading that, despite appearances, it does not even contain real proper names! In the following excerpt, Russell describes what he means by names:

> A name is a simple symbol whose meaning is something that can only occur as subject, i.e., something of the kind that we defined as an "individual" or a "particular." And a "simple" symbol is one which has no parts that are symbols. Thus "Scott" is a simple symbol, because, though it has parts (namely, separate letters), these parts are not symbols. On the other hand, "the author of *Waverly*" is not a simple symbol, because the separate words that compose the phrase are parts which are symbols. … 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. A proposition containing a description is not identical with what that proposition becomes when a name is substituted, even if the name names the same object as the description describes. "Scott is the author of *Waverly*" is obviously a different proposition from "Scott is Scott": the first is a fact in literary history, the second a trivial truism. And if we put anyone other than Scott in place of "the author of *Waverly*," our proposition would become false, and would therefore certainly no longer be the same proposition.[3]

His idea here is that a proper name is a simple symbol having no analysis and no parts. It means what it does simply in virtue of what it designates. Definite descriptions are not proper names in that sense at all, because the proposition expressed cannot be preserved by substituting a name for a description (or vice versa). This substitution is not plausible because definite descriptions and names are completely different types of expressions, having quite different sorts of meanings.

Russell also employs the idea of "direct designation." Direct designation characterizes how a real name directly designates its bearer—not via any description. A name does not express a description that then picks out an object. Instead, a name directly designates its bearer, and the bearer is the meaning of the name. Russell is a Millian, then, because he believes that names have their meaning in virtue of their reference and their reference alone.

One thing to notice is that in "Definite Descriptions" Russell fails to say anything about what would be a proper name. But in other writings

he suggests that a logically proper name is a demonstrative, because a demonstrative can refer directly to sense data. In Russell's view, one cannot refer directly to material objects since the material object might not exist (the viewer could be hallucinating the object). Therefore, the only logically proper names are phrases like "that black patch you are now seeing," where this refers to a subjective sense datum. According to Russell, the only logically proper names are demonstratives, and they can only refer to sense data. This certainly seems odd; we don't usually classify demonstratives as *names*. When did you last call one of your sense data by its proper name? Have you ever referred to a sense datum as, say, "Phil"?

If we look back at our discussion of Frege, we may have a few questions in regard to Russell's Millian theory. For instance, how does Russell's idea of logically proper names work with identity statements? Russell never talks about that, perhaps because he is very concerned by the question of existence. Frege's main concern is with identity. Russell does not have anything to say here about identity statements. He assumes that two logically proper names of the same thing have the same meaning, because the meaning of a proper name is its bearer. Russell is committed to the position that an identity statement linking two logically proper names must be a tautology. Russell avoids an obvious objection here by avoiding the question of Hesperus and Phosphorus.

Russell's position as to how to handle an identity statement that links two logically proper names is that two nonsynonymous logically proper names, in his system, cannot designate the same object. Names can differ in their meaning while referring to the same thing only if they are not really names. If they are names, as Russell defines logically proper names to be, then they cannot differ in their meanings while co-denoting. The identity statement must contain demonstratives that refer to sense data. Of course, it will be a false identity statement if the reference is to two different appearances. For the viewer, Hesperus elicits different sense data in the morning than Phosphorus does in the evening. Because these represent two entirely different pieces of sense data, they do not fit Russell's strict criteria for logically proper names. Thus "Hesperus" is not a name, for him, but "this sense datum of a luminous point" is. In Russell's system, there are no identity statements that are informative and contain ordinary names.

One important consequence of Russell's theory that generated much discussion is how he handles truth-values. According to Russell, the

truth-value of the sentence "The king of France is bald" is false. It is natural to assume that this statement would be false only if the subsistent Meinongian king of France had hair. Russell does not think along these lines at all. He believes that any statement containing that description is false, because the king of France does not exist. In his handling of truth-values, the sentence "Sherlock Holmes is a detective" is false, because it logically implies the real existence of Sherlock Holmes. In his famous article "On Referring," P. F. Strawson objected to this point, arguing that such a statement is neither true nor false, because there is no king of France to be bald or not be bald. The only way for that sentence to be true would be by the king of France being bald, and the only way it could be false is by the king of France having a good head of hair. Since neither of those things is the case, the statement "The king of France is bald" must to be neither true nor false. But Russell's analysis implies that it straightforwardly false.

3.6 Problems with Russell

Although in the previous sections we explained Russell's analysis, we have not yet discussed whether or not this analysis is correct. The following passage is an excellent summary of what we discussed in the previous sections:

> 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. We may inquire significantly whether Homer existed, which we could not do if "Homer" were a name. The proposition "the so-and-so exists" is significant, whether true or false; but if *a* is the so-and-so (where "*a*" is a name), the words "*a* exists" are meaningless. It is only of descriptions—definite or indefinite—that existence can be significantly asserted; for, if "*a*" is a name, it *must* name something: what does not name anything is not a name, and therefore, if intended to be a name, is a symbol devoid of meaning, whereas a description, like "the present king of France," does not become incapable of occurring significantly merely on the ground that it describes nothing, the reason being that it is a *complex* symbol, of which the meaning is derived from that of its constituent symbols. And so, when we ask whether Homer existed, we are using the word "Homer" as an abbreviated description: we may replace it by (say) "the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." The same considerations apply to almost all uses of what look like proper names.[4]

In this passage, Russell makes three major points. He defines a name as a simple symbol whose meaning is its reference. A name without reference

would lack meaning. Calling a name "empty" is a contradiction in terms, because a name without reference is not a name. Russell also believes that descriptions are quantifiers and that ordinary "names" are equivalent to descriptions. The only reason why ordinary proper names appear to be names is because of the infirmities of natural language.

Russell's conception of genuine names has an obvious consequence for existential statements. He believes that existential statements are highly misleading because they appear to contain names when they do not. Statements like "*a* exists" look like they contain the proper name "*a*." There are two possibilities for this type of statement. First, if the name does refer to something, then the meaning of the name guarantees that the name has a reference. Therefore, adding "exists" to the name is stating a tautology, because names in Russell's system will refer only to things that exist. We can create an example to illustrate this point. If someone looks up outside and says, in reference to the color of the sky, "That shade of blue exists," he knows that that shade of blue exists, because it is an aspect of a sense datum. To add that the color exists is unnecessary, since that is understood in virtue of grasping the name alone.

The second possibility arises if the name does not refer to anything. If the name does not refer to anything, then the statement containing it must be a meaningless statement with a meaningless part—and hence not a real statement. Take the sentence "*a* does not exist." Since the name "*a*" does not refer, we can say that it is *empty*. The problem with that alleged statement, "*a* does not exist," is that it cannot be true since the name lacks reference and is therefore meaningless. According to Russell, existential statements cannot be applied to names. On the other hand, existential statements can be applied to descriptions, because in the case of descriptions they do not need reference in order to have meaning. Existential statements will never contain names. In Russell's system, names must refer to have meaning, so it is trivial to say that their reference exists because it will always have to exist.

Russell is making a very radical proposal. The thought behind this proposal is that there are propositions that lurk behind sentences and each proposition has a kind of intrinsic logical form. It is as if these propositions are clothed in the sentences of ordinary language, but the clothing is very misleading as to the real form of the proposition. The job of the philosopher is to slip beneath the clothing and discern the real nature of the proposition. Then, he is able to devise a notation to reflect that nature. Russell's

proposal led to the idea that philosophers needed to devise a logically perfect language that reveals the actual structure that is hidden behind ordinary language. In our example of "*a* exists," the sentence looks like a subject-predicate sentence like "*a* is red," but in actuality it is a quantifier sentence. Therefore, the underlying proposition is of a completely different kind than that expressed by the sentence "*a* is red." One of the reasons why Russell's analysis of descriptions was so important was that it initiated discussions on the possibility of creating a logically perfect language. Many philosophers believed that such a logically perfect language could solve all philosophical problems. In particular, a completely logical language could solve ontological problems, ridding us of the shadowy ontology of Meinong.

For example, consider the ontological proof for the existence of god: God has all perfections, and one of those perfections must be existence, and therefore God must exist. According to Russell, this presupposes that existence is a predicate. In other words, subject-predicate sentences like "God exists" would assign a predicate to something named by "God." According to both Russell and Frege, that sentence is not a subject-predicate sentence at all, because the word "exists" is not a predicate. The idea is that existence is not a predicate or a property of things, like being red. Rather, it is a second-order concept that is really a property of a propositional function. Therefore, the ontological argument is unsound. To resolve philosophical problems, we must reform language so as to reflect the hidden form of propositions.

3.7 Primary and Secondary Occurrences

So far, we have only considered sentences of the form "The F is G." We may wonder how Russell handles sentences of the form "The F is not G." He argues that such sentences are ambiguous. To understand his point, we can consider a case where the "not" applies to a predicate, for example, "The queen of England is not pregnant." Here we are attributing nonpregnancy to Her Majesty. But instead of placing the negation sign immediately before "G," we could place it at the beginning, creating the sentence "It is not the case that the queen of England is pregnant." If we translate this into Russell's analysis, we get the negation of the existential clause: "It is not the case that at least one thing is a queen of England." This sentence is expressing the proposition that it is not the case that a queen of England exists.

Let us now consider an example where the description is empty: "It is not the case that there is at least one king of France." By negating the existential statement that there is a king of France, the statement becomes true. Since it is not the case that there is at least one king of France, the sentence "The king of France is not bald" will be true when interpreted this way. But under the first interpretation, the sentence will not be true. These two propositions have different truth-values. Thus, the truth or falsity of the sentence depends on at what point the negation is inserted. In the latter case, the entire sentence was negated; in the former case, only the predicate was negated.

Consider the sentence "It is not the case that there is a queen of England and she is pregnant." Since there is a queen of England, this sentence is false. On the other hand, if "not" were placed before the predicate, the sentence would be true (since the queen of England is not pregnant). To handle this kind of ambiguity, Russell brings in the concepts of primary and secondary occurrence. A primary occurrence of the description happens when the negation occurs before the predicate. A secondary occurrence of the description happens when the negation applies to the whole sentence including the description. To illustrate this point more clearly, we can bring in the concept of the scope of negation from logic. In the primary occurrence, negation has narrow scope; in the secondary occurrence, negation has wide scope and thus applies to the description. The scope merely tells you what is included in the negation. Are we negating the whole proposition or just the part of it that corresponds to the predicate?

This point about negation also applies to necessity. Like negation, necessity has a similar kind of ambiguity. One might wonder how to read the sentence "The queen of England is necessarily pregnant." It could be read either as "Necessarily there exists a queen of England and only one and she's pregnant" or as "There exists a queen of England and only one and she's necessarily pregnant." In the former case the modal operator has wide scope; in the latter, narrow scope. These can have different truth-values. When these sorts of operators like negation, necessity, or possibility occur in sentences containing descriptions, the scope determines the logical interaction between the operator and the description. This interaction can get quite complex if the sentence contains multiple operators.

This concludes our discussion of Russell's theory of descriptions. In the next chapter we will look at some possible criticisms of Russell.