

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF P.F. Strawson

EDITED BY  
PRANAB KUMAR SEN  
ROOP REKHA VERMA

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# Identification

NIRMALANGSHU MUKHERJI

### I

Russell<sup>1</sup> was interested in a class of phrases called *denoting phrases*, which he displayed with a list: 'An F', 'All Fs', 'Some F' and 'The F'. Assuming the controversial interchangeability of 'A/An' and 'Some',<sup>2</sup> the logical form of the sentences containing the first three phrases as subjects is well understood: 'All' (along with 'Each', 'Every', 'Any', let us assume) goes into ' $(Ax)$ ', the universal quantifier; 'Some' and 'A/An' go into ' $(Ex)$ ', the existential quantifier. Russell was persuaded that even sentences of the form 'The F is G' are amenable to the given quantifier-variable form with a little twist. The twist was to read sentences of the form

(1) The F is G

as logically equivalent to either (2) or (3):

(2) One and only one F is G.

(3) Exactly one F is G.

Assuming the logical equivalence between (2) and (3), Russell was persuaded that, say, (3) could be rewritten as:

(4)  $(Ex) (F^*x \ \& \ Gx)$

where ' $F^*x$ ' is an abbreviation of ' $Fx \ \& \ (Ay) (Fy \rightarrow x = y)$ '. The phenomenon of denoting phrases is, thus, assimilated into first-order quantification theory; in particular, sentences with definite descriptions as subjects are seen as quantified formulae. To recapitulate, there are *two* crucial steps in the theory. First, (1) and (3) are seen to be equivalent. Following

Kaplan,<sup>3</sup> we call this Russell's *fundamental equivalence*. Second, sentences in a natural language, viz. (1) and (3), are equivalent to a sentence in a regimented language, viz. (4). The total theory is called the *Theory of Descriptions*.

Before we leave the actual theory for a while for some historical remarks, notice that (i) the original list of denoting phrases does not contain either proper names or demonstrative phrases ('This/That F'), and (ii) the phrase 'The F' 'disappears under analysis' in (4), suggesting that definite descriptions are 'incomplete' symbols.

## II

It can well be maintained that this little, innocent-looking theory was the principal motivating force for a major area of Anglo-Saxon philosophy during the first half of this century. Russell himself applied the theory to (i) solve some of Frege's semantic puzzles, (ii) remove the most significant obstacles towards the leading results in *Principia Mathematica*, (iii) formulate the principles of logical atomism, and much else besides. Subsequently, this theory lay at the heart of much important work by Wittgenstein, Ramsey, Carnap and others. Ramsey, thus, had good reason to label this theory as a 'new paradigm' in philosophy.

When this theory was finally challenged head-on by Strawson,<sup>4</sup> it is no wonder that an intense controversy occupied philosophy for the best part of the 1950s for, by now, habits of philosophical thinking were almost completely governed by Russell's theory and the research programme (logicism, logical constructionism, search for ideal languages and the like) it generated. Strawson's paper, viewed as a plea for a 'paradigm'-shift, led justly to a debate between the old and the new. It is difficult to recall, in recent decades, another philosophical debate of similar intensity and effect.

Nevertheless, about four decades after the event, the Russell-Strawson controversy remains something of an enigma for contemporary students of philosophy. We are prone to ask: What exactly happened? And we are prone to expect, following fashionable descriptions of paradigm-shifts elsewhere, that after a few years of controversy, Russell's theory would be replaced



by another theory, that new textbooks of logic will contain just a passing mention of Russell's theory as a historical curiosity, that things accomplished by Russell's theory will either be shown to be of no value, or else, be coopted within the new theory, or both.

In reality just the opposite happened. In one of the most influential recent studies on language, Quine<sup>5</sup> developed his twin ideas of the elimination of singular terms and the logical regimentation of language almost squarely within the paradigm of the Theory of Descriptions. Kripke<sup>6</sup> proposed the startling theory of rigid designators, taking Russell's theory as the foundation for the notion of *non-rigid* designators. The list goes on. More importantly, all this vigorous research with Russell's theory at the core is almost entirely free of logicism, logical atomism, logical constructionism and the like. The theory survived the abandonment of its own research programme!

Strawson's work, on the other hand, after an initial popularity, occupies only a minor area in the works of speech-act theorists and other practitioners of pragmatics. Further, this relegation of Strawson's work was *not* preceded by anything like a direct refutation of Strawson by the Russellians. So, in a way, Strawson's challenge survived without preventing the proliferation of Russellian theories. For all theoretical purposes, we are told, Russell's and Strawson's ideas were at *cross-purposes* with each other. So, both the theories survived because they were not really in conflict. How can that be?

A largely stable *status quo* of competing ideas is not something unheard of in philosophy. By tradition, we expect such a *status quo* to obtain between large-scale 'systems' where a choice between competing 'systems' ultimately is a matter of taste. We approach some tiny area of experience with very abstract and largely normative tools. In most cases, we approach *different* (and tiny) areas of experience from different directions: rationalism/empiricism, idealism/realism, realism/nominalism and the like. Hence, we fall short of an actual, overriding conflict. The interest lies in the internal coherence of the *views* themselves and *not* essentially in what the views are about. So long as the views maintain a sufficient distance between themselves and the tiny area of experience which might have triggered them

off, we may rest content with a *status quo* of views, albeit, sometimes, with unequal weightage.

It is difficult to see how such a grand vision may be applied to the Russell–Strawson controversy. Russell's theory, as commonly understood, is clearly a *theory*, not a 'system', though the theory might have led to a system of thought. It is a theory since it is concerned *directly* and *only* with a certain delineable data, viz. the use of a certain variety of phrases—definite descriptions—in English ('The present king of France', 'The author of Waverley'). However, it has been argued much later, and with hindsight, that Russell's theory was not a theory of *use* at all; or, at least, that such a theory was not what Russell *intended*.

What did Russell intend? What *else* could he have intended given that he was interested in an analysis of the English phrases mentioned above? Russell surely could not have been interested in some artificial object (such as a fancy operator in a formal language) and given an account of this object from within the framework that created this object. Thus, for example, the theory could not have been *about* the iota-operator which Russell defined contextually with a certain formula; the thrust of the *theory* lay in coupling this artificially defined operator with a delineable class of *English* phrases. If this crucial coupling was not available to him, he could not have used the theory to solve some problems (i.e. Frege's puzzles) which arise explicitly with uses of phrases in a natural language, English, German or whatever. Further, there is some textual evidence that Russell *was*, indeed, concerned with use: 'Now *the*, when it is strictly used, involves uniqueness. . . . Thus when we say 'x was *the* father of Charles II' we not only assert that x had a certain relation to Charles II, but also that nothing else had this relation'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, to insist that Russell was not concerned with use is to miss the most significant aspect of Russell's theory, viz. that an artificial language is better equipped to display the *underlying* structure of ordinary language. In order to maintain this claim, Russell has to be correct about the *underlying* structure; otherwise, how could he claim that *that* structure has been adequately displayed? Since Russell's theory, in the preceding way, is a theory regarding a *matter of fact*, it is difficult to see how the grand vision of traditional philosophy applies to the Russell–

Strawson debate. Surely, *both* of them cannot be right (regarding, say, the correct understanding of the *underlying* structure). In what sense, then, are their views at cross-purposes?

An option that has been casually suggested at this point is that both of them are *partly* right. According to this view, then, Russell's theory was not wrong but was inadequate; Strawson's work may now be viewed as a supplement to Russell's theory, as compensating for some of the inadequacies in Russell's theory. In the face of what happened during the 1950s, this option is not acceptable on several counts. First, a mere supplementation does not quite explain the intensity of the controversy that raged for about a decade. Second, if Strawson's ideas were a supplement to Russell's, the received theory of descriptions *now* in currency should have had both Russell and Strawson in a single body. There is *no* such joint theory currently at hand—a theory that conveniently puts everything that Russell wants and everything that Strawson wants in a single coherent package. There could be *other* packages though; I discuss them below in connection with Kaplan.<sup>8</sup>

In order to appreciate the first worry raised above, let us contrast Strawson's work with that of Richard Sharvy.<sup>9</sup> It was well known for a long time, quite independently of Strawson, that Russell's theory was too artificially restricted to singular definite descriptions of a certain variety; plural descriptions ('The authors of *Principia Mathematica*', 'The founding fathers') and descriptions with mass terms ('The coffee in this room', 'The sand') were simply ignored. In these respects, then, Russell's theory was clearly inadequate. Sharvy proposed a set-theoretical framework in which such descriptions get a 'Russellian' treatment with Russell's theory obtaining for singular definite descriptions as a special case. This is a clear case of supplementation and it never generated a Russell-Sharvy controversy. Notice also the date of Sharvy's paper; thirty years after Strawson's paper, Sharvy is still working on a supplement to Russell's theory.

What sense, then, could be given to the widely popular view that Russell and Strawson were at *cross-purposes*? Since Russell was concerned with a clear phenomenon, a challenge to his theory is expected to address the same phenomenon and, thus,

both cannot be right. If Strawson was addressing a different phenomenon, then there could not have been a debate; but there was a major debate—then about what? As the contrast with Sharvy shows, we cannot even view Strawson's work as a mere supplement to Russell's theory. Yet there must be *some* notion of cross-purposes; otherwise, how could both the theories survive?

### III

One way to begin the search for a suitable notion of cross-purposes is to ask: 'Just what is it about definite descriptions that concerned Russell and Strawson?' The moment we ask this and look back at the original papers we are surprised. The surprise is that neither Russell nor Strawson, in their original papers, was *really* concerned with definite descriptions. Russell was literally concerned, as we saw, with the phenomenon of denoting, covering the class of denoting phrases. Strawson was concerned with the phenomenon of referring, covering referring expressions. This much is obvious from the very titles of the papers. Since definite descriptions (let us grant) *happen* to be both denoting phrases and referring expressions, Russell and Strawson were concerned with the same topic only incidentally. If natural languages did not contain definite descriptions, there would not have been a scenario of conflict. Given this reading, it would seem that our basic assumption, i.e. that both Russell and Strawson were concerned directly with the same phenomenon, is probably false. How will this reading, if correct, generate a suitable notion of cross-purposes?

Let us consider what would have happened if Russell had restricted his paper just to typically quantified phrases and Strawson restricted his paper just to proper names. Quite obviously, *nothing* would have happened. That is why such papers were never written. In agreement with each other, they would have claimed that there are denoting phrases *and* there are referring expressions without claiming that either category exhausts the grammatical category of subjects. This much has been known since antiquity. As a result, there was never any obvious conflict between Aristotelian logic and Mill's theory of



proper names; they simply did not have anything to say to each other. So, considering their respective *approaches* to linguistic phenomena, Russell and Strawson had divergent interests.

Nevertheless, the availability of singular definite descriptions at the intersection of Russell's and Strawson's (otherwise) divergent interests gives rise to the suitable notion of cross-purpose. In so far as Russell and Strawson were both concerned with definite descriptions, they were in (possible) conflict; in so far as they were concerned with different *aspects* of definite descriptions, they were at cross-purposes. This solution, which I take to be the received solution, does seem plausible; yet it is not wholly compelling. If, after all, Russell and Strawson were both concerned, if only incidentally, with definite descriptions, it is likely that there would be *some* conflict, however apparent.

This residual element of the puzzle may be resolved along the following lines. It is quite possible that, in admitting definite descriptions within their respective concerns, both Russell and Strawson were stretching things a bit. We may view the respective theories as somewhat artificially pulled in different directions just to loop over the intersecting phenomenon. This scenario reinforces the remark made above that neither theory was really about definite descriptions. Concern with definite descriptions showed at the stretched parts of the theories, not at the core parts. Since the core parts were not in conflict, the choice over definite descriptions becomes largely a matter of taste. It is a choice, as the received view suggests, between two *models* of language.

I do not agree with this view. I think there are compelling elements in Strawson's critique to completely overthrow Russell's theory. But I also think that there are other, more popular, elements in Strawson's work which *do* substantiate the received view; or, at any rate, that some of the popular elements of Strawson's work do substantiate the formulation of the received view as above. I take up this last point first in order to disentangle the different elements in Strawson's critique.

#### IV

Given the vastness of the literature on the received view and the limitations of space here, this part of the discussion is going to

be schematic and, to an extent, simplistic. I hope that I do not distort any essential point.

A *referring expression*, for Strawson, is an expression whose primary function—the *identifying function*—is to pick out an object for discourse (a topic) so that the user may make a comment on it. In a use of the sentence 'John is a bachelor', for example, the referring expression 'John' picks out a topic (John) to be commented upon (a bachelor). It is quite obvious that ordinary proper names, as in this example, are referring expressions. Are there other items that fall under this category?

An answer to this question could be provided by an intuitive list. However, an important part of Strawson's work lies in providing a theoretical answer. In a subject-predicate sentence, the term occurring in the subject position is a referring expression serving an identifying function to show what the sentence is about; the term occurring in the predicate position is an attributive expression which describes, classifies (or ascribes something to) the topic.<sup>10</sup>

From this theoretical perspective, then, not only proper names such as 'John', but expressions such as 'All men', 'Some man/men', 'The man', 'A few of the men', 'A little less than the majority of the men', as well as 'This/That man', when used in the subject position, are *all* referring expressions serving the identifying function, since the predicate part may be used to comment on the topics picked by the listed phrases.

We saw that proper names form the core data for the theory and, with a vast theoretical sweep, the entire class of subjects is assimilated to them. The theory binds the grammatical fact of the occurrence in a certain position with the fact of the performance of a certain function—the identifying function. We may view a major part of Strawson's work in philosophy of language as explaining this binding. I shall not, here, evaluate this theoretical point, as it falls outside the scope of this paper.

I am more interested in the process of generalization from the core data to an entire syntactic class.<sup>11</sup> Since proper names are unstructured expressions devoid of a general term, it is hard to see that they serve any attributive function even in a secondary way—Russell's insistence on proper names being 'disguised descriptions' notwithstanding. Hence, it must be that proper names serve only the identifying function; so the theory

begins convincingly here. Although demonstrative phrases typically do contain a general term, the theory is still secure with them, given the rather special use of these phrases.<sup>12</sup> Without much strain, we may view the presence of a general term here as *contributing* to the identifying function without overruling it.

Next, the theory moves to definite descriptions. Here the subject may pick out a topic. But does it perform the identifying function? Notice again the movement. We agreed to assimilate demonstratives with proper names despite the fact that the latter do not contain a general term since the typical linguistic function of a demonstrative is the identifying one, in the correct sense. Definite descriptions contain a general term and typically do not have an *ostensive* identifying function, except in very special circumstances where they parallel the use of demonstratives. Some authors have even argued that definite descriptions do not function in the manner of demonstratives even when they contain explicit indexicals like 'over there'.<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, it seems that, typically, definite descriptions begin to lose contact with proper names if the contact is to be established only via the notion of an identifying function. The problem, just raised, enlarges as we move from definite descriptions to typically quantified phrases such as 'All Gs', 'Some G', etc. In what sense, except that they may occur as subject, do all these phrases or referring expressions serve an identifying function?

It is important to be clear about the exact import of Strawson's theory. Strawson's point is *not* that the expressions listed above may have a referential *use*. Strawson's point is that, when they occur as subjects, these expressions are referring, period. As Donnellan<sup>14</sup> construes it, an expression may have an exclusively referential use—a use geared solely to pick out an object—even if the expression contains a general term. The general term, in such a use, is not serving its primary function (perhaps it is serving no function at all). Thus Donnellan allows that when the function of describing, classifying, etc., they may be used attributively, i.e. in a way which is compatible with Russell's understanding of these phrases. So Donnellan has no claim which binds an exclusive grammatical position with an exclusive function. I am not defending Donnellan here; I am using him as a

contrast to Strawson. The contrast shows why Strawson's theory is *stretched* at the point where it focuses on expressions containing general terms serving *their* primary function. With definite descriptions, in particular, we squarely face a choice. Do we (partly) ignore the presence of a general term and focus exclusively on the identifying function, or do we take the presence of a general term seriously and (partly) ignore the identifying function? How do we decide the issue?

Definite descriptions, we saw, lie at the very centre of this issue. It is, on the whole, implausible that typical quantified phrases are referring expressions on a par with proper names. It is equally implausible that proper names are denoting phrases, as Russell would have us believe, on a par with typical quantified phrases. Starting from different directions, then, the rival models of language find their first non-trivial extension in definite descriptions since it is plausible that definite descriptions are both referring expressions and quantified phrases, though it is implausible that definite descriptions are either of these *exclusively*. The core theories, therefore, are (i) trivially convincing in their respective local corners, (ii) implausible in their respective extensions at the extremities and (iii) strained but without entirely losing plausibility just at definite descriptions. Thus, the theories, essentially, are *not* about definite descriptions; they are general theories of subjects based on two radically different models of language. Yet, although the theories are not primarily about definite descriptions, the primary interest of the theories lies in what they say about definite descriptions since definite descriptions, in either case, supply the first non-trivial extension of the rival theories. This is a fairly unique situation in contemporary philosophy explaining the puzzling features of the received view in this area.

## V

The preceding scenario suggests the following course of action. Since the rival theories are not directly in conflict, i.e. since the only plausible meeting-point of the theories, viz. definite descriptions, seem to exhibit features of both, we may try to retain the theories in part and make the parts supplement each other in the case of definite descriptions. If successful, this attempt



will finally turn a controversy into a cooperation. In a paper which could have been titled 'How to Strawson a Russell-Quine', David Kaplan<sup>15</sup> made such an attempt. I am interested in this work in so far as it throws some light on the central issue here: What exactly is the sense in which Russell and Strawson were at cross-purposes? I am suggesting that a genuine view of cross-purposes must ultimately lead to a joint theory based on cooperation. The availability of a joint theory, after the fact, will tell us that the original theories, after all, were at cross-purposes. In particular, such a theory will tell us how to display the identifying function of definite descriptions *while* taking the presence of a general term seriously. Such, I believe, was Kaplan's programme without his explicitly saying so. How do we activate such a programme?

From the point of view of Russell's theory, the basic obstacle to construing definite descriptions as referring expressions is the notion of incomplete symbols. Since, according to Russell, definite descriptions, in the model which began with typical quantified phrases, do not at all have an 'independent meaning', there is no question of their serving an identifying function in the sense required by Strawson. The notion of incomplete symbols obviously requires a stronger tie between, say, 'some'-phrases and definite descriptions than between proper names and definite descriptions. Independently of Strawson, there are several problems with Russell's requirement. I will only consider what I, pace Kaplan, take to be the central problem.

Consider a pair of sentences:

(5)  $(\exists x) (Fx \ \& \ \neg Gx)$

(6)  $\neg(\exists x) (Fx \ \& \ Gx).$

The question is, can we view these sentences as the disambiguated versions of, say,

(7) Some friends are not garrulous?

In particular, for (6) to be a *version* of (7), we must allow that, under certain circumstances, (7) amounts to a denial of the existence of garrulous friends. Does (7) ever amount to such a sweeping denial? It is surely more natural, notwithstanding the availability of artificial *readings*, to think of (6) as a universal sentence, say, 'No friends are garrulous'. Thus, while the wide-

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scope (5) is a genuine existential sentence, the narrow-scope (6) is better thought of as a universal sentence. In standard quantification theory, we are not allowed to apply the rule of instantiation to a context ' $-(\text{Ex}) (\dots x \dots)$ ' unless the context is first changed into a universal context ' $(\text{Ax}) -(\dots x \dots)$ '. This formal restriction, thus, neatly captures the linguistic point raised above.

Under this analysis, (7) is not ambiguous at all and (5) and (6) do not represent disambiguated versions of a *single* 'Some'-phrase. Given the interplay allowed by the quantifier duality laws, we need not postulate a scope convention for disambiguating a 'Some'-phrase; we simply shift to a different phrase. This analysis also brings out the 'incompleteness' of 'Some'-phrases since the whole explanation of scope distinction goes through, as desired by Russell, without even mentioning the denotation of 'Some friends'. Such is the naturalness of standard quantification theory when applied to 'Some'-phrases.

The situation with respect to 'The'-phrases is entirely different. It is well known that, given the problem of vacuous descriptions, Russell wanted (8) and (9) to be consistently false together:

- (8)  $(\text{Ex}) (\text{F}^*x \ \& \ \text{G}x)$
- (9)  $(\text{Ex}) (\text{F}^*x \ \& \ -\text{G}x).$

Thus, when (8) is false,

- (10)  $-(\text{Ex}) (\text{F}^*x \ \& \ \text{G}x)$

turns out to be true, just as desired by the law of excluded middle. So the solution works out nicely when 'The F' is vacuous. But 'The F' is not always vacuous. There is a clear intuition that when 'The F' is referring, (8) and (9) should be inconsistent and this fact must be uniformly represented in the logical form. If 'The President of the US in 1984' has a reference, under no circumstances should both

- (11) The President of the US in 1984 is a conservative
- (12) The President of the US in 1984 is not a conservative

come out true/false together. Call it the 'name-like' feature of 'The President of the US in 1984'. This is the source of Russell's distinction between *primary* and *secondary* occurrences of defi-

nite descriptions. We can view such a phrase in the manner of a name 'so long as (say) "the author of Waverley" has... a primary occurrence in the proposition concerned'. Thus, concerning the sentence 'George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of Waverley', the primary occurrence of 'The author of Waverley' may be expressed by: 'Concerning the man who in fact wrote Waverley, George IV wished to know whether he was Scott'.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, if 'The F' is non-vacuous and has a primary occurrence, 'The F is G' and 'The F is -G' are contradictories, as desired. Now, interpreting primary and secondary occurrences in terms of scope, we are able to say that when 'The F' is vacuous then, given primary/wide scope, both the above sentences come out as false as desired, because of the failure of the existence clause. But, in the second sentence, 'The F' may be given secondary/narrow scope specially when 'The F' is vacuous, which makes the first sentence false and the second true, as desired. Thus, the entire solution depends on whether or not to give 'The F' a wide scope under negation and *that* depends on whether or not 'The F' has a reference.

Russell's dilemma is obvious. In order to dissociate 'The'-phrases from (logically) proper names in an attempt to preserve the law of excluded middle, Russell must depend on the quantifier-variable model illustrated naturally in 'Some'-phrases. In order to preserve *some* name-like features of 'The'-phrases, Russell must dissociate himself radically from the same model. In effect, he must dissociate himself from the only support he has. Russell must recognize that 'The F', typically, is a referring expression, not an 'incomplete symbol'. The strong parallel with 'Some'-phrases ought to be given up. We have, thus, reached an agreement with Kaplan<sup>17</sup> that the notion of 'incomplete symbols', scope distinctions, etc., simply be given up when dealing with definite descriptions.

Still, Kaplan suggests, we have Russell's *fundamental equivalence*, the equivalence between (1) viz. 'The F is G' and (3) viz. 'Exactly one F is G'. We may now use this equivalence to introduce a *primitive* operator unlike Russell's iota-operator which was defined contextually in the language. The primitive operator, to be called simply the 'definite description operator', will be covered by a single 'evaluation rule' for all designators of the

language: If 't' is a term, then (i) 't is bald' is true iff 't' denotes something which is bald *and is within the domain of discourse*, and (ii) 't is bald' is false iff 't' denotes something which is not bald; when 't' is a definite description, 't' denotes one and only one object satisfying a given predicate. Notice that the emphasized clause in (i) takes care of vacuous terms and, thus, further scope indications are not needed.

Let us take stock of what has been achieved by Kaplan's neat little idea. First, it retains Russell's analysis of typical quantified phrases and delinks definite descriptions from this analysis. Second, it assimilates definite descriptions into the class of designators or referring expressions, as desired by Strawson. Third, in retaining Russell's fundamental equivalence, it takes the presence of a general term in a definite description seriously. Thus, Kaplan delivers what was desired at the beginning of this section, viz. a theory of definite descriptions based on a cooperation between Russell and Strawson.

## VI

However, in achieving all this, we are perhaps paying a heavy price. Both Russell and Strawson, we have seen, aimed at a *general* theory of subjects. For Russell, subjects are denoting phrases, period; for Strawson, subjects are referring expressions, period. Kaplan's idea, on the other hand, forces a sharp distinction between typical quantified phrases and the class of designators. Since the class of designators now includes expressions containing general terms, one cannot read off from the structure of an expression whether it is a quantified expression or a designator. The strong binding between structure and function, so central to both Russell and Strawson, is now on its way out.

So my complaint against Kaplan is that we miss the air of generality with which the controversy started. Yet, I do not think that Russell and Strawson (in particular, Strawson) can afford to raise this complaint in view of what we have seen. We have seen that the air of generality is the problem with their theories. Given that neither the notion of identifying function nor the notion of denoting phrases is qualified to cover the entire class of subjects, neither Russell nor Strawson can legitimately pro-

test against the loss of generality in Kaplan's work. On the other hand, if we decide, somewhat dogmatically, to retain either notion for the entire class, we cannot reach an empirically useful theory exclusively for definite descriptions. Via Russell or Strawson, the general does not seem to generate the particular. Under the circumstances, Kaplan's distinction between designators and quantified phrases does seem to be a plausible way out.

I have just argued that, on methodological grounds, Strawson really cannot object to Kaplan's loss of generality. Can Strawson object to Kaplan's *specific* ideas regarding definite descriptions? That is, granting the distinction between designators and quantified phrases, is Strawson satisfied that Kaplan has given the correct account of the designatorial role of definite descriptions? Since Kaplan does assimilate definite descriptions to proper names under the generic label 'designator', he satisfies one crucial element required by Strawson. So, perhaps the only place where Strawson can still raise an objection is the residual Russellian element in Kaplan, viz. Russell's *fundamental equivalence*. Perhaps Strawson doubts whether Russell's fundamental equivalence meshes with his notion of identifying function. I wish to be very careful in raising this issue for this is where the received literature, I believe, is at its most complex.

We have already rejected a crucial element of Russell's theory via Kaplan. We no longer view definite descriptions as 'incomplete symbols'. We have thus taken the first crucial step towards assimilating definite descriptions into the class of referring expressions. It seems, then, that step (4) of Russell's theory stands rejected. In the system proposed later by Kaplan,<sup>18</sup> 'The' is taken to be a primitive operator which, when combined with a one-place predicate, generates an *individual term* (i-term) meaning 'One and only one F' or 'Unique F'. This is the most we get by way of a cooperation between Russell and Strawson.

The effect of all this, I hope, is that the entire controversy has been brought down to this single step in Russell's theory. If Strawson agrees with Russell's fundamental equivalence, he cannot complain against Kaplan's theory since this is the only ground of complaint still open to him. As far as I can see, the rest of Kaplan's theory was explicitly designed to accommodate Strawson. Does Strawson agree with Kaplan's use of Russell's fundamental equivalence?



In 'On Referring', Strawson's response to this issue is interesting and, justly, popular. Regarding the sentence 'The king of France is wise', Strawson<sup>19</sup> says that (i) Russell is right in saying that 'anyone now uttering the sentence would be making a true assertion only if there in fact at present existed one and only one king of France, and if he were wise', and (ii) Russell is wrong in saying that anyone now uttering it would be asserting (in part) 'that there at present existed one and only one king of France'. What exactly is the effect of these remarks on Russell's equivalence?

It is well known that, in these remarks, Strawson makes the seminal distinction between the *conditions*/presuppositions of making an assertion and the *content* of an assertion. According to him, the availability of one and only one F is a presupposition governing a (successful) use of 'The F'. However, it is not at all clear whether Strawson is saying *explicitly* that, since the content of 'The F' is not the same as the content of 'One and only one F', these two expressions are *not* logically equivalent. Unfortunately, I cannot find any specific guidance on this point in the standard literature on this subject. In fact, I do not find, in 'On Referring', any specific guidance on the *assertion* 'One and only one F is G'.

Devoid of any specific guidance, let us assume, in order to create the greatest possible distance between Russell and Strawson, that Strawson indeed thinks that the two assertions are not logically equivalent. What, then, is the content of 'The F' according to Strawson? What is asserted when someone asserts 'The F is G'? Perhaps, Strawson will say that the content of 'The F' is *the F*, period. Why should there be another expression in the language to bring out specially the content of 'The F' when 'The F' is a primitive expression serving an identifying function? 'The F' picks out a topic under the condition that there exists one and only one F and the predicate-part 'G' is used to comment on it. Supposing this to be Strawson's position, it is perfectly in tune with his general understanding of referring expressions.

Does this understanding amount to a direct refutation of Russell? In order to probe this point, let us ask: What is the condition for an assertion with 'One and only one F'?

The answer is strikingly trivial. The condition for asserting with 'One and only one F' is that there be one and only one F!

Just as the condition for asserting with 'John's children' is that John has children. In general, we get the condition for asserting with a referring expression simply by disquoting the expression and attaching an existence claim to it suitably: the condition for asserting '*i* F is ...' (where '*i*' is any designator-forming operation) is that there exist circumstances to the effect that *i* F. By the same token, Strawson could have said that the condition for asserting 'The F is ...' is that there be *the* F.

Strawson's point had seemed interesting all these years because Russell paved the way. On his way to assimilating definite descriptions into denoting phrases, Russell came up with an *English* sentence to paraphrase the original one. Working with *two* English expressions, fortuitously supplied by Russell, Strawson's point had looked non-trivial and to be in direct conflict with Russell's. As argued above, I do not see anything more in Strawson's claim than that the condition of an assertion with a definite description can be gotten simply by disquoting the expression with an existence claim. Barring the existence claim, disquoting a description gives, as well, the content of the description, as we saw for 'The F is G'. So the conditions and the contents match, barring again the existence claim. Therefore, since the conditions of 'The F' and 'One and only one F' are identical, the same must be true of their contents. Strawson has done nothing specific to Russell's equivalence so long as he agrees that 'One and only one F' supplies the condition/presupposition of asserting 'The F'.

Therefore, the real issue between Strawson and Russell is whether an implicit existence claim (barring constructions such as 'Quine exists') is a part of the content or a part of the condition. It is well known that the issue becomes significant only with vacuous terms. We saw that Kaplan handles vacuous terms by simply setting them aside, as falling outside the domain of discourse. Independently of Kaplan, there are good reasons to doubt whether the problem of vacuous terms is a genuine problem at all.<sup>20</sup> In any case, for standard, non-vacuous uses of terms, there is *no* empirical issue between Russell and Strawson on this point.

I conclude, then, that in so far as the ideas in 'On Referring' are concerned, there is nothing that Strawson can do about Kaplan's specific proposals regarding definite descriptions.

Strawson can still raise 'framework'-objections against the residual Russellian element in Kaplan, but such objections are not likely to have an empirical bearing. Nevertheless, I hope to show that the matter does not quite end here.

## VII

The main thrust of the discussion so far has been to show that Strawson's notion of referring expressions and the accompanying notion of an identifying function are too *thickly grained*. The notions cover, quite implausibly in my view, the entire class of subjects. Even when, following Kaplan, we bifurcate the syntactic class, the notions continue to be thickly grained. In particular, Strawson has not supplied any compelling reason as to why the notions cannot be applied to both 'The F' and 'One and only one F', even assuming that the latter expression is a referring one, in the correct sense. At this point the popular notion of presuppositions does nothing to demarcate *these two* expressions. Thus, the current notion of an identifying function does not supply a totally non-Russellian theory in an empirically useful way.

Nevertheless, the desired, fine-grained demarcation between 'The F' and 'One and only one F' was supplied by Strawson much later in a remarkable passage. I believe that, in the hue and cry over referring expressions and presuppositions, the seminal message of this passage has been lost, probably, even to the author. The passage, from 'Singular Terms and Predication', runs as follows:

One who says that there exists one thing with a certain property typically intends to inform his hearer of this fact. Thereby he does indeed supply the hearer with resources of knowledge which constitute, so to speak, a minimal basis for a subsequent identifying reference to draw on. But the act of supplying new resources is not the same act of drawing on independently established resources.<sup>21</sup>

I begin my discussion of this passage with a terminological point. The notion of an identifying function associated with referring expressions, we saw, cannot distinguish between 'The F' and 'One and only one F', since the only contrast available so far is between them *and* general terms occupying a predicative position. In fact, given this quite fundamental distinction, no



further distinctions are so far available *within* the class of referring expressions which, for Strawson, spans the entire class of subjects. This much, we saw, is not enough to challenge Russell's fundamental equivalence as used by Kaplan.

The cited passage, I propose, offers a distinction between the *identificatory* ('ficatory' versus 'fying') function and the *resource-presenting* function;<sup>22</sup> I take this to be a distinction *within* the generic identifying function. I will argue that *this* distinction amounts to a distinction between *all* typically quantified phrases including, in particular, 'One and only one F', on the one hand, and designators which typically include definite descriptions of *all* varieties (and perhaps proper names and demonstratives as well, but I will not argue this point), on the other.

At the minimum, then, Strawson is claiming that the expressions 'The F' and 'One and only one F' signal very different speech acts. Let me try to understand this claim with straightforward linguistic intuition. Thus, let us suppose a schoolteacher asked in a history class, 'How many kings of France died at the guillotine?' What would be an appropriate response to this question? Supposing just one king of France died at the guillotine, an appropriate and correct response would be 'One'. If the teacher pursues, 'Isn't that two?', an appropriate answer would be, 'No, exactly (/just/only) one'. The point is, under no circumstances would it be appropriate to respond, 'The king of France'. The question requested a number, possibly a unique one, and *that* request cannot be fulfilled by uttering 'The king of France'.

Suppose now that the teacher asks, given a set of kings from different countries, 'Which one of them ruled from Versailles?' Now an appropriate and correct answer would be, 'The king of France'. In this case, it would be totally inappropriate to respond, 'One and only one king of France'. Roughly, then, we respond with 'Exactly one' to questions of the form 'How many?'; we respond with 'The F' to questions of the form 'who/what?' when asked in a context in which the speaker is assured that the audience can draw on an independently established resource, e.g., the earlier presentation of a set of kings from different countries. It begins to look as if Russell's equivalence is involved in a fundamental confusion amounting almost to a category mistake. We may view the cited passage as a theoretical explanation of that confusion.

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It is important to distinguish *such* 'who/what' questions from another sort mentioned in 'On Referring'.<sup>23</sup> We must have some way of forestalling the question, 'What (who, which one) are you talking about?', as well as the question, 'What are you saying about it (him, her)?' *There*, we saw the distinction was between referring and ascribing which covered 'The F' as well as 'Exactly one F'. *Here*, 'Exactly one F' performs a resource-presenting function via an answer to the question 'How many?', while 'The F' performs an identificatory function based on resources available antecedently.

A very interesting pattern of the uses of various types of head nouns, thus, becomes visible. We answer a 'How many?' question with any one of 'All Fs', 'Some F', 'A few Fs' as well as 'Exactly one F'. *All* these answers help in the introduction of new resources for *subsequent* identification by 'The F/Fs'. Quantified phrases, therefore, do exactly what they are expected to do, viz. signal a quantity of Fs. Designators, on the other hand, simply refer back to these objects signalled in advance. Strawson is *not* suggesting that the signalling of objects can only be performed via a *linguistic* act of using quantified phrases.<sup>24</sup> Surely, there are other equally valid means:

That function is successfully performed if and only if the singular term establishes for the hearer an identity, and the right identity, between the thought of *what-is-being-spoken-of-by-the-speaker* and the thought of some object *already within the reach of the hearer's own knowledge, experience, or perception*.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, the point is that the knowledge of the right objects is not supplied by the phrase performing an identificatory function; it is given in advance.

We may generalize as follows. A predicate 'F', when occurring as a part of the subject, by itself supplies only a vague and indefinite area of reference, so that we may ask, 'Which F?'. For referring to be effective, we need to forestall that question, we need to cut the vague area down to a proper size. A *resource* for reference becomes available only after such tailoring takes place. Quantified phrases serve the function of presenting new resources. In a use of 'The F', on the other hand, no such resource is *presented*. The hearer is simply instructed to find/locate the proper F from his own resources. However, many

more issues need to be settled before we can reach anything like a full theory of definite descriptions. This task is not within the scope of this paper.<sup>26</sup> I hope that the essential theoretical point has been made reasonably clear.

What is the effect of all this on Russell's fundamental equivalence? First, we have finally found a function exclusively for definite descriptions (and perhaps for a narrow class of designators). Second, we have been able to assemble *all* quantified phrases including 'One and only one F' around the notion of a resource-presenting function. Having thus secured two separate functions for two delineable sub-classes of subjects, we no longer need Russell's equivalence to *bridge* the two sub-classes; there is no such bridge. Russell's equivalence simply misses this fundamental feature of our referential apparatus.

Contrary to what Russell suggested, then, a use of 'The' never produces a quantitative picture, implicitly or otherwise. Perhaps, in a use of a *singular* definite description, the use of the predicate 'F' in the singular, given that it has already been cut to size in advance, may bear information quite similar to the one borne by a use of 'One and only one F'. But this coincidence, easily explained, has nothing to do with the use of the definite article and has no effect on a general theory of definite descriptions. Russell approached the phenomenon with the wrong sort of data. This simple point was lost for many decades due to the technical brilliance of the Theory of Descriptions and because the theory was applied with success in areas where a correct understanding of the linguistic function of definite descriptions was never squarely faced.

With Strawson's notion of an identificatory function, the Theory of Descriptions, in its totality, may now be set aside, since, with this single notion, the entire spectrum of the uses of definite descriptions can now be explained with complete generality. This can be done fairly easily since, as we noted in the early sections of this paper, the research programme generated by Russell's theory has, by now, lost its validity anyway.

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10. F

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 1905, pp. 479-93.
2. George Wilson, 'On Definite and Indefinite Descriptions', *The Philosophical Review*, January 1978, pp. 48-76.
3. David Kaplan, 'What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions?', in Yourgrau and Beck (eds.), *Physics, Logic and History*, Plenum Press, New York, 1970.
4. P.F. Strawson, 'On Referring', *Mind*, July 1950.
5. W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1960.
6. Saul Kripke, 'Naming and Necessity', in G. Harman & D. Davidson (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language*, D. Reidel Publishing Co., Dordrecht, Netherlands and Boston, USA, 1972. (Later published with a Preface as a monograph, *Naming and Necessity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1980.
7. 'On Denoting', op. cit., p. 481.
8. David Kaplan, 'What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions?', in Yourgrau and Beck (eds.), *Physics, Logic and History*.
9. Richard Sharvy, 'A More General Theory of Definite Descriptions', *The Philosophical Review*, 89, No. 4, 1980, pp. 607-24.
10. P.F. Strawson, 'On Referring', *Mind*, July 1950, p. 335.

Strawson's actual position, however, is justly more complicated. There are qualifications to block obvious counter-examples such as 'Nothing' and 'Nobody' and there are ways of avoiding vague terms such as 'about'. Further, there is a good deal of qualification on *grammatical* concepts like subject and predicate. I opt for the most direct and general version since (i) it will not affect the ultimate argument, and (ii) it supplies the most direct contrast with Russell.

Usually, Strawson restricts the discussion to singular terms which have a uniquely referring use; these include proper names, singular definite descriptions and singular demonstratives. The issue that interests me, viz. the status of quantified phrases in the subject position, is seldom addressed in full. Still, there are suggestions in 'On Referring' (p. 343) and *Individuals* (Methuen, 1959, p. 156), that the theory may be extended to the quantified phrases. However, two pages later in *Individuals* (p. 158), Strawson decides to withdraw the extension since the uses of quantified phrases are not *definitely* identifying. The qualifier 'definitely' is now an additional feature on top of the notion of identifying reference. Given the basic contrast between a predicative position



- and the rest, I find no theoretical arguments to block typical quantified phrases. Hence, I stick to the most general version.
11. I am not suggesting that Strawson himself builds up the theory in this fashion. In illustrating referring uses, proper names and definite descriptions are usually run together. This, of course, will not supply the contrast I need to pin down the exact difference with Russell. There are contrasting signals on the point whether the theory begins with proper names. For example, in *Individuals* (Chapter 6), it is said that an identifying reference to a particular can be made only under the condition that a true empirical proposition is known in advance. The suggestion seems to be that the concerned expression *itself* does not supply such knowledge. We discuss one aspect of this interesting suggestion below (section VI). Nevertheless, it seems that the suggestion, strictly, applies to proper names since they have no descriptive content (signalled, in turn, by the absence of a general term). So the theory begins with them. On the other hand, later in the same work, it is said that it is theoretically possible to dissolve a use of a proper name in a chain of presuppositions containing descriptions. Given this 'backing of descriptions' view of proper names, it would seem that the issue of the absence of a general term is bypassed. As argued later (section VI), this view of proper names will have a lasting effect on Russell's theory only if a further contrast is supplied between definite descriptions and typical quantified phrases. This Strawson did not supply either in 'On Referring' or in *Individuals*.
  12. David Kaplan, 'On the Logic of Demonstratives', in French, Uehling and Wettstein (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1979.
  13. Jon Barwise and John Perry, *Situations and Attitudes*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1983; G.W. Fitch, 'Indeterminate Descriptions', *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, June 1984.
  14. Keith Donnellan, 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', *The Philosophical Review*, 75, 1966, pp. 281-304.
  15. 'What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions?', in Yourgrau and Beck (eds.), *Physics, Logic and History*.
  16. Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 1905.
  17. 'What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions?', in Yourgrau and Beck.
  18. 'Dthat', in French, Uehling and Wettstein (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, op. cit.
  19. 'On Referring', *Mind*, July 1950, p. 329.
  20. Nirmalangshu Mukherji, 'Descriptions and Group Reference', *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, January 1990.

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21. P.F. Strawson, 'Singular Terms and Predication', *The Journal of Philosophy*, July 1961, p. 403.
22. I hope it will be seen that the notion of the identificatory function has *nothing* to do with the general notion of presuppositions since the latter notion applies to any referring expression in the subject position.
23. *Mind*, July 1950, p. 335.
24. This fact alone rules out the 'anaphoric' treatment of definite descriptions as a general theory of such phrases; see Jaako Hintikka and J. Kulas, *Anaphora and Definite Descriptions*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht-Holland, 1985. A discussion of this technical issue is beyond the scope of this paper.
25. P.F. Strawson, 'Singular Terms and Predication', *Journal of Philosophy*, July 1961, p. 402.
26. Cf. John Hawkins, *Definiteness and Indefiniteness*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1978; Nirmalangshu Mukherji, *Language and Definiteness*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Waterloo, Canada, 1987 and 'Descriptions and Group Reference', op. cit.

There is no formally valid inference for which it would not be an adequate (if sometimes unnecessarily complex) representation.

In my own mature views on the topic of Bhattacharyya's paper, I have set them out fully in the book, *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar*, which Professor Bhattacharyya refers to but does not discuss in detail. In that work I begin from what I argue to be the basic class of cases of the fundamental logical combination of predication (symbolically represented by 'fx', 'f(x, y)' etc.) and enlarge the theme from there. I will not here rehearse again the details of that argument and that enlargement; but will add simply that in a later publication I developed the (perhaps more questionable) thought that in a predicative expression (whether one-or more-place) it is possible to distinguish the copulative from a referential (or denotative) element. (See 'Concepts and Properties or Predication and Copulation' in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 149, October 1987).

## 2. NIRMALANGSHU MUKHERJI ON IDENTIFICATION AND DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

I am grateful to Dr Mukherji for his thoughtful, refined and sensitive paper. I welcome particularly his last section (VII) in which he brings out with striking clarity the point which decisively separates my view of singular definite descriptions from that of Russell and his followers. The point is that the characteristic use of the singular form 'the F' is to draw on resources of knowledge *already in possession of the audience* in order to indicate which or what particular item is being referred to, or, as Professor Mukherji puts it, to forestall the question, 'which F?'. The point, indeed, can be extended, beyond the case of descriptions, to bring in the class of proper names. For just as there is normally a plurality of items falling under a general term 'F', so there is, normally, a plurality of persons bearing an ordinary proper name such as 'John' or 'Mr Smith'—or even 'Aristotle' or 'Socrates'; and a speaker, using such a name to make an identifying reference, will normally rely, just as he will in using the form 'the F', on the audience's knowledge of the context and circumstances of utterance to indicate which of the bearers of the name within the scope of the audience's knowledge is the one intended.

I spoke just now of the 'characteristic use' of definite singular descriptions. I did so advisedly, since there are certain well-marked cases in which a full-scale Russellian account is obviously correct. To give an example which I think I have used elsewhere before, one can imagine a case in which a speaker is describing a situation in which the members of a group of people are being urged, or pressured, to sign a certain document. The speaker concludes: 'The only man who refused to sign was shot'. In such a context it is clear that part of the content of the information explicitly conveyed is precisely that one and only one man refused to sign. One could multiply examples: e.g. 'The only volunteer was a Quaker'. The presence of the word 'only' is just what marks such cases as clearly Russellian.

There are also cases which fit Donnellan's model for what he calls the 'attributive' use of the form. For example: 'The person who wins the lottery will be rich'. Here also there is an implicit, though different, quantifier, since it amounts to 'whoever wins the lottery will be rich'.

It might be thought that the point that Mukherji and I myself have emphasised about the central or characteristic use of the singular definite description is essentially a point belonging to pragmatics and leaves open the question of the *semantics* of the form. First, it is essential in linguistic theory to recognize the *semantic function* of definite singular reference, represented in the standard symbolism by 'Fa'—a function performed equally by both proper names and definite descriptions in their characteristic uses. Second, since the successful performance of this function normally depends on what may broadly be called contextual features of the situation, and since it is this fact which licenses, or encourages, the invocation of 'pragmatics', one may reasonably conclude that, insofar as this invocation is justified, then, to just that extent, it is a mistake to represent the distinction between semantics and pragmatics as absolute: perhaps we should speak, rather, of 'pragmatic-semantics'. The point is evident enough in the cases involving demonstratives.

Finally I should mention an important reservation I have regarding Dr Mukherji's paper. Mukherji has an ingenious suggestion regarding the history of controversy in this area. He suggests that both Russell and I were fundamentally concerned



with the entire class of subject-expressions and that each of us seemed to err in assimilating the entire class to a particular model. In Russell's case the model was that of explicitly quantified forms, in mine that of proper names, the apparent clash occurring in the contested area of definite descriptions. I cannot, of course, speak for Russell, though the suggestion does seem plausible in his case; but for myself I must say that at the time of my original critique of Russell, I was concerned only with definite descriptions, and certainly not with the entire class of subject-expressions. It is true that later, and in particular in *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974), I did concern myself with grammatical subject-expressions in general and connected my treatment of them with the special case of identifying reference to particulars; but the connections I there established, or sought to establish, were of a more complex and indirect kind than any suggested by Dr Mukherji.

### 3. ROOP REKHA VERMA ON A POINT ABOUT REFERENCE

Roop Rekha Verma addresses herself to the question of the character of identity sentences coupling two names—an issue which, as she rightly says, has engaged philosophical attention for many years. Much ingenuity, and some passion, have been devoted to it; but its discussion has rarely attained the level of sensitivity, elegance and economy manifested in Professor Verma's handling of it. I can do little more than record my substantial agreement with her analysis, while adding a quite minor, and qualified, reservation.

It is quite clear that anyone who *learns* from such an identity statement really does *learn* something from it. He is not confronted with a tautology or a truism. And this fact alone is enough to dispose of the 'Reference-Transparency Thesis'. So what does he learn? What information is conveyed in such a case?—for some certainly is, and it is not merely the information, about the names themselves, that they refer to one and the same thing. Here we must resist the attraction of the idea that each of the two names, on every occasion of its use with the same reality-rooted reference, has its own invariant (Fregean?) 'sense', the 'sense' of one of the coupled names differing, of course, from the 'sense' of the other. (The oft-repeated use of