

Essay Units 7-9: Number 5

Explain Russell's Theory of Descriptions, and discuss the claim that the sense of a proper name is equivalent to a description of the object which the name picks out.

Russell's theory of descriptions was designed to deal with what he perceived to be the flaws in our everyday language in denoting objects. Specifically he concerned himself with definite and indefinite descriptions. For the purposes of dealing with proper names the theory concerns definite descriptions (although I believe that he also dealt with indefinite descriptions like 'there is a tree...').

In the theory the definite description can denote either a real object, or it can have no denoting value. In the first instance the object might be something like 'The Prime Minister of Australia'. In the second instance it might be something like 'The President of Australia'.

Russell was trying to use a logical syntax to unravel seemingly paradoxical statements like 'The present king of France is bald'. These statements were concerning for logicians like Russell who were trying to establish their truth value. The negation of these sentences in English ('The present king of France is not bald') did not correctly establish their truth value because in this case no king even exists, that is, the phrase did not denote anything.

The answer for Russell lay in the use of the newly developed symbolic logic and its existential and universal quantifiers. In the above statement this would be described as:

$$(\exists x) \{ [F x \ \& \ (\forall y) (F y \supset x=y)] \ \& \ G x \}$$

where the predicates F and G are such that F is 'the king of France' and G is 'bald'. The sentence in English is approximately 'There is such a person that that person is the king of France and any other person who is the king of France must be the same person (ie there is only one king of France) and that person is bald'. Such a sentence allows the placement of a negation at the very beginning of the sentence without the ambiguity that the use of the word 'not' has in its English sentence equivalent. The placement of the negation at the beginning essentially denies that the person exists in the first place. In the English sentence equivalent the negation could indicate that there exists a person but he isn't bald (ie a negation in front of the predicate Gx)

The theory also allowed precise statements in symbolic logic for real objects eg for the statement 'Scott is the author of Waverly' this would be

$$(\exists x) (F x \ \& \ G x)$$

where the sentence would be roughly translated 'There is an author of Waverly and that person is Scott'.

Russell felt that all names were actually just descriptions that could be clarified using this form of symbolic logic. Names didn't refer to anything. They were just descriptions. His next step was to argue that they were descriptions of private sensory data.

In Frege's formulation of sense and reference the sense was the route to reference, the path by which a subject understood the object referred to. He had struggled with the issue that for the same referring object there might be language with a different sense to that reference (ie the 'morning star' and 'evening star' are different routes to the same reference ie Venus). In this regard he considered that ordinary everyday language was imprecise and inaccurate. Russell believed he had tackled this problem by eliminating the issue of reference with his theory of descriptions.

The central problem with Russell's account in respect to proper names is that there is no clear way of establishing that the description means the same thing to different people, even when an attempt is made to make the description as unambiguous as possible by the use of symbolic logic.

Russell's approach (which we could in fact call an important type of language game) clarifies a logical approach to definite descriptions. For scientists this might be extremely important (and probably is). But the description of sense given by Frege conveyed the idea of 'sense' being part of the 'meaning' for the language user. On this perspective Russell's theory of descriptions did not allow descriptions to replace the sense but rather provided another and probably more accurate 'route to reference' (a new type of sense in a new type of logical language).

Wittgenstein's later views about language as a game that is part of a 'form of life' allows for a more nuanced view of accounting for the sense proper names. In some cases a description will be adequate for language users to understand the sense of the object they are describing to one another. In other instances a demonstration (pointing to an object) will be required, although this too has limitations, particularly in regard to proper names of non-existent objects. In essence the sense of the proper name is its meaning, and its meaning is defined by its use within a language community. I would argue that the sense of a statement using the proper name 'King Louis' when used in English today is completely different than it was when used in English 230 years ago, while the reference is of course the same. That is not to say that in both instances the name does not have, or did not have, a meaning for language users that implied consequences. It is just that those language communities are not the same. A symbolic logic will not

capture that sense. I would argue these views are consistent with Wittgenstein's later philosophy.