The Gray's *Elegy* Argument: Denoting Concepts, Singular Terms, and Truth-Value Dependence

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ABSTRACT: In the notoriously obscure "Gray's *Elegy* Argument" (GEA) of "On Denoting", Russell argues against the *theory of denoting concepts* which he had set out in his earlier work *The Principles of Mathematics* (*PoM*). Nathan Salmon has argued that the GEA is intended to demonstrate the falsity of the thesis that *definite descriptions are singular terms*, a view which he attributes to the Russell of *PoM*. In a similar vein, Peter Hylton has argued that we can make sense of the GEA by attributing to the early Russell the *principle of truth-value dependence*. In this paper I argue that Russell was committed to neither of these positions. If Salmon and Hylton mischaracterise Russell's position in *PoM*, then they also, I suggest, mischaracterise the GEA. I close, therefore, by suggesting how my account of the relation between the theory of denoting concepts and Russell's position in "On Denoting" can guide our approach to the GEA.

KEYWORDS: definite description, denoting, denoting concept, Gray's Elegy Argument, incomplete symbol, proposition, singular term, truth-value dependence

1. Introduction

It is now widely accepted that Russell's theory of descriptions was not developed in response to the ontological problems raised by empty denoting phrases such as "the present king of France". Rather, the theory grew out of the pursuit of a more localised problem which Russell had identified in his earlier *theory of denoting concepts*.[1] In "On Denoting" (*OD*) this

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[1] *The Principles of Mathematics* (Russell (2006), henceforth *PoM*), ch. V; for the theory of descriptions see "On Denoting" (Russell (1905c), henceforth *OD*); for the transition between the two see the papers in Part III of Russell (1994), especially "On Fundamentals" (Russell (1905b)).

problem is set out in eight rather baffling paragraphs which have come to be known as "The Gray's *Elegy* Argument" (GEA).[2]

Various obstacles stand in the way of the reconstruction of the GEA, one such being the lack of any clear understanding of the position against which the argument is directed. According to one line of thought, the argument targets both the theory of denoting concepts from Russell's 1903 work *The Principles of Mathematics* (*PoM*) and Frege's theory of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.[3] These two theories both posit an intermediary between a definite description and the entity it describes.[4] Nonetheless, there are significant differences between the two theories, most notably the fact that the theory of denoting concepts, unlike Frege's theory, is a theory of *generality* (Frege's account of generality was, in essentials, independent of his *Sinn*/*Bedeutung* distinction).[5] Marked though these differences are, Russell himself seems to have overlooked them, describing the two theories as "very nearly the same" (*OD*, 42n.). This suggests that he took the two theories as very nearly the same *in a certain respect*, this respect being a shared assumption in virtue of which the GEA targets both.

It is to the credit of Nathan Salmon's interpretation of the GEA that it attempts to fix on the common assumption linking the two theories.[6] Salmon identifies the overall aim of *OD* as being "to supplant the view that a definite description is a singular term" (2005: 1076), and presents the GEA as in the service of this goal:

> It is exactly this basic, and seemingly innocuous, account – nothing less – that I believe Russell is ultimately attempting to refute in his "Gray's *Elegy*" argument. … He thus intends to overthrow by his argument *both* Frege and his former self. (2005: 1077–78)

Frege certainly treated definite descriptions as singular terms, but as regards the Russell of *PoM* matters are less clear. This paper argues that the Russell of *PoM* did *not* take definite descriptions to be singular terms. Consequently, to the extent that the assumption that he *did* so take definite descriptions informs an interpretation of the GEA, that interpretation is suspect.

Quite how widespread this understanding of Russell's position in *PoM* is, is difficult to judge (it is not often discussed[7]). It is explicitly attributed

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[2] *OD*, 48–51.

[3] Frege (1892).

[4] Russell, unlike Frege, restricts his theory to denoting phrases.

[5] There are also significant differences in the underlying epistemologies of Russell and Frege, as explored by Levine (2004).

[6] Salmon (2005).

[7] Perhaps it is seldom discussed because it is widely assumed.

by Salmon (as above) and Pelletier & Linsky (2009: 40), and is *almost* explicit in Blackburn & Code (1978) and Levine (2005). I shall argue that it is indirectly attributed to the early Russell in Peter Hylton's important work *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*.[8] Hylton does not explicitly address the question of descriptions as singular terms in *PoM*, but he does attribute to the Russell of *PoM* a related claim, the *principle of truth-value dependence*:

> Principle of Truth-Value Dependence (TV Dep)
>
> If *p* is a proposition containing a denoting concept, the truth-value of *p* is "dependent upon the truth-value of the proposition obtained from [*p*] by replacing the denoting concept by the denoted entity" (Hylton (1990: 251)).

I argue in section 3 that to attribute (TV Dep) to Russell (at least as far as definite descriptions are concerned) is tantamount to attributing to him the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms. Of course much depends on how we understand "singular term", and part of my task is to settle on an appropriate understanding. I argue in section 4 that on the most plausible interpretation of Russell's position, we cannot attribute to him a commitment to either the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms or to (TV Dep). Salmon and Hylton have, in that case, mischaracterised Russell's position in *PoM*.

Since the GEA certainly targets the theory of denoting concepts,[9] Salmon and Hylton's interpretations, being based on their mischaracterisations of Russell's position on descriptions in *PoM*, must be (in some significant sense, to some non-negligible degree) mistaken. I argue in section 5 that what is most significant about *OD* is not, *pace* Salmon, that Russell no longer treats descriptions as singular terms, but that he no longer treats denoting phrases as having "meaning in isolation" (*OD*, 42), in other words that he now treats such phrases as *incomplete symbols*. The early Russell had held that "every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning" (*PoM*, 42) and that "*Words* all have meaning in the simple sense that they are symbols which stand for something other than themselves" (*PoM*, 47). It is *this* claim[10] which is common to the early Russell and Frege; and it is *this* claim that Russell's arguments in *OD* are, ultimately, aimed at undermining.

We begin with a brief discussion of the theory of denoting concepts and the relevant aspects of Russell's general framework of propositions.

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[8] Hylton (1990).

[9] This is, I take it, uncontroversial (unlike the claim that it also targets Frege). Henceforth the focus is solely on Russell: I say no more of the relation of the GEA to Frege's position.

[10] At least insofar as it is a claim about denoting phrases in natural language.

2. The Theory of Denoting Concepts

The ontology of *PoM* is staunchly realist: the world is composed of a number of mind- and language-independent entities which Russell calls "terms". Whatever *is* is a term:

> A man, a moment, a number, a class, a relation, a chimaera, or anything else that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term; and to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false. (*PoM*, 43)

(I now drop Russell's use of "term" in favour of "entity":[11] in a discussion concerning *singular terms* this is less likely to cause confusion.)

Certain combinations of entities, united in a distinctive (but ultimately rather mysterious) manner, constitute *propositions*. Propositions are the objects of judgement, hence to judge that *Socrates is wise* is to stand in the two-place relation of *judgement* to the proposition <Socrates is wise> (I distinguish propositions from sentences with angle brackets "<" and ">"). A proposition does not *represent* a circumstance or state of affairs: it *is* that circumstance or state of affairs. Accordingly, when Russell speaks of a proposition's being *about* its constituents (or some of them at least), he is using "about" in an unfamiliar sense. This unfamiliarity arises through the comparison of propositions with sentences. The comparison is natural because (declarative) sentences express propositions; but unlike propositions, sentences are not, in general, about their constituents (e.g. "Socrates is wise" is not about the word "Socrates" but the man indicated by it). The sense of "about" that Russell intends is more nearly grasped by considering propositions as analogous with the scenes of a play. If the scenes are composed of characters and the events that befall them, one may consider them to be *about* certain of those characters and events.

The proposition <Socrates is human> is a complex entity having two entities as constituents, Socrates and *human*.[12] It is about Socrates, but not *human* (or *humanity*: Russell is adamant that *human* and *humanity* are the same entity).[13] Some propositions containing *human* are about it (e.g. <*humanity* is a concept>); but there are no propositions containing Socrates that are not about him. This is the heart of Russell's distinction between *things* and *concepts*:

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[11] Which he takes to be a synonym (*PoM*, 43).

[12] Or perhaps it has more. Does "is" indicate a relation of predication or is it rather a part of the wider semantic unit "is wise"? How is the tense of the sentence reflected at the propositional level? Does this involve a further constituent (an instant of time perhaps)? Such issues are important but tangential to present concerns.

[13] "In 'Socrates is human', the notion expressed by *human* occurs in a different way from that in which it occurs when it is called *humanity*, the difference being that in the latter case, but not in the former, the proposition is *about* this notion" (*PoM*, 45).

> Socrates is a thing, because Socrates can never occur otherwise than as a term in [i.e. as the subject of] a proposition: Socrates is not capable of that curious twofold use which is involved in *human* and *humanity*. (*PoM*, 45)

When an entity *e* occurs in a proposition *p* such that *p* is about *e*, *e* is described as a "term of *p*", or as we might rather put it, as the *subject* of *p*. For any *e* there is at least one *p* such that *p* is about *e* in virtue of *e's* occurring as the subject of *p*.

Propositions are the primary bearers of truth-values. Russell's truth-bearers are not, therefore, representational entities. As such there can be no account of truth in terms of any (non-vacuous) correspondence relation: nothing is left over, in addition to the truth-bearer, for the proposition to correspond to. Truth and falsity are, for Russell in this period, primitive properties of propositions:

> some propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white. … What is truth, and what falsehood, we must merely apprehend, for both seem incapable of analysis. (Russell (1904: 523–24))[14]

Importantly, every proposition has one of the primitive properties, *truth* or *falsehood*. "Proposition" is Russell's term for "the true or false as such" (*PoM*, xxiv).[15]

The theory of denoting concepts is introduced as an account of *generality*, an account of propositions about some entity (or entities) specified via some property that it (they) instantiate(s). A denoting concept is a special kind of concept, one that *denotes*, and a concept denotes "when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about [an entity] connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept" (*PoM*, 53):

> If I say "I met a man," the proposition is not about *a man*: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public house and a drunken wife. (*PoM*, 53)

The notion of denoting is arrived at via a kind of "logical genesis" (*PoM*, 54) from subject-predicate propositions. In the subject-predicate proposition <Socrates is human> we may distinguish the predicate, or *class-*

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[14] For a detailed examination of Russell's account of truth see the paper by Anssi Korhonen in this journal.

[15] Or again: "An expression such as '*x* is a man' is … not a proposition, for it is neither true nor false" (*PoM*, 13). Strictly, of course, "*x* is a man" is not a proposition because it is an expression, but Russell's point is clear.

concept,[16] *humanity*. Associated with the predicate (class-concept) are various denoting concepts, which are the correlates, at the propositional level, of the result, at the linguistic level, of appending such words as "all", "every", "any", "a", "some", or "the" to the word for the predicate (class-concept). Thus associated with *humanity* are the denoting concepts #all men#, #every man#, #any man#, #a man#, #some man#, and #the man# (I distinguish denoting concepts from denoting phrases using the *hash* "#" and alter quotations accordingly).[17]

On the theory of denoting concepts sentence (1) expresses proposition <1>:

(1)   The teacher of Plato is wise.

<1>   <#the teacher of Plato# is wise>

And <1> is not about the denoting concept #the teacher of Plato#, but about its denotation, namely Socrates, even though Socrates does not number among <1>'s constituents. Compare <2>:

(2)   Socrates is wise.

<2>   <Socrates is wise>

<2> is about the entity that occurs in it in (what we might term) *subject position*, namely Socrates.[18] Subject position in <1> is occupied by #the teacher of Plato#; yet <1> is about Socrates. This is a welcome development as it affords an explanation of various familiar phenomena: informative identities (*PoM*, 64); the possibility of definition (*PoM*, 63); and the ability of finitely-minded beings to manipulate the infinite (*PoM*, 73). Progress is possible in these cases because the entity that the proposition is about is not among its constituents, but is rather denoted by the one of them.

Because #the teacher of Plato# denotes Socrates, <1> will have the same truth-value as <2>. But this is not yet to claim that the truth-value of <1> is *dependent upon* the truth-value of <2>, as would be the case if

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[16] *F* is a class-concept if "*x* is an *F*" is a propositional function (i.e. yields a proposition when *x* is assigned a value). Russell's account of the distinction between predicates and class-concepts (*PoM*, 56) is obscure, but we will not go far astray by treating them as equivalent: Russell himself admits that "the distinction is perhaps only verbal" (*PoM*, 56).

[17] It is not entirely clear why Russell switches, without warning, from the predicate (class-concept) *humanity* to denoting concepts involving what one might take to be a distinct predicate (class-concept), *being a man*. The same switch, in the opposite direction, occurs at *OD* (43–44).

[18] I use *subject position* merely to describe a position in a proposition; it does not follow, on this use, that the entity occurring in subject position is the *logical subject* of the proposition.

Russell were committed to (TV Dep). According to the general account of the truth (falsehood) of propositions sketched above, whether or not <1> is true is a matter of whether or not it has the primitive property *truth*.[19] Such, at least, is the position one ought to attribute to Russell in the first instance. To attribute any other view would be to attribute to him an inconsistency; and while *PoM* is inconsistent in certain respects, we should not read inconsistencies into it unnecessarily. For the moment then, let us leave the question of Russell's commitment to (TV Dep) open.

3. Singular Terms and (TV Dep)

The aim of this section is to demonstrate that if the Russell of *PoM* had been committed to (TV Dep) he would, thereby, have been committed to the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms. Let us begin by recalling the relation of (TV Dep) to the GEA.

Hylton introduces (TV Dep) as follows:

> The crucial idea for understanding denoting is that a proposition may be *about* an object which it does not contain. It is by no means obvious how to make sense of this idea within the context of [the general framework of *PoM*]. … [A] natural way to do so is to say that for a proposition containing a denoting concept to be about some other entity is for the truth-value of that proposition to be dependent upon the truth-value of the proposition obtained from it by replacing the denoting concept by the denoted entity. (1990: 251)

Revisiting the examples from section 2, replacing the denoting concept with the denoted entity, we arrive at <2> from <1>.

Hylton clearly intends (TV Dep) to posit a stronger connection between the truth-values of <1> and <2> than mere co-variance. The principle says that the truth-value of <1> *depends upon* that of <2>. Thus the truth of <1> must be *grounded* in the facts that #the teacher of Plato# denotes Socrates, and that the result of replacing the former with the latter (in <1>) is a true proposition. On this view, <1> attributes wisdom to some particular entity and is true just in case that entity is wise. That entity happens to be Socrates (since #the teacher of Plato# denotes him), so <1> is true just in case there is a true proposition attributing wisdom to Socrates – that is, <1> is true just in case <2> is.

This is plainly in conflict with Russell's truth-primitivism, as Hylton is well aware:

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[19] One might suggest – though Russell does not – that the truth-value of <1> is dependent upon the truth-value of the proposition <<1> is true>. This is not, of course, the kind of truth-value dependence that Hylton has in mind.

> The idea of the truth or falsehood of one proposition depending upon that of another is clearly quite alien to [Russell's general position]. It amounts, indeed, to the introduction of something like the correspondence theory of truth for the special case of those propositions which contain denoting concepts: whether such a proposition is true depends upon whether there is a corresponding fact, where a fact is a true proposition which does not contain a denoting concept, or a combination of such propositions. (1990: 209)

Hylton is willing to ascribe (TV Dep) to Russell, even in the face of this tension, as it affords an explanation of various of Russell's moves in the GEA. Firstly, it is sometimes suggested that at least part of the argumentation in the GEA is intended to demonstrate the impossibility of there being a proposition which is about a denoting concept in virtue of containing that concept. For instance, the proposition <#the teacher of Plato# denotes Socrates> is apparently a true proposition about #the teacher of Plato#; but if (TV Dep) holds, then its truth depends upon the truth of <Socrates denotes Socrates>. Since this is obviously false,

> [(*TV Dep*)] has the consequence that there are no true propositions which say that one entity denotes another; but clearly there must be such propositions if the theory of denoting concepts is correct. (Hylton (1990: 252))[20]

The second way in which (TV Dep) is supposedly implicated in the GEA concerns the final paragraph of the argument (*OD*, 50–51). There Russell notes that "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" and "Scott is Scott" express propositions having different properties (George IV was curious about one but not the other). But there is not, on the face of it, any difficulty here for the theory of denoting concepts, which anyway distinguishes the two propositions. What then could Russell's point be? "This puzzle is removed", Hylton says, "if we suppose that Russell is taking for granted something like [(TV Dep)]" (1990: 253). (TV Dep) has it that the truth-value of <George IV wished to know whether Scott was #the author of *Waverley*#> is dependent upon that of <George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott>. We are to suppose that the former is true, but since the latter is false, the former *cannot* be true, if we endorse (TV Dep).

In the above ways one can attempt to make sense of the GEA by associating the theory of denoting concepts with (TV Dep). This will all be to no avail, however, if it can be demonstrated that Russell did not endorse (TV Dep).

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[20] One response to this problem is to distinguish different "modes of occurrence"–ways in which a denoting concept can occur in a proposition. The denoting concept in <#the author of *Waverley*# denotes Scott>, for example, might occur *non-denotatively*. Hylton discusses the attempt to follow through this idea (in "On Fundamentals") as "show[ing] Russell attempting to accommodate the failure of [(TV Dep)]" (1990: 253).

Before demonstrating that (TV Dep) commits one to the view that definite descriptions are singular terms, let us settle on an understanding of "singular term". A singular term is, according to Salmon (2005: 1072), an expression whose semantic function is to designate exactly one entity. But what exactly is *designation*?

Like *truth*, *designation* is interestingly connected to *aboutness*. To say that an expression designates an entity is to say that declarative sentences containing that expression express propositions that are about that entity. We have encountered two ways in which a proposition may be about an entity:

(Ab1) A proposition *p* may be about an entity *e* in virtue of containing *e* (in subject position).

(Ab2) A proposition *p* may be about an entity *e* in virtue of containing a denoting concept *d*, such that *d* denotes *e*.

Where definite descriptions are concerned, (Ab2) is in play.

Just as we can attribute truth or falsehood to a sentence based upon the truth-value of the proposition it expresses, so we can speak of a sentence's being *about* a certain entity based upon the associated proposition's being about that entity. So if "the teacher of Plato" is a singular term designating Socrates, sentences of the form "the teacher of Plato is □" express propositions which are about Socrates in the (Ab2) sense. And if Russell is committed to (TV Dep), then such sentences express propositions the truth-values of which are dependent upon the truth-values of propositions which are about Socrates in the (Ab1) sense.

We can cash out the distinctions in play here in more contemporary terms. According to the theory of descriptions, (1) expresses an *object-independent* proposition, more perspicuously expressed by (1a):

(1)   The teacher of Plato is wise.

(1a) $(\exists x)(Txp \,\&\, (\forall y)(Typ \rightarrow y = x) \,\&\, Wx)$

While – assuming that "Socrates" is a genuine singular term – (2) expresses an *object-dependent* proposition more perspicuously expressed by (2a):

(2)   Socrates is wise.

(2a) Ws

Stephen Neale cashes out the distinction between object-dependent and object-independent propositions in these terms:

A genuine referring expression "*b*" may be combined with a (monadic) predicate expression to express an *object-dependent* thought,[21] a thought that simply could not be expressed or even entertained if the object referred to by "*b*" did not exist. A definite description "the *F*", by contrast, although it *may* in fact be satisfied by a unique object *x*, can be combined with a monadic predicate to express a thought that is not contingent upon the existence of *x*. (1990: 5–6)

In terms of truth, an object-dependent proposition will be true just in case the entity upon whose existence it is dependent has the property expressed by the predicate expression. The truth of an object-independent proposition will not depend upon any *particular* entity's having the property expressed by the predicate expression. There may in fact be exactly one entity satisfying the descriptive condition, but the proposition would subsist even if no entity (or more than one) satisfied the descriptive condition; for as we might put it, that entity does not enter into the truth-condition of the proposition expressed. Returning to our example, the crucial difference between the propositions expressed by (1a) and (2a) is this: the state of each and every entity within the domain of the quantified variables is relevant to the truth-value of the proposition expressed by (1a), while the truth-value of the proposition expressed by (2a) is a matter only of the state of the entity designated by the singular term occurring therein. This is the distinction between object-dependent and object-independent propositions, and it squares up exactly to the distinction between singular terms and quantifier expressions. Let us then adopt the following characterisation of a singular term:

(ST)　"*a*" is a singular term just in case, when it occurs in a sentence *S* of the form "*a* is *G*", the truth-value of the proposition expressed by *S* is a matter of how things stand with the entity designated by "*a*".[22]

Characterising singular terms in terms of object-dependent propositions involves a departure from Russell's terminology, but not from the spirit of the notions he employed. He writes for instance that if I assert "I met a man" then:

the whole human race is involved in my assertion: if any man who ever existed or will exist had not existed or been going to exist, the purport of my proposition would have been different. (*PoM*, 62)

This sets up a clear distinction between object-dependent propositions, in which the entity that the proposition is about actually occurs in the propo-

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[21] For present purposes read "thought" as "proposition".

[22] This (ST) is obviously not to be confused with Salmon's (2005: 1082).

sition, and object-independent propositions in which every entity in the relevant domain is relevant to the truth-condition of the proposition. The distinction may only be implicit in *PoM*, and couched in different terms, but it is there nonetheless and recognisably so.

(ST) enables us to see exactly why commitment to (TV Dep) would commit Russell to the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms. By (TV Dep), the truth of sentence (1) depends upon the truth of proposition <2>. This may be illustrated as follows. (1) is true (in the derivative sense of truth applicable to sentences) if it expresses a true proposition; (1) expresses <1>; <1> is true, according to (TV Dep), just in case <2> is true; and the truth-value of <2> is a matter of how things stand with Socrates. "The teacher of Plato" is, then, the kind of expression which, when it occurs in a sentence of the form "the teacher of Plato is *G*", expresses a proposition whose truth-value is a matter of how things stand with Socrates (that is, the entity designated by "the teacher of Plato"). But to be an expression of *that* kind *just is*, according to (ST), what it is to be a singular term.

Now according to an alternative, but perhaps common, use of "singular term", singular terms are simply to be contrasted with *incomplete symbols*. An incomplete symbol is an expression which may contribute to the construction of significant sentences, but which does not stand for, or *indicate*, an entity. Paradigmatically, the denoting phrases of *OD* are considered as incomplete symbols (though Russell does not there use the terminology) in that they "never have any meaning in themselves, but … every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning" (*OD*, 43). Now if to be a singular term is *just* to not be an incomplete symbol, then of course the Russell of *PoM* did take descriptions to be singular terms, as they all indicate denoting concepts. But this conception of singular terms is so general as to be almost useless. For instance, suppose one takes it, as some do, that the semantic value of *OD*'s denoting phrases are second-level functions.[23] Are we not then entitled to deem *OD*'s denoting phrases singular terms, since on this view they indicate second-level functions? Under this proposal *all* quantifier expressions turn out to be singular terms, collapsing a distinction that ought to be preserved. What is wrong with the present understanding of singular terms is that it ignores the central issue, namely *aboutness*. Singular terms and quantifier expressions enable one to speak about the world in significantly different ways. A serviceable account of singular terms must therefore preserve the contrast with quantifier expressions, but the proposal that to be a singular term

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[23] This view is presented by e.g., Miller (1998: 60). It is not an interpretation of *OD* that I endorse.

is simply not to be an incomplete symbol fails in this regard. For this rea-
son, when we ask whether definite descriptions are taken, by the Russell
of *PoM*, to be singular terms, we are asking after (say) the way in which
a sentence such as (1) is about Socrates. (ST) offers a characterisation of
singular terms that preserves the contrast with quantifier expressions by
appealing to the notion of *designation*, which is cashed out in terms of
object-dependence. As I have urged, though this terminology is anachro-
nistic, the underlying notions are not.

Let us pause for a moment to ask whether (ST) is faithful to the char-
acterisation of singular terms that Salmon has in mind. One limitation of
(ST) is that it says nothing of expressions which fail to designate. Salmon,
on the other hand, writes:

> an expression may have the semantic function of designating a single indi-
> vidual without necessarily fulfilling its function. Hence, "the present king
> of France" is not disqualified [from being a singular term] simply because
> France is no longer a monarchy (and would not have been disqualified even
> if France had never been a monarchy). (2005: 1072n.)

Thus it seems that (ST) does not capture all that Salmon's characterisation
of singular terms captures. But arguably, whatever it is that (ST) leaves out
can have no real bearing on a discussion of the views of the early Russell.
To see why, consider sentence (3):

(3) The present king of France is wise.

If "the present king of France" is a significant expression, as the Russell of
PoM certainly held that it was, then (3) certainly expresses a proposition
(call it "<3>"). Now there either is or is not some unique entity satisfying
the descriptive condition *is presently king of France*. Let us consider the
two possibilities.

1. If there is *no* entity satisfying the descriptive condition, then the
proposition must be false.[24] But notice the contrast here with the treatment
of the arch singular term, the proper name. Russell's view is that there can
be no such thing as a genuine proper name that lacks a bearer:

> "*A* is not" must always be either false or meaningless. For if *A* were nothing,
> it could not be said not to be; "*A* is not" implies that there is a term [entity]
> *A* whose being is denied, and hence that *A* is. Thus unless "*A* is not" be an
> empty sound, it must be false – whatever *A* may be, it certainly is. (*PoM*,
> 449)

For Russell the idea of a bearer-less proper name is incoherent. Thus
if definite descriptions are singular terms, then insofar as there may be

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[24] It surely isn't true.

empty definite descriptions, definite descriptions are singular terms of a different kind to proper names. This new kind of singular term would be one which tolerates the formation of sentences expressing propositions that do not conform to either of (Ab1) or (Ab2) – for there is no entity that <3> is about – yet these are central to Russell's framework of propositions in *PoM*. As such, the proposal that "the present king of France" is a singular term that designates nothing at all, and yet contributes to the formation of significant declarative sentences like (3), is highly implausible as an account of Russell's position in *PoM*. Indeed it is difficult to see how it could even find an application to Russell's position: that all propositions are about some entity (or entities) is near axiomatic for Russell in *PoM*, yet the present proposal tolerates exceptions.[25]

2. Let us then consider the second alternative, the possibility that there *is* some unique entity satisfying the descriptive condition *is presently king of France*. There is certainly no *existing* present king of France. But as is well known, Russell countenanced entities which do not exist, but merely *subsist* or have *being*:

> *Being* is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought – in short to everything that can possibly occur in any proposition, true or false, and to all such propositions themselves. … *Existence*, on the contrary, is the prerogative of some only among beings. (*PoM*, 449)

Perhaps then, "the present king of France" designates a non-existent being. <3> will then be taken as true or false depending upon how we evaluate propositions containing non-existent entities (we need not investigate this mode of evaluation: suffice it to note that <3> is, presumably, false). This second possibility, unlike the first, conforms with (Ab1) and (Ab2): <3> is about the non-existent present king of France. Now I don't, for the moment, want to deny that, as an interpretation of Russell, this view is an option (though cf. section 4.1 below). For now I simply note that if we attribute to Russell the view that definite descriptions are singular terms against this backdrop (so that empty definite descriptions are accounted for by positing non-existents), then (ST) does not, after all, miss out anything of importance. We were entertaining the possibility that (ST) was not the characterisation of singular terms that Salmon had in mind on the grounds that it was too narrow, that it said nothing about empty definite descriptions. But now we have come full circle: we now *deny* that there are empty definite descriptions by appealing to Russell's distinction between *existence* and *being*. If there are no empty descriptions, (ST) is not too narrow after all.

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[25] A version of the present proposal (as an interpretation of Russell) is considered and rejected in subsection 4.2 below.

I take it then, that (ST) captures enough of what is important about Russell's general position in *PoM* to be fruitfully applicable to that position, but is also not unfair to the notion of *singular term* at work in Salmon's paper.

4. Definite Descriptions as Singular Terms in *PoM*?

We noted in section 3 that, for Russell in *PoM*, there can be no proper name that fails to indicate something; a proper name which indicates nothing is not, properly speaking, a proper name at all, but a meaningless sound. As far as *indication* goes, the same holds for denoting phrases: a denoting phrase that indicates no denoting concept is not, properly speaking, a *phrase* at all, but just another meaningless sound. But Russell holds that *all* denoting phrases have an indication, namely a denoting concept. The question is, then, whether there can be denoting *concepts* that are empty, that denote nothing. Russell openly acknowledges this possibility:

> It is necessary to realize, in the first place, that a concept may denote although it does not denote anything. This occurs when there are propositions in which the said concept occurs, and which are not about the said concept, but all such propositions are false. (*PoM*, 73)

As such, there being no unique entity that is *F* is no barrier to there being a proposition expressed by a sentence of the form "the *F* is *G*". But if the proposition is not about the denoting concept itself, and is not about the denotation (since, *ex hypothesi*, there is none), what could it be about?

If the Russell of *PoM* holds that definite descriptions are singular terms, then there are two plausible responses to the above question. First, one might renege on the claim that there is no denotation, declaring Russell's statement to the contrary a slip. When there is no unique *F*, "the *F* is *G*" will express a proposition which is about a *non-existent* entity. For instance, in section 3 we entertained the suggestion that "the present king of France" designates a non-existent entity. It *indicates* #the present king of France#, which *denotes* the non-existent present king of France. (3) is then significant in virtue of expressing the false proposition <3>:[26]

   <3>   <#the present king of France# is wise>

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[26] Quite how Russell might bring it about that propositions such as <3> are false is not our concern here. One suggestion is to stipulate that non-existent entities have no properties other than those included in, or implied by, their descriptive conditions. Certain specifically ontological properties – e.g. *being non-existent*, *subsisting*, etc. – may require exemption from the general stipulation. This is nothing more than a suggested starting point for an explanation.

In subsection 4.1 I indicate how recent developments in Russell scholarship tell against this proposal. If the Russell of *PoM* endorsed the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms, it was not against *this* backdrop.

The second – and more promising – response to the question raised above involves maintaining the interpretation according to which Russell is committed to the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms, but acknowledging and accommodating the fact that not all denoting phrases have a denotation. This is, no doubt, the position that Salmon and Hylton have in mind. In subsection 4.2 I argue that even against *this* backdrop, proper consideration of the nature of denoting suggests that Russell should not be seen as committed to the thesis in question.

4.1. The Ontology of PoM

Russell scholarship has seen, in recent years, a move away from the *standard view* (as Griffin (1996) calls it) of the origins of the theory of descriptions, the view, that is, "that the theory of descriptions was intended primarily as a contribution to ontology, a device (as Quine (1966: 659) put it) for 'dispensing with unwelcome objects'" (Griffin (1996: 24)). The standard view has gone hand-in-hand with the claim that the ontology of *PoM* is (in some, most often pejorative, sense) "quasi-Meinongian" – that is "unrestrained" (Quine (1966: 658)) or "intolerably overcrowded" (Ayer (1971: 28)). Thus the move away from the standard view has heralded a move away from the quasi-Meinongian reading of *PoM*.[27]

The quasi-Meinongian reading offers a good deal of support to the thesis that the Russell of *PoM* treated definite descriptions as singular terms. If the quasi-Meinongian reading is wrongheaded, the motivation for the claim regarding descriptions as singular terms is significantly weakened. The quasi-Meinongian reading is indeed wrongheaded; however, the considerations in favour of its rejection are not, taken individually, conclusive. In the present section I discuss four reasons for rejecting the quasi-Meinongian reading, indicating their shortcomings along the way.

The first objection appeals to the fact that the Russell of *PoM* already had at his disposal the means to avoid the quasi-Meinongian ontology. The rejection of the quasi-Meinongian ontology does not require the theory of descriptions: the theory of denoting concepts will do just as well. This is borne out most notably by Russell's "The Existential Import of Proposi-

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[27] For discussion see Stevens (forthcoming).

tions",[28] published some months before *OD*, in which Russell, still advocating the theory of denoting concepts,[29] urges:

> "The present King of England" is a complex concept denoting an individual; "the present King of France" is a similar complex concept denoting nothing. The phrase intends to point out an individual, but fails to do so: it does not point out an unreal individual, but no individual at all. (Russell (1905a: 399))

The obvious problem with this objection is that, as yet, it says nothing of Russell's position in *PoM*. That the means were at his disposal does not entail that he noticed them (even if he did recognise them, further evidence is required to establish that he put them to work). The quoted passage was published two years after *PoM*, so we should be wary of immediately attributing the view to Russell in the earlier work.[30] That such a position is available in *PoM* – and that Russell subsequently came to adopt it – should give the advocate of the quasi-Meinongian reading pause; but it is not even nearly conclusive.

The second objection concerns the reductive aspect of the logicist project: mathematical concepts are to be defined – and sometimes defined *away* – in terms of purely logical concepts. Cardinal numbers, for example, are defined in terms of classes of classes (*PoM*, ch. XI). But if cardinal numbers are thus defined *and* Russell is still committed to their subsistence, then, Griffin urges, "it is difficult to see what the reductive definitions of logicism achieve and why Russell considered them to be important" (1996: 50).

Griffin's point is that it would be a glaring error – or at least an obvious opportunity missed – to give a reductive definition of a concept *B* in terms of more a more basic concept *A*, but not to eliminate *B*s from one's ontology. It would be as if one acknowledged the propriety of analysing (4) as (4a),

(4)   The round-square does not exist.

(4a) $\neg(\exists x)((Rx \ \& \ Sx) \ \& \ (\forall y)((Ry \ \& \ Sy) \rightarrow y = x))$

and yet still maintained that the round square subsists in the realm of being. But we should acknowledge two considerations, one more general,

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[28] Russell (1905a).

[29] The papers in Part III of Russell (1994) all indicate that Russell's views on denoting developed somewhat in the period between *PoM* and *OD*. Plotting the details of the development is no small task (Russell Wahl (1993) makes a good attempt). I see no reason to suppose that any of these developments was so significant or longstanding that we would go far astray by labelling the theory Russell held right up until the discovery of the theory of descriptions "the theory of denoting concepts".

[30] Such reticence can be found in Hylton (1990: 240–44). For critical discussion see Makin (2000: 54ff).

one more particular. First, the analysis of (4) as (4a) is an example of what Michael Beaney (forthcoming) has called "interpretive" (or "transformative") analysis. In interpretive analysis a sentence of one language is translated into a sentence (or formula) of another, such that certain problematic issues may be seen to disappear, to be more clearly delineated, or to be more readily solvable. In this case, the apparently substantive phrase "the round-square" is seen to disappear on analysis, and with it goes the pressure to posit any such entity as the round-square. In this respect, the theory of descriptions is a hugely powerful ontological tool (this goes some way towards explaining the appeal of the standard view). However while interpretive analysis does have great eliminative potential, one is not obliged to take the eliminative step (indeed Beaney suggests that Frege employed interpretive analysis in relative ignorance of its eliminativist potential). So it does not follow, in general, that the definition of numbers in terms of classes forces upon one the ontological elimination of numbers as entities. One might apply an interpretive analysis not with the intention of *eliminating* the analysandum, but with the intention of making clear, or sharpening, the conception of it.

The more particular consideration that the defender of the quasi-Meinongian reading can invoke calls upon Russell's distinction between mathematical and philosophical definition.

> It is necessary to realize that definition, in mathematics, does not mean, as in philosophy, an analysis of the idea to be defined into constituent ideas. … Mathematical definition consists in pointing out a fixed relation to a fixed [entity], of which one [entity] only is capable: this [latter entity] is then defined by means of the fixed relation and the fixed [entity]. (*PoM*, 27)

This distinction is not reflected in Griffin's objection, but is clearly of great importance in this regard. Russell says: "Mathematically, a number is nothing but a class of similar classes" (*PoM*, 116). This is to say nothing more than that, for mathematical purposes, one may regard numbers as nothing more than classes of similar classes: it says nothing of the ontological status of numbers. There is a division, discernible throughout *PoM*, of logico-mathematical and philosophical issues. Of course the two are intertwined, but it is often the case that Russell will deem an explanation satisfactory for logico-mathematical purposes, but philosophically inadequate.[31] In the present case, the mathematical account of cardinal

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[31] The following passage, which occurs in the context of a discussion of the null class, is representative of a general theme: "I am not at present discussing what should be done in the logical calculus, where the established practice appears to me the best, but what is the philosophical truth concerning the null class" (*PoM*, 74). What is adequate for logico-mathematical purposes may not constitute the philosophical truth of the matter.

numbers is one thing, the philosophical account of their ontological status quite another. A mathematical definition provides only a descriptive condition that uniquely applies to one entity; it is a further question – and a *philosophical* one at that (requiring what Russell calls "philosophical insight" (*PoM*, 27)) – whether one can advance any additional thesis concerning the metaphysical nature of that entity. The upshot is that it is not clear, at least not without further more detailed exegesis, that the logicism of *PoM* is uniformly reductive in the eliminative sense that Griffin's objection requires.

The third objection to the quasi-Meinongian reading of *PoM* that I shall consider also comes from Griffin (1996). The logic of *PoM* is entirely general, employing unrestricted variables. A proposition *p* is logically true, says Griffin (1996: 51–2), if: (i) *p* is true; and (ii) the result of replacing any constituent entity of *p* (except for logical constants) by any other entity is a true proposition. Suppose that we grant the quasi-Meinongian reading, so that any well-formed definite description is taken to designate an entity. Griffin now argues as follows. The entity denoted by a denoting concept such as #the entity that is both *F* and *not-F*# cannot be substituted *salva veritate* into a statement of the logical principle embodying the claim that nothing is both *F* and *not-F*. Generalising,

> suppose *L* is any putative law of logic, we can then form the denoting concept #(*ιx*) ¬*L*#, which, then, on the standard [i.e. quasi-Meinongian] interpretation, will then denote a term [entity] for which *L* is not true! It seems clear, then, that … the standard interpretation … is inconsistent with the entire philosophy of logic which underlines [*PoM*]. (Griffin (1996: 52))

The quasi-Meinongian reading is, if the objection stands, incompatible with Russell's conception of the variables of logic as wholly unrestricted.

This objection can be resisted, though at a cost. For ease of exposition, let's name the entity denoted by #the entity that is both *F* and *not-F*# "*f*". Then the objection is that *f* constitutes a counterexample to the logical principle that nothing is both *F* and *not F*. But the objection presupposes that <*f* is *F*> and <*f* is *not-F*> are both true; and this the proponent of the quasi-Meinongian reading might deny. This denial will not, of course, be particularly attractive if we adopt the view (suggested above, fn. 26) that non-existent entities may be truly said to have those properties mentioned in their descriptive conditions. On this view, proposition <5> is false, but <6> true.

<5>   <#the king of France# is bald>

<6>   <#the bald king of France# is bald>

But the view is not forced upon one. One might instead hold that the only properties that any non-existent entity has are those specifically ontological properties that are common to all non-existent entities (such as *being non-existent*). On this alternative view, <5> and <6> are both automatically false. Returning to our contradictory entity *f*, if *F* is a property such as *baldness*, <*f* is *F*> and <*f* is *not-F*> are both false, and so there is no counterexample to the logical principle (though one might worry about the law of excluded middle). The counterexample will only arise, on the present proposal, if *F* is taken to be an ontological property. But one might treat such properties as *relational* properties, which an entity has just in case it stands in a certain relation to the entities *existence*, *non-existence*, *subsistence* (etc.). This line of thought is not at all alien to Russell, who writes "To exist is to have a specific relation to existence" (*PoM*, 449). But it is clear where we are heading: non-existent entities will have no intrinsic properties. Whether this is, ultimately, a coherent position is a question we need not address here. It is enough to note that there is logical space here of which the advocate of the quasi-Meinongian reading might make use.

The more general thrust of the objection – that for any logical law we can generate a denoting concept denoting an entity for which the law fails to hold – may also be countered. There would only be a counterexample to the logical law *L* if the entity denoted by #(*ιx*) ¬*L*# were a true proposition. What is denoted is certainly a proposition, but it need not – and indeed, if *L* is a logical law, *could not* – be true. The objection may therefore be countered, thought at the cost of admitting to the ontology entities with no intrinsic properties. This may be deemed a heavy price to pay; but as an interpretation of Russell it is nonetheless an option.

The fourth objection to the quasi-Meinongian reading is raised by Makin (2000). Of the four objections considered it is, I think, the most compelling. Makin raises the point in discussion of the various kinds of entities that Russell is, on the quasi-Meinongian reading, supposedly committed to:

> Russell's "ontological exuberance" in *PoM* regarding fictitious entities is *name-driven not description-driven*… [I]t was not the thought that "everything goes" that led Russell to admit fictitious entities into his ontology, but rather a specific principle (i.e. that "A is not" is always false) … together with the reluctance to dismiss apparently intelligible talk of such entities as empty noise. (2000: 63, emphasis added).

There is undoubtedly an extent to which Russell's ontology is pressured by linguistic form. But the extent seems only to amount to this: that he felt that every significant expression should indicate something. In the case

of proper names – for which indication and designation coincide – this manifests itself in the claim that "'*A* is not' must always be either false or meaningless" (*PoM*, 449), and the subsequent admission to the ontology of the likes of Apollo and Hamlet. In the case of definite descriptions however, the pressure induced by linguistic form is relieved simply by the admission of the corresponding denoting concept: having posited an indicated entity, there is no additional pressure to posit a non-existent entity to stand as its denotation. When, after *PoM*, Apollo and Hamlet are no longer admitted to the ontology – be it under the auspices of the theory of denoting concepts as in Russell (1905a), or the theory of descriptions as in *OD* – it is because Russell has struck upon a specific method of releasing the pressure induced by linguistic form, namely the analysis of proper names as disguised descriptions.

We have, then, four objections to the quasi-Meinongian reading, none of which is individually conclusive, but which together present a compelling case. To base an interpretation of Russell's position on singular terms on the quasi-Meinongian interpretation of the *PoM* ontology would be misguided.

4.2. The Nature of Denoting

It may be suggested that Salmon and Hylton can maintain their respective positions if we take those positions to acknowledge and accommodate the fact that not all denoting phrases have a denotation. Salmon will thus be understood as attributing to Russell the thesis that definite descriptions are expressions the semantic function of which is to designate the unique entity – *if any* – satisfying the descriptive condition. On this proposal, sentence (1) is about Socrates, since he is the unique entity satisfying the descriptive condition *teacher of Plato*; while (3) is taken to be a degenerate case, and to be about nothing. Similarly, Hylton will be understood to attribute to Russell a version of (TV Dep) according to which the truth-value of a proposition *p* (containing a denoting concept) is dependent upon the truth-value of the proposition obtained from *p* by replacing the denoting concept by the denoted entity *if there is one*, otherwise *p* is false. On this proposal the otherwise problematic <3> is declared automatically false.

The difficulty, however, is that whatever the independent merits of these positions, they will not do as an interpretation of Russell. For Russell, recall, a denoting phrase enables one to express a proposition which is about a given entity (or entities) in a peculiar way – as *denoted* rather than *referred to* (cf. (Ab1) and (Ab2)). This distinction is what, in *PoM*, secures the distinction between discursive thought and immediate perception (*PoM*, 53) – between, analogously, general and singular propositions.

Now Russell of course accepts that propositions <1> and <2> are intimately linked.

    <1>   <#the teacher of Plato# is wise>

    <2>   <Socrates is wise>

They are linked in virtue of the fact that #the teacher of Plato# denotes Socrates. #The teacher of Plato# denote Socrates (rather than anyone else) because (i) Socrates is the unique instance of the predicate (class-concept) *teacher of Plato*, and (ii) #the teacher of Plato# is obtained, derived we might say, from the predicate (class-concept) *teacher of Plato*. Associated with every predicate (class-concept) are various denoting concepts obtained from it:

> There is, connected with every predicate, a great variety of closely allied concepts… Starting, for example, with *human*, we have man, men, all men, every man, any man, the human race, of which all except the first two are twofold, a denoting concept and an object denoted; we have also, less closely analogous, the notions "a man" and "some man," which again denote objects other than themselves. This vast apparatus connected with every predicate must be borne in mind, and an endeavour must be made to give an analysis of all the above notions. (*PoM*, 55)[32]

Ultimately then, that there is such a proposition as <1> is dependent upon there being such a predicate (class-concept) as *teacher of Plato*, not upon there being some entity that is the unique instance of it (this is no less the case for a proposition such as <3>). To be a proposition is to have a truth-value: all and only propositions have truth-values; so if the existence of the proposition <1> is not contingent upon the existence of Socrates (but rather upon the existence of the predicate *teacher of Plato*), then neither is its having a truth-value. This is a round-about way of saying that the proposition is object-independent; for its truth-value is not, ultimately, a matter of how things stand with Socrates, but with the unique instance (if any) of the predicate (class-concept) *teacher of Plato*. And if <1> is object-independent, then "the teacher of Plato" is not a singular term. Generalising, definite descriptions are not singular terms.

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[32] This passage lists all the denoting phrases *except* definite descriptions ("The human race" is intended as equivalent to "all men"). Does this suggest that Russell intended a distinct treatment of definite descriptions? No. The definite article is "correctly employed only in relation to a class-concept of which there is only one instance" says Russell (*PoM*, 62). The notion of *correctness* here is prescriptive rather than absolute: it is not that one *cannot* use "the" in relation to a class-concept of which there is more or less than one instance, just that one *should* not. Thus for any predicate (class-concept) *F*, there is an associated denoting concept #the *F*# regardless of the cardinality of the class of *F*s.

Similarly, we can argue in the following manner. Russell insists that the logical differences pertaining to the different kinds of denoting concepts (#all *F*#, #some *F*#, etc) are traceable to differences in the kinds of entities denoted, rather than the denoting relation itself (*PoM*, 61–2). Thus all denoting phrases bring it about that the sentences in which they occur express propositions that are about whatever it is that they are about *in the same kind of way*. Consider now a predicate (class-concept) having only one instance, e.g. *author of Waverley*. As Russell says, "The word *the*, in the singular, is correctly employed only in relation to a class-concept of which there is only one instance" (*PoM*, 62). He does not, then, take the predicate (class-concept) from which #the author of *Waverley*# is obtained to be *unique author of Waverley*, but just *author of Waverley*. The denoting concept #the author of *Waverley*# then denotes the unit class, if any, whose member is the entity satisfying the descriptive condition. Now whether this entails that the proposition <#the author of *Waverley*# is Scotch> is about a certain unit class, or about Scott, or about both, is a matter of whether one identifies a unit class with its member – a matter upon which Russell vacillates, eventually coming to distinguish them (*PoM*, 106; cf. 68). (Note that any concern that <#the author of *Waverley*# is Scotch> is about a class rather than a man is misplaced. The unit class of authors of *Waverley* is, taken in extension, identical with Scott.) The crucial point, however, is that the account of how <#the author of *Waverley*# is Scotch> comes to be about whatever it is about, is intended by Russell to be the same as the account of how, say, <#an author of *Principia Mathematica*# smokes> comes to be about whatever it is about: i.e. through the relation of denoting, as given in (Ab2). The relevant logical differences between the two propositions pertain to the character of the entities denoted by the respective denoting concepts, not the way in which they are denoted. Now "an author of *Principia Mathematica*" is plainly not a singular term, and since "the author of *Waverley*" functions in so similar a way, *it* is not a singular term either.

Russell does not, then, take definite descriptions as singular terms in *PoM*. But what then of the amended version of (TV Dep) that one might offer Hylton? Once we no longer understand Russell to have taken definite descriptions for singular terms, part of the motivation for (TV Dep) is removed. The principle was proposed as an explanation of the fact that a proposition may be about an entity it does not contain as a constituent (Hylton (1990: 251)). In its amended form, and without definite descriptions as singular terms, the principle is now a less than comprehensive explanation, offering no real account of the fact that <3> is not about any of its constituents. It is true that Russell himself offers no real explanation of this; but in extending his position to redress this oversight, the natural

move is to make use of his notion of denoting concepts as obtained from predicates (class-concepts). We might then take the denotation of #the present king of France# to be the class of present kings of France, which, taken in extension, is the null class.[33] This proposal has two advantages over the amended version of (TV Dep). First, it is far more in keeping with the spirit of Russell's position; second, Russell's truth-primitivism is left uncompromised.

I see, therefore, no reason to suppose that the Russell of *PoM* was committed to either the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms or (TV Dep). If this account is correct, then the interpretations of the GEA forwarded by Salmon, Hylton – and any other interpreter of the GEA who relies upon these claims in their exposition – rest on a mischaracterisation of the position against which the Russell of *OD* was arguing.

5. From *PoM* to *OD*

I will close by noting some of the respects in which Russell's position in *OD* represents an advance from his position in *PoM*, and indicating how the acknowledgment of these might influence the way in which we approach the task of understanding the GEA.

The great similarity between the theory of denoting concepts and the theory of descriptions is that both are theories of generality. As I have argued above, this holds true not only for the relatively uncontroversial quantifier phrases – "all *F*", "any *F*", "some *F*", etc. – but also for definite descriptions. In this very limited respect, then, there is no real change. Broadening our view however, *OD* heralds significant advances in both ontological and semantic respects.

The ontological advance is not, as was once thought, that a whole realm of non-existent entities are jettisoned, but, rather, that denoting concepts are abandoned. One must remember however – as Hylton notes (1990: 255–56) – that the variable, which is very arguably a kind of denoting concept, remains in *OD*, though now taken as fundamental (*OD*, 42).

The main action is on the semantic front, where *OD* sees the abandoning of Russell's former naivety concerning the relationship between grammatical and logical form. In *PoM* grammatical form[34] was taken to be, on the whole, a reliable guide to logical (that is, propositional) form (*PoM*, 42). By *OD*, while Russell still holds that the analysis of a sentence can reveal the logical form of the proposition it expresses, he no longer accepts that the logical form of a proposition can be uncritically "read off" from

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[33] This is obviously reminiscent of Frege in the *Grundgesetze* (Frege 1964).
[34] That is: the grammatical form of sentences of natural language.

the grammatical form of a sentence expressing it. That a sentence is of subject-predicate form, for example, is no sure indication that the proposition it expresses has the analogous logical form. It is this overcoming of a certain semantic naivety that constitutes the real advance from *PoM* to *OD*. In particular, Russell no longer holds that it follows from the fact that "*A*" is a significant expression – that it can be systematically employed in the construction of sentences – that there *must be* some entity that it indicates.[35] This development is characteristic of the theory of descriptions: it amounts to the recognition of a class of incomplete symbols. If, in this way, one treats definite descriptions as incomplete symbols, one thereby denies that they are singular terms. But as we have seen, it does not follow from the fact that an expression is *not* an incomplete symbol, that it *is* a singular term; nor does it follow from the fact that an expression is *not* a singular term that it *is* an incomplete symbol. We must not lose sight of the fact that the really significant development in *OD* involves the casting of definite descriptions as incomplete expressions, not the denying that they are singular terms.

How might these considerations help us in understanding the GEA? In treating denoting phrases as incomplete symbols, Russell is able to explain, without recourse to denoting concepts,[36] how a proposition could be about certain entities not contained in it. My suggestion therefore, is that the GEA should be understood as criticising the theory of denoting concepts on just this matter: that it fails to explain how a proposition could be about certain entities not contained in it. On this suggestion then, the tangle that the GEA uncovers concerns the relation between a denoting concept and its denotation. Of course there is nothing very new in this suggestion yet. But, the suggestion continues, the kind of problem we should expect to find in the GEA is not so much that denoting concepts are themselves inherently problematic (though they may be[37]), but that the theory that posits them is unable to explain their relation to the entities they denote. The conclusion that any interpretation of the GEA ought to identify is, then, that the theory of denoting concepts cannot adequately explain why, say, <#the author of *Waverley*# is Scotch> is about Scott. Accordingly, we should be wary of interpretations of the GEA which focus upon problems attending directly to denoting concepts themselves. I have no

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[35] Here we see clearly the respect in which the theory of denoting concepts and Frege's theory of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* are sufficiently alike – and sufficiently unlike the theory of descriptions – to both come under attack in the GEA.

[36] Though bear in mind the complicated status of the variable.

[37] There are various objections to the very notion of a denoting concept in the offing. This, I suspect, has led many to unduly read such objections into the GEA. For related discussion see Noonan (1996).

wish to deny that there may be such issues, or even that, at certain stages of the GEA, they come under consideration. But, if my suggestion is along the right lines, we should take very seriously the possibility that such issues do not constitute the heart of the matter. The central problem does not concern the denoting concepts themselves, or the possibility of forming propositions directly about them, but rather concerns their relation to their denotations. This relation – which ought, if all is well, to explain why it is that propositions containing the former are about the latter – is shrouded in obscurity; it remains, as Russell puts it, "wholly mysterious" (*OD*, 50).[38]

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