

Russell and Strawson on definite descriptions: The principle of charity and its role in the appraisal of a philosophical theory

Russel e Strawson sobre descrições definidas: o princípio de caridade e seu papel na avaliação de teorias filosóficas

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Abstract

The principle of charity is an important norm which governs not only philosophical inquiry but also conversations (or talk exchanges). It requires that we adopt the more/most plausible or reasonable interpretation of other people's views in such a way that we ascribe to them the greatest possible consistency and rationality. This paper highlights the importance of the principle of charity in the critical appraisal of a philosophical theory. To further this end, the paper delves into the arguments presented by Strawson against Russell's theory of definite descriptions. In general, Strawson's arguments are not enough to demolish Russell's theory of definite descriptions and the main reason for this is the former's failure to adopt the more/most charitable interpretation of the latter's theory. This paper also argues that the crucial element which Strawson should have considered in evaluating Russell's theory so as to comply with the demands of the principle of charity is the latter's epistemological concern (or project), since this is its proper context.

Key words: definite descriptions, principle of charity, Russell, Strawson.

Resumo

O princípio de caridade é uma norma importante que governa não apenas pesquisas filosóficas, mas também conversações (ou troca de ideias). Ele requer que adotemos a mais plausível ou razoável interpretação do ponto de vista da outra pessoa, de tal modo que atribuamos a ela a maior consistência e racionalidade possíveis. Este artigo destaca a importância do princípio de caridade na avaliação crítica de uma teoria filosófica. Para tanto, o artigo investiga os argumentos apresentados por Strawson contra a teoria das

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descrições definidas de Russell. De modo geral, os argumentos de Strawson não são suficientes para demolir a teoria das descrições de Russell e a principal razão para isso é a falha em adotar a interpretação mais caridosa daquela teoria. Este artigo também argumenta que o elemento crucial que Strawson deveria ter considerado na avaliação da teoria de Russell a fim de atender as exigências do princípio de caridade era a preocupação epistemológica do autor (ou o seu projeto), pois este seria o contexto apropriado para a teoria.

Palavras-chave: princípio da caridade, Strawson, Russell, descrições definidas.

Introduction

Philosophical theories are subjected to rigorous examinations and criticisms. Consequently, philosophical theories are eventually rejected, accepted, or modified. It is by undergoing these tedious processes that various philosophical problems are redefined and reformulated. It is also via these processes that tentative solutions to philosophical problems are developed and refined. On the whole, then, the philosophical enterprise benefits from various exchanges (formal or informal) between and among philosophers, especially in terms of the arguments that they present for or against a particular philosophical theory (or position). The foregoing remarks point out that, like any other social activity, philosophical inquiry demands *cooperation* from those who engage in it so as to ensure that it achieves what it seeks to achieve – *conceptual clarification*.

In presenting arguments for or against a particular philosophical theory, there is always the danger of violating (consciously or unconsciously) some principles that exhibit *genuine* cooperation in the relevant sense. One such principle is the principle of *charity* (henceforth PC). As a methodological principle, PC requires that we take the more/most plausible or reasonable interpretation of other people's views in the event that two or more interpretations are possible. According to Davidson (1973-1974, p. 19), such a principle requires that we "make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement". Upholding PC in philosophical inquiry has undeniable positive results. *First*, it makes the task more fruitful in the sense that what we evaluate is the strongest possible interpretation of the thesis/argument in question instead of a mere caricature of it. In this way, we can help ensure that we bring out the best arguments that human reason can provide. *Second*, it makes the task more efficient in the sense that it lessens the time that we spend on disagreements that should not have been disagreements in the first place (if only we had been more charitable in interpreting others).

To the extent that philosophical inquiry is a *discourse* (or a *conversation*), one may add PC to Grice's list of categories² and maxims under his Cooperative Principle (henceforth CP). Grice (1996) formulates CP in the following way: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". At the outset, let me point out that even if one complains that Grice is concerned with CP as it applies to the logic of *conversation* (or what he refers to as *talk exchange*), it is nevertheless clear that any violation of PC counts as a serious violation of Grice's CP in both formal and informal talk exchanges (or conversations). Grice's main point is that even ordinary conversations have a sort of logic that can be shown in a perspicuous way. This is what Grice (1996, p. 157) means by "the

² These categories are taken by Grice from Kant. They are as follows: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. See Grice (1996).

conditions governing conversation". To be sure, the maxim 'Be charitable' will not easily fit Grice's categories but it is easy to see how the non-observance of such a maxim amounts to a significant violation of Grice's CP: In ordinary conversations and in formal exchanges, if I do not interpret the words and thoughts of others in such a way that I ascribe to them the greatest possible consistency and rationality, this is a manifestation of my inability (or unwillingness) to cooperate in the activity. It is important to note that the non-observance of PC has crucial implications on Grice's categories such as *quality* and *relation*. For instance, if I do not uphold PC in interpreting the words and thoughts of others, this might lead to a scenario where my response (or contribution) would not be *true* or *relevant* to the subject of (and the purposes by which I engage in) the talk exchange. Aside from Grice's CP and categories then, PC qualifies as an important *condition* for the successful performance not only of speech acts and philosophical inquiry but also for the success of any communication situation we are engaged in (for instance, the successful *decoding* of conversational implicatures *à la* Grice).

In this paper, I will provide a defense of Russell's theory of definite descriptions against the criticisms raised against it by Strawson. In the process, I will show that: (i) a *more* charitable interpretation of Russell's theory of definite descriptions would significantly lessen the apparent disagreements between Russell and Strawson's views; (ii) the crucial element which Strawson *should* have considered in evaluating Russell's theory (so as to render it more plausible, consistent, and rational) is the latter's *epistemological concern* (or project) which can help explain why he is proposing the theory in the first place; (iii) the supposed defects that Strawson attributes to Russell's theory (as the arguments raised against it by Strawson show) are not defects that come from directly confronting the theory itself. By not adopting the more/most charitable interpretation of Russell's theory, the alleged defects rather appear to be perceived defects which can be explained by Strawson's own philosophical commitments at the time which he considers to be incompatible with those of Russell's.

Russell and Frege: The principle of charity as a norm of philosophical inquiry and conversational practice

There is no doubt that Russell rightfully belongs to the class of great philosophers. Even Gottlob Frege recognizes the excellent quality of Russell's thought and even gives him credit for pointing out what appears to be a contradiction in the former's Rule V. The significance of the aforementioned rule is of utmost importance for Frege and Russell's discovery has profound implications on the former's system. As to the seriousness of the aforementioned discovery, Frege, in his letter to Russell, says the following:

Your discovery of the contradiction caused me the greatest surprise and, I would almost say, consternation, since it has shaken the basis on which I intended to build arithmetic [...] I must reflect further on the matter. It is all the more serious since, with the loss of my Rule V, not only the foundations of my arithmetic, but also the sole possible foundations of arithmetic, seem to vanish (Frege and Russell, 1967, p. 127-128).

Both philosophers have deep respect for each other and both exhibit genuine attempts to *cooperate* in their efforts to be clear on the issue concerning the contradiction that Russell is pointing out. Here is an excerpt from Russell's letter to Frege:

I find myself in deep agreement with you in all essentials, particularly when you reject any psychological element [Moment] in logic and when you place a high value upon ideography [Begriffsschrift] for the foundations of mathematics and of formal logic [...] I find in your work discussions, distinctions, and definitions that one seeks in vain in the works of other logicians. Especially so far as function is concerned [...] I have been led on my own to views that are the same even in the details. There is just one point where I have encountered a difficulty [...] You state [...] that a function, too, can act as the indeterminate element. This I formerly believed, but now this view seems doubtful to me because of the following contradiction. Let w be the predicate: to be a predicate that cannot be predicated of itself. Can w be predicated of itself? From each answer its opposite follows. Therefore we must conclude that w is not a predicate. Likewise there is no class (as a totality) of those classes which, each taken as a totality, do not belong to themselves. From this I conclude that under certain circumstances a definable collection [Menge] does not form a totality (Russell and Frege, 1967, p. 124-125).

It is clear in the foregoing passages that both philosophers have been *charitable* in their interpretation of each other's views. This is important because it *maximizes* the agreement between the two and it helps explain why Frege considers Russell's discovery a serious one which merits further reflection. Despite its devastating effect on his project, Frege's reception of Russell's discovery is admirable. After attempting to identify the source of the contradiction and a general strategy³ to address the problem, Frege says to Russell: "In any case your discovery is very remarkable and will perhaps result in a great advance in logic, unwelcome as it may seem at first glance" (Frege and Russell, 1967, p. 128). When Russell was asked if he would allow the publication of his 1902 letter to Frege, he immediately agreed and even sent the editor, Jean van Heijenoort a letter in which Russell has these things to say about Frege (the year was 1962):

As I think about acts of integrity and grace, I realise that there is nothing in my knowledge to compare with Frege's dedication to truth. His entire life's work was on the verge of completion, much of his work had been ignored to the benefit of men infinitely less capable, his second volume was about to be published, and upon finding that his fundamental assumption was in error, he responded with intellectual pleasure clearly submerging any feelings of personal disappointment. It was almost superhuman and a telling indication of that of which men are capable if their dedication is to creative work and knowledge instead of cruder efforts to dominate and be known (Russell and Heijenoort, 1967, p. 127).

The foregoing section highlights the importance of being charitable in interpreting the words and thoughts of others. As stated earlier, this requires that we adopt the more/most plausible or reasonable interpretation of other people's views in such a way that we ascribe to them the greatest possible consistency and rationality. The short excursion on Russell and Frege serves as a fine example of two philosophers upholding PC in their mutual attempt to get clear about a particular problem that they seek to understand. It is important to note that by upholding PC, they were able to maximize their agreements and minimize their disagreements. It is also important to note that Russell's single disagreement with Frege (i.e., that which concerns the no-

³ The strategy entertained by Frege involves the possibility of setting up "conditions for the transformation of the generalization of an equality into an equality of courses-of-values" to keep the essentials of his proof intact. See "Letter to Russell" (Frege and Russell, 1967, p. 128).

tion of a *function* and the accompanying derivation of a contradiction) is recognized by the latter as legitimate. This is because Russell's argument confronts Frege's Rule V head on. Furthermore, it is a kind of argument couched in terms that Frege understands and which has direct implications to what Frege is trying to develop. In my estimation, these reasons explain why Frege cannot cry foul or accuse Russell of being unfair.⁴ This brings me to a very important point: Upholding PC significantly lessens the tendency of both parties engaged in talk exchange (conversation, or discourse) to accuse each other of being unfair. That being said, PC can qualify as a very important *norm* that we must employ for the communication process to be successful. Grice (1996, p. 160) took great pains to show the importance of the Cooperative Principle (and its attendant maxims), that it is something "reasonable for us to follow, that we should not abandon" in our conversational practices. This, I concede, is correct and the same thing may be said of the principle of charity (PC).

Russell's theory of definite descriptions

In this section, I will outline Russell's theory of definite descriptions (henceforth TDD). The aforementioned theory appears in "On Denoting" and is considered by many philosophers as an excellent example of the kind of analysis that philosophy is capable of doing. Ramsey (1931, p. 263) considers Russell's achievement in "On Denoting" as "that paradigm of philosophy". In discussing the theory of definite descriptions, it is instructive to begin with the notion of a *denoting phrase*.

Traditionally, phrases such as 'the present King of France' and 'the present King of England', etc., have been assimilated to the class of *proper names* because they *appear* to function in the same way. Russell, however, proposes to classify these phrases as belonging to a different class: the class of denoting phrases. He provides other examples of denoting phrases: 'a man', 'some man', 'any man', 'every man', 'all men', 'the revolution of the earth around the sun', etc. For Russell (1996, p. 199), a phrase is denoting solely in virtue of its *form*: (a) a phrase may be denoting, and yet not denote anything (e.g., 'the present King of France'); (b) a phrase may denote one definite object (e.g., 'the present King of England'); (c) a phrase may denote ambiguously (e.g., 'a man'). It is important to note that the foregoing examples all involve the notion of a *quantifier*. The notion of a quantifier is crucial to Russell's TDD and its significance can be appreciated fully once we are clear on Russell's notation (to which we shall now turn).

In Russell's notation, ' $C(x)$ ' means a *propositional function* (where x , the variable is essentially and wholly undetermined). Accordingly, ' $C(x)$ is always true' is to be taken as "ultimate and undefinable and the others are defined by means of it" (Russell, 1996, p. 200). For our current purposes, it would be helpful to think of 'always' as 'for every instantiation of the variable'. As one may easily notice, Russell seeks to accomplish his task by using a *single* quantifier: $\forall x$ (the *universal* quantifier). Using our current notation, we symbolize them this way: (a) C (everything) means $(\forall x) C(x)$; (b) C (nothing) means $(\forall x) \sim C(x)$; (c) C (something) means $\sim(\forall x) \sim C(x)$. Note that $\sim(\forall x) \sim C(x) =_{\text{def}} (\exists x) C(x)$. This means that what can be symbolized by a universal quantifier can also be symbolized by the existential quantifier. With the current notation in place, 'All men are mortal' is symbolized as $(\forall x) (Hx \rightarrow Mx)$ or $\sim(\exists x) (Hx \& \sim Mx)$; 'No men are mortal' as $(\forall x) (Hx \rightarrow \sim Mx)$ or $\sim(\exists x) (Hx \& Mx)$; 'Some men are mortal' as $(\exists x) (Hx \& Mx)$ or $\sim(\forall x) (Hx \rightarrow \sim Mx)$.

⁴ Of course, Frege *can* cry foul or accuse Russell of being unfair. The fact that he did not only attests to the character and integrity of Frege as an intellectual.

Aside from 'all', 'nothing', and 'some', the notation also allows Russell to provide an analysis of propositions which involve *definite descriptions* (i.e., 'the father of Charles II'). For Russell, the definite article 'the' involves *uniqueness* (1996, p. 200). So, the proposition 'The father of Charles II was executed' may be symbolized in the following way:

$$(1) (\exists x) [x \text{ begat } c \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ begat } c \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ was executed}].$$

In ordinary language, (1) is read in the following way: Exactly one person begat Charles II and that person was executed. What is distinctive in Russell's theory is that a denoting phrase (the paradigm of which is a definite description) such as 'the *F*' is treated not as a proper name (or as a singular term that names or stands for an object) but rather as a *quantifier phrase* similar to 'All *F*'s' and 'Some *F*'s'. Moreover, 'the *F*' has no meaning in itself (or in isolation). Russell writes:

Everything, nothing, and something are not assumed to have any meaning in isolation, but a meaning is assigned to every proposition in which they occur. This is the principle of the theory of denoting I wish to advocate: that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning (1996, p. 200).

To further highlight the distinctness of Russell's theory, consider the denoting phrase (i.e., the definite description) 'the author of *Waverley*' as it occurs in the proposition: The author of *Waverley* was a man. Traditional grammar tells us that 'the author of *Waverley*' occupies the subject position in the proposition in which it occurs. In the same way, 'the present King of France' occupies the subject position in the proposition: The present King of France is bald. Traditional grammar therefore treats these denoting phrases in the same way as it treats proper names (for instance, they can be the subject of a proposition). Russell thinks that treating denoting phrases in this way is mistaken. To further this point, he writes:

According to the view that I advocate, a denoting phrase is essentially *part* of a sentence, and does not, like most single words, have any significance on its own account. If I say 'Scott was a man', that is a statement of the form 'x was a man', and it has 'Scott' for its subject. But if I say 'the author of *Waverley* was a man', that is not a statement of the form 'x was a man', and does not have 'the author of *Waverley*' for its subject. Abbreviating the statement made at the beginning of this article, we may put, in place of 'the author of *Waverley* was a man', the following: 'One and only one entity wrote *Waverley*, and that one was a man' (Russell, 1996, p. 204).

Taking Russell's suggestion, the proposition 'the author of *Waverley* was a man' may be symbolized in the following way:

$$(2) (\exists x) [x \text{ wrote } Waverley \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ wrote } Waverley \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ was a man}].$$

The Russellian analysis of definite descriptions is thus put in plain view. For the purpose of generality, let us use the *form* 'The *F* is *G*'. For Russell, 'The *F* is *G*' means the following: (a) there is something which is an *F*; (b) anything else which is an *F* is identical to it; (c) it is *G*. To be clear, let us specify what (a), (b), and (c) involve individually: (a) involves *existence* and may be symbolized as $(\exists x) Fx$; (b) involves *uniqueness* (because of the definite article 'the') and may be symbolized as $(\forall x) (\forall y) [(Fx \ \& \ Fy) \rightarrow y = x]$; (c) involves *predication* and may be symbolized as $(\forall x)$

($Fx \rightarrow Gx$). In essence then, to say that 'The F is G ' is to say that there exists something, x , that satisfies the following conditions: (i) Fx ; (ii) $(\forall y) (Fy \rightarrow y = x)$; and (iii) Gx .

Russell identifies three puzzles that a theory of denoting ought to be able to solve (1996, p. 202). These are problems concerning: (a) the failure of substitutivity, (b) the law of excluded middle, and (c) negative existentials. Russell summarizes the problem concerning the failure of substitutivity concerning 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' in the following:

If a is identical with b , whatever is true of the one is true of the other, and either may be substituted for the other in any proposition without altering the truth or falsehood of that proposition. Now George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*; and in fact Scott was the author of *Waverley*. Hence we may substitute Scott for the author of '*Waverley*', and thereby prove that George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott. Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe (Russell, 1996, p. 202).

If we take Russell's analysis seriously, the failure of substitutivity stems from a failure to understand how to treat denoting phrases (i.e., definite descriptions) as they occur in the context of propositions. Again, Russell maintains that 'the author of *Waverley*' is not to be treated as a proper name (or a singular term) which has meaning on its own and which stands for a particular object. According to Russell, what George IV wishes to know is whether $(\exists x) [x \text{ wrote } Waverley \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ wrote } Waverley \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x = \text{Scott}]$.⁵

In the following passage, Russell summarizes the puzzle concerning the law of excluded middle:

By the law of excluded middle, either ' A is B ' or ' A is not B ' must be true. Hence either 'the present King of France is bald' or 'the present King of France is not bald' must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list (1996, p. 202).

Russell is *unwilling* to violate the law of excluded middle and any theory of denoting ought to be able to solve the foregoing puzzle. Consider Russell's famous example: 'The present King of France is bald'. In Russell's TDD, 'the present King of France is bald' is translated as 'there is one and only one entity which is now a King of France and that entity is bald', which may be symbolized in the following way:

(3) $(\exists x) [(x \text{ regally rules France} \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ regally rules France} \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ is bald}]$.

According to Russell (1996, p. 205), (3) is *false* since there is no entity which is at present the King of France. If the aforementioned sentence is false, then its negation must be *true* (if we want to uphold the law of excluded middle). Consider the following compound proposition:

(4) The present King of France is bald or the present King of France is not bald.

The foregoing disjunction expresses a logical truth (since it is an instance of the law of excluded middle). For Russell, the right disjunct of (4) is *ambiguous*.

⁵ The inference which leads to 'Scott is Scott' ($a = a$) stems from treating 'Scott' (a) and 'the author of *Waverley*' (b) in the same way, that is, as proper names or singular terms. But Russell is clear that denoting phrases should not be treated in that way. Clearly then, Russell's analysis avoids this problem.

This is because the definite description (i.e., 'the present King of France') may have a *primary* or a *secondary occurrence*⁶ in the proposition in which it occurs. In (5) below, 'the present King of France' has a primary occurrence:

(5) $(\exists x) [x \text{ regally rules France} \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ regally rules France} \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ is not bald}]$.

Using Russell's analysis, (5) is also *false* like (3). How then can we preserve the law of excluded middle? To preserve the law of excluded middle, the right disjunct of (4) is translated as 'it is not the case that there is one and only one entity which is now a King of France and that entity is bald', which may be symbolized in the following way:

(6) $\sim(\exists x) [x \text{ regally rules France} \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ regally rules France} \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ is bald}]$.

It is important to note that in (6), the definite description has a secondary occurrence. Unlike (5), which is false, (6) is *true*. In this way, the law of excluded middle is preserved (and not violated). Russell's TDD can also handle negative existentials. Russell (1996, p. 202) asks, "But how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?" Consider once more the definite description 'the present King of France' as it occurs in the following proposition: The present King of France does not exist. If we treat 'the present King of France' in the same way as we treat proper names or singular terms that name or stand for objects, it would appear that "it must always be self-contradictory to deny the being of anything" (Russell, 1996, p. 202). Russell's theory avoids this problem. In his view, 'The present King of France does not exist' is symbolized in the following way:

(7) $\sim(\exists x) [(x \text{ regally rules France} \ \& \ (\forall y) (y \text{ regally rules France} \rightarrow y = x))]$.

It is important to take into account that Russell's TDD is significant not only because it provides us with a plausible theory that explains the kind of structure that propositions which contain definite descriptions have. It is significant in at least two more aspects. *First*, it reduces the number of entities that we are willing to accommodate in meaningful discourse (whether in the context of philosophy, science, or logic and mathematics). Of course, such a reduction is not done for the sole purpose of reducing the number of entities. It should rather be interpreted in the spirit of Occam's Razor: Never multiply entities beyond necessity. This observation is supported by what Russell says about theories that might be called *ontologically excessive* (similar to that of Meinong). Consider what Russell says in the following:

Mr. MacColl [...] regards individuals as of two sorts, real and unreal; hence he defines the null-class as the class consisting of all unreal individuals. This assumes that such phrases as 'the present King of France', which do not denote a real individual, do, nevertheless, denote an individual, but an unreal one. This is essentially Meinong's theory, which [*sic*] have seen reason to reject because it conflicts with the law of contradiction. *With our theory of denoting, we are able to hold that there are no unreal individuals; so that the null-class is the class containing no members, not the class containing as members all unreal individuals* (1996, p. 206, emphasis mine).

⁶ NB: Today, the distinction between the primary and the secondary occurrence of the definite description in the proposition in which it occurs is called the *wide* or *narrow* scope.

The *second* aspect is Russell's *epistemological concern*. This provides us with a suitable *context* for understanding the theory itself and its underlying motivations. At the outset, Russell says the following:

The subject of denoting is of very great importance, not only in logic and mathematics, but also in theory of knowledge. For example, we know that the center of mass of the solar system at a definite instant is some definite point, and we can affirm a number of propositions about it; but we have no immediate *acquaintance* with this point, which is only known to us by description. The distinction between *acquaintance* and *knowledge about* is the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by denoting phrases [...] To take a very important instance: there seems no reason to believe that we are ever acquainted with other people's minds, seeing that these are not directly perceived; hence what we know about them is obtained through denoting. All thinking has to start from acquaintance, but it succeeds in thinking *about* many things with which we have no acquaintance (Russell, 1996, p. 199).

The foregoing passage *situates* the particular theory in question with the proponent's underlying motivations for proposing the theory. If we are to uphold PC, therefore, it is incumbent upon us not to take the theory in question in isolation from its proper context (i.e., from Russell's epistemological project).

Strawson's arguments against the theory of definite descriptions: An analysis

How should one appraise the correctness of Russell's TDD? In my estimation, any correct appraisal of the theory of definite descriptions should take into account Russell's underlying epistemological concern for which the theory is proposed in the first place. This means that Russell's TDD should be criticized within the confines of how Russell understands *propositions* and their overall significance in the *theory of knowledge*. In this paper, it is argued that the more (if not the most) *charitable* interpretation of Russell's TDD should be able to account for these things. In this section, I will outline Strawson's arguments against TDD, evaluate these arguments, and determine whether or not they fulfill the conditions that we stated earlier for correctly appraising the theory in question.

In "On Referring", Strawson (1996, p. 215-230) aims to show that Russell's theory of definite descriptions fails to provide a correct account of the use of expressions of the form "the-so-and-so" (e.g. "the table," "the old man," "the king of France"). Let us outline how Strawson interprets Russell. Strawson asks us to consider the sentence "The king of France is wise" and abbreviate it as the *sentence* S. How can S be significant (or meaningful) even when there is not at present a king of France? Let us abbreviate the *phrase* "the king of France" as D. According to Strawson's interpretation of Russell, it is a mistake to think that the grammatical subject (the phrase D) of S is also the logical subject of S. This means that S is not logically a subject-predicate sentence but a complex kind of existential proposition part of which might be described as a "uniquely existential" proposition. Russell does this, according to Strawson (1996, p. 216-217), by rewriting sentences in ordinary language into symbolic ones to reveal their logical form.

Strawson continues that if Russell's theory is correct, anyone who would assert S would be asserting three propositions: (a) There is a king of France; (b) There is not more than one king of France, and (c) There is nothing which is king

of France and is not wise. Since *S* is a conjunction of three propositions and one of its component parts (a) is false, then the assertion as a whole is significant but false (1996, p. 217).

The summary appears to be fair. Strawson was able to state the essentials of TDD. There is, however, an important *point* which needs to be mentioned before we continue (and this point is crucial for the discussions that will follow). If one pays *careful* attention to Russell's discussion of TDD, he is clearly employing the notion of a *proposition* and not simply that of a *sentence*. This observation will be confirmed by Russell's own examples and his preferred analysis of propositions which contain denoting phrases/definite descriptions. If one is not careful to nuances such as the aforementioned, it is possible that one will be amiss not only in interpreting the theory, but also in terms of appraising it.

In order to show that Russell's theory is mistaken, Strawson (1996, p. 218) provides us with what he takes to be important *distinctions*: (A1) a sentence, (A2) a use of a sentence, (A3) an utterance of a sentence, (B1) an expression, (B2) a use of an expression, and (B3) an utterance of an expression. Consider once more the sentence *S* ('The king of France is wise'). Strawson argues that we cannot talk of *S* as being true or false. We can only talk of the *use* of *S* to make a true or false assertion. In the same vein, we cannot talk of *S* as being about a particular person but only of a *use* of *S* to talk about a particular person.

Consider once again the expression *D* ('the king of France'). We use the expression to mention or refer to a particular person in the context of using the sentence to talk about him. Strawson maintains that 'mentioning' or 'referring' is not something an expression does. It is something that someone can use an expression to do. Strawson provides a clear summary of his main points in the following:

Meaning [...] is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression [...] is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions (1996, p. 216).

Strawson continues to explain his points further in the following, which leads him to his conclusion which he sees as particularly damaging to Russell's TDD:

The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to. The meaning of a sentence cannot be identified with the assertion it is used, on a particular occasion, to make. For to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use on a particular occasion, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer to or to assert. So the question of whether a sentence or expression is *significant or not* has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether the sentence, *uttered on a particular occasion*, is, on that occasion, being used to make a true-or-false assertion or not, or of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all (1996, p. 219-220).

The conclusion which Strawson considers to be damaging to Russell's TDD is the last sentence of the foregoing paragraph. Strawson then explains what he thinks to be the source of Russell's *mistake*. In Strawson's view, Russell fails to distinguish between (B1) and (B2) or what the former calls the distinction between *an expression* and *a use of an expression*, respectively. Strawson says that Russell "confused expressions with their use in a particular context; and so confused meaning with

mentioning, with referring" (1996, p. 220). Do we have good reasons to believe that Russell really confused meaning with mentioning, with referring, as Strawson claims?

Let me articulate the reasons why Strawson's arguments are not sufficient to conclude that Russell confused the distinctions that Strawson provides. *First*, as I mentioned earlier, in Russell's discussion of TDD, the stock of examples clearly shows that Russell employs *propositions* (and not sentences). Using the standard view about propositions, they are considered by most philosophers (most especially during the time that Russell wrote "On Denoting") as the bearers of truth and falsity. In other words, truth and falsity are properties that are ascribed to propositions (and not mere sentences). If this is correct, it is interesting as to why Strawson insists on distinguishing between (A1) and (A2) (i.e., the distinction between *a sentence* and *a use of the sentence*, respectively). For this reason, Strawson should not have been surprised that 'The king of France is wise' (to use his example) can come out true or false when uttered by someone in different periods in history (e.g., the time of Louis XIV, the time of Louis XV). It should also not be surprising that 'The king of France is wise' when uttered in different periods in history may refer to different monarchs. One may easily assent to these things but the question remains: Are they arguments against Russell's TDD? This observation is at least clear: Whereas Russell is talking about propositions, Strawson is talking about sentences. The latter produces arguments that employ sentences and provides a distinction between (A1) and (A2) to demolish the former's TDD. *Second*, Russell is not saying that it is the sentence that is true or false; it is the proposition that is either true or false. If Russell is concerned with propositions, and propositions are traditionally conceived of as the bearers of truth and falsity, how then can Strawson maintain that Russell confuses *a sentence* with *a use of a sentence*? *Third*, consider Strawson's argument which is supposed to highlight (A2) (here, the example still concerns 'the king of France is wise'):

For instance, if one man uttered it in the reign of Louis XIV and another man uttered it in the reign of Louis XV, it would be natural to say (to assume) that they were respectively talking about different people; and it might be held that the first man, in using the sentence, made a true assertion, while the second man, in using the same sentence, made a false assertion (1996, p. 218).

Even if we neglect for a moment the first point raised earlier (i.e., that Russell is concerned with propositions and not sentences), the foregoing argument is still insufficient to show that TDD is wrong. Let us use Strawson's proposed distinctions to provide a counter-argument. Strawson argues that the men in his example used the same sentence in two different ways: "the first man, in using the same sentence, made a true assertion, while the second man, in using the same sentence, made a false assertion." From Strawson's argument, it is also plausible to maintain that the two men nevertheless made a similar *use* of the sentence that they uttered: *to assert something*. Or, should we really think that adding 'something true' to 'to assert' would count as a *distinct* use of the sentence uttered by the two men, as opposed to 'to assert something false'? Is it not part of the notion of asserting that for a person to genuinely assert something is for that person to commit herself to the truthfulness of what she asserts? If this condition is not fulfilled, Grice would say that this counts as a violation of CP. In particular, it violates the maxim "Do not say what you believe to be false", under Grice's category called *Quality* (1996, p. 159). *Fourth*, if the third point is correct, we can maintain that making a false assertion is different from asserting something which turns out to be false. The difference can be explained in the following way: During the time that I assert that *P* (where *P* is a

proposition), I am committed to the truthfulness of *P*. It might turn out, however, that *P* is false, and this does not in any way pose any problem. In what sense then is Strawson offering the distinction between (A1) and (A2) that is responsive to Russell's TDD? *Fifth*, if Russell merely confuses the distinctions that Strawson provides, it is difficult to explain what Russell says in the following:

Thus if 'C' is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity *x* (there cannot be more than one) for which the proposition 'x is identical with C' is true [...] We may then say that the entity *x* is the denotation of the phrase 'C'. Thus Scott is the denotation of 'the author of *Waverley*'. The 'C' in inverted commas will be merely the *phrase*, not anything that can be called the *meaning*. The phrase *per se* has no meaning, because in any proposition in which it occurs the proposition, fully expressed, does not contain the phrase, which has been broken up (1996, p. 204).

The foregoing passage reveals that Russell is well aware of the distinctions that Strawson provides. As evidence, we may cite Russell's careful attention to distinguishing, for instance, C from 'C'.⁷ The foregoing passage also confirms what we have said earlier about Russell's treatment of denoting phrases: they do not have any meaning in isolation from the proposition in which they occur. This further confirms that the unit of significance in assessing TDD at least as far as Russell's analysis is concerned is the proposition and not the denoting phrase taken in isolation. Strawson, however, appears to allow expressions (e.g., 'I') to have meaning even in isolation in the following:

The expression "I" may correctly be used by (and only by) any one of innumerable people to refer to himself. To say this is to say something about the expression "I": it is, in a sense, to give its meaning. This is the sort of thing that can be said about *expressions*. But it makes no sense to say of the *expression* "I" that it refers to a particular person. This is the sort of thing that can be said only of a particular use of the expression (1996, p. 219).

The foregoing passage clearly suggests a significant *difference* between Russell and Strawson's views. However, it remains unclear as to how Strawson can maintain that Russell confuses the distinctions that he provides. To further strengthen this point, consider what Russell says in the following passage:

I have heard of a touchy owner of a yacht to whom a guest, on first seeing it, remarked, 'I thought your yacht was larger than it is'; and the owner replied, 'No, my yacht is not larger than it is'. What the guest meant was, 'The size that I thought your yacht was is greater than the size your yacht is'; the meaning attributed to him is, 'I thought the size of your yacht was greater than the size of your yacht' (1996, p. 205).

A careful reading of the passage above reveals that Russell's example already contains Strawson's distinctions between a sentence, a use of a sentence, and an utterance of a sentence. Here, Russell seeks to highlight his distinction between

⁷ Also, Russell's discussions of theories, including his own, all involve a careful analysis of the distinctions over meaning as opposed to denotation. This observation alone confirms that Russell is aware of the distinctions offered by Strawson. In my estimation, it is not implausible to maintain that given Russell's employment of propositions and his overall epistemological project, some of these distinctions are already presupposed by Russell, and they need not be defended because they are not relevant to the task at hand (e.g., distinguishing between a sentence and its use to make an assertion). It is important to note, however, that for Russell, as for many other philosophers during his time, propositions and not sentences are the bearers of truth.

primary and secondary occurrence. As in Russell's example concerning 'the author of *Waverley*' and George IV's curiosity, he was able to show that in interpreting a proposition containing a definite description, the occurrence of the description in question matters in order to avoid *ambiguity*. This brings me to the *sixth* point. Why would Russell want to avoid ambiguity? The answer to this question can only be appreciated once we realize that TDD is to be understood within the context of Russell's epistemological project. In general, ambiguity is to be avoided since he is concerned with *knowledge*. This explains why Russell is concerned with propositions (and not sentences). This also explains why the distinctions that Strawson provides do not affect the cogency of TDD as a theory for understanding and revealing the structure of propositions which contain denoting phrases. As I have attempted to show, Russell can in fact accommodate some of these distinctions but this is not what he is interested in, and this is not what he is trying to accomplish. If this is what Russell wants, he could have simply noted the various ways in which people use expressions, sentences, and language in general *à la* Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In that case, Russell would have no need for a theory of definite descriptions.

At this point, let me articulate that the foregoing arguments are consistent with (and are supported by) what Russell says in his *response* to Strawson. In "Mr. Strawson on Referring," Russell says the following:

The gist of Mr. Strawson's argument consists in identifying two problems which I have regarded as quite distinct – namely, the problem of descriptions and the problem of egocentricity. I have dealt with both these problems at considerable length, but as I have considered them to be different problems, I have not dealt with the one when I was considering the other. This enables Mr. Strawson to pretend that I have overlooked the problem of egocentricity (1975, p. 175-176).

If the problem of descriptions and the problem of egocentricity are two distinct problems, then it is but fitting to provide a separate analysis of the two (as Russell correctly notes). The proper analysis of TDD, in my view, should proceed by taking into careful consideration the *context* as to why such a theory is being offered in the first place. As I have presented earlier, this context is Russell's epistemological project (for this serves as the *motivation* for the TDD). Recall that in "On Denoting" Russell clearly states that the topic of denoting phrases is important not only for logic and mathematics but also for the theory of knowledge. Recall as well that in the same work Russell mentions the distinction between the knowledge that we arrive at by *acquaintance* and by *description* (i.e., via denoting phrases). Mindful of these important points, consider what Russell says in the following:

It is of the essence of a scientific account of the world to reduce to a minimum the egocentric element in an assertion, but success in this attempt is a matter of degree, and is never complete where empirical material is concerned. This is due to the fact that the meanings of all empirical words depend ultimately upon ostensive definitions, that ostensive definitions depend upon experience, and that experience is egocentric. We can, however, by means of egocentric words, *describe* something which is not egocentric; it is this that enables us to use a common language (1975, p. 177).

As may be noticed from the foregoing passage, Russell's remarks are clearly couched in epistemological terms even if the debate between him and Strawson concerns TDD. One may even say that the foregoing passage provides us with a glimpse of Russell's epistemology. It is important to note that the foregoing passage

is not the only passage in Russell's response to Strawson where the former clearly links together TDD and its proper context (i.e., Russell's epistemological project). Consider what Russell says in the following:

For my part, I think that there must be such words if language is to have any relation to fact [...] How do we know what is meant by such words as 'red' and 'blue'? We cannot know what these words mean unless we have seen red and seen blue. If there were no red and no blue in our experience, we might, perhaps, invent some elaborate description which we could substitute for the word 'red' or for the word 'blue'. For example, if you were dealing with a blind man, you could hold a red-hot poker near enough for him to feel the heat, and you could tell him that red is what he would see if he could see –but of course for the word 'see' you would have to substitute another elaborate description. Any description which the blind man could understand would have to be in terms of words expressing experiences which he had had. Unless fundamental words in the individual's vocabulary had this kind of direct relation to fact, language in general would have no such relation (1975, p. 177-178).

Take note of the last sentence in the foregoing passage. Consistent with what we have been arguing so far, the suitable context within which one should base one's criticisms of TDD should be Russell's distinction between the knowledge that we arrive at by acquaintance and by description (i.e., via denoting phrases).

Let us consider the other arguments that Strawson provides against Russell's TDD. Consider once more what Strawson refers to as the sentence S ('the king of France is wise'). Strawson identifies two *false* things that Russell would say about the sentence S: (1) If anyone at present utters S, then he is either making a true or a false assertion, and (2) The part of S which he is asserting is that there is at present one and only one king of France. By using the distinctions that he offered earlier, Strawson also provides a solution to the problem that Russell's theory seeks to address. If someone utters S and asks us if we agree with him, or if we think that what he says is either true or false, the correct response would be 'There is no king of France'. Strawson explains that "the question of whether his statement was true or false simply did not arise, because there was no such person as the king of France" (1996, p. 221). Take note that in the foregoing quote from Strawson he says 'statement' and not 'sentence'. What then is the point of uttering S? I think both Russell and Strawson will agree that communication, as an activity, is always *purposive*. Thus, in ordinary circumstances, a person who utters S should have a point in uttering it. More importantly, even if we grant that ordinary discourse (or conversation) can get away with utterances such as S, what is its status? The problem with 'the king of France is wise' and similar other examples in this discussion is that they have been taken out of their *proper context* (i.e., Russell's epistemological project). In my estimation, this is the reason why Strawson's arguments can come from anywhere (e.g., fiction). However, it remains to be seen as to how Strawson's arguments can render Russell's TDD as mistaken when the theory is taken in its proper context and when the discussion is couched in terms and assumptions that both philosophers will accept.

Conclusion

The principle of charity requires that we take the more/most plausible interpretation of other people's words and thoughts so as to ascribe to them the greatest possible consistency and rationality. In this paper, it was shown that the

aforementioned principle is an important norm that helps ensure the success of virtually all communication situations (e.g., philosophical inquiry, conversations, decoding of conversational implicatures, speech acts, etc.). It has also been shown that any violation of the principle of charity counts as a violation of Grice's cooperative principle. In this paper, two examples have been scrutinized to highlight the significant role of the principle of charity in the critical appraisal of a philosophical theory: (1) Frege and Russell, and (2) Russell and Strawson on the difficult issue of definite descriptions. In regard (1), the result is generally positive. It can qualify as a fine example of two philosophers in genuine search for clarity, precision, and the truth. In regard (2), the result is negative. In general, Strawson fails to take the more/most charitable interpretation of Russell's theory of definite descriptions. This can be explained by what appears to be a sort of negligence, on Strawson's part, to assess the theory of descriptions in its proper context (i.e., within the context of Russell's epistemological project). If the arguments that I have presented so far are correct, such negligence resulted in arguments that do not really affect the overall cogency of the theory of definite descriptions.

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