

Russell's Analysis of Definite Descriptions

- I. Motivation for the analysis
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Motivation: Basic Terms

Indefinite descriptions: Phrases of the form “an *F*”

“A plant needs water to grow.”

“We love a sunny day at the beach.”

Definite descriptions: Phrases of the form “the *F*”

“The dog in the window is adorable!”

“The man in stretchy pants is Clark Kent.”

Motivation: Basic Terms

***Not* definite descriptions:**

“The spinach feta burger at the Saturn Café is fantastic!”

“The banana slug is a majestic creature.”

But this *is* a definite description:

“The car needs gas, dear.”

“The car (that is red and that belongs to us and bears the silly vanity plates etc.) needs gas, dear.”

Motivation: Some Puzzles

“The S.F. Giants' place kicker sure is tall!”



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Motivation: Some Puzzles

“The S.F. Giants' place kicker sure is tall!”

Q: What are we supposed to say about an utterance like this?

1. This is a nonsensical utterance. It has no significance whatsoever.

But it doesn't sound like nonsense. It seems like this sentence should take a truth value.

According to our intuitions, this sentence sounds *false*.

Motivation: Some Puzzles

“The S.F. Giants' place kicker sure is tall!”

Q: What are we supposed to say about an utterance like this?

2. “The S.F. Giants' place kicker” represents a non-existent entity. It *refers* to something that simply doesn't exist.

This has two problematic results:

- a. We end up violating the law of the excluded middle.
- b. How can we say of a *something* that it does not exist?

Motivation: Some Puzzles

“The pitcher on the mound is Barry Zito.”

Q: In what sense is this statement *informative*?

Proposal: “The pitcher on the mound” is an expression that *refers* to something in the world. Namely, it refers to Barry Zito.

Problem: If that's right, then we should be able to simply substitute the equivalent expression “Barry Zito” to yield a sentence with the same meaning:

“Barry Zito is Barry Zito.”

But something is *missing* in this second sentence. It isn't *informative*.

Motivation

We need a theory of descriptions that can do the following:

1. Allow claims about the S.F. Giants' place kicker to bear truth values.
2. Avoid reference to non-existent entities.
3. Allow us to make interesting, informative identity claims.

Russell's Analysis

Formal Statement:

“The F is G .”

$$\exists x(F(x) \ \& \ \forall y(F(y) \rightarrow x=y) \ \& \ G(x))$$

The idea is that definite descriptions don't strictly *refer* to anything all by themselves. Whenever I utter a sentence of the form “The F is G ”, I'm really making **3** separate assertions:

1. At least one thing is F . (Something is F)
2. At most one thing is F . (Only one thing is F)
3. Whatever is F is G .

Russell's Analysis

“The dog in the window is adorable!”

1. At least one thing is “the dog in the window”. **EXISTENCE Claim**
2. At most one thing is “the dog in the window”. **UNIQUENESS Claim**
3. Whatever is “the dog in the window” is adorable. **UNIVERSAL Claim**

Russell's Analysis

“The pitcher on the mound is Barry Zito.”

1. At least one thing is “the pitcher on the mound.” **EXISTENCE Claim**
 2. At most one thing is “the pitcher on the mound.” **UNIQUENESS Claim**
 3. Whatever is “the pitcher on the mound” is Barry Zito. **UNIVERSAL Claim**
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“The pitcher on the mound is Barry Zito” can be roughly translated to mean, “There is exactly one thing that is the pitcher on the mound, and that is Barry Zito.”

This contains information that is not contained in the sentence, “Barry Zito is Barry Zito”--that's why it's more informative!

Russell's Analysis

“The place kicker for the S.F. Giants is tall.”

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|----|---|-------------------------|
| 1. | At least one thing is “the place kicker for the S.F. Giants.” | EXISTENCE Claim |
| 2. | At most one thing is “the place kicker for the S.F. Giants.” | UNIQUENESS Claim |
| 3. | Whatever is “the place kicker for the S.F. Giants” is tall. | UNIVERSAL Claim |

Since the first assertion above is false, we can give the original sentence its appropriate truth value!

What's more, we don't have to commit ourselves to “non-existent entities”.

Review

According to Russell's Analysis of Definite Descriptions, a sentence of the form "The *F* is *G*" involves three separate assertions:

- 1) At least one thing is *F*
- 2) At most one thing is *F*
- 3) Whatever is *F* is *G*

Russell's Analysis enables us to answer three philosophical challenges:

- 1) Make sense of claims about things that don't exist
- 2) Keep "non-existent" entities out of our ontology
- 3) Make informative claims about identity