Phil 445 Session 2 — Russell Handout

*See also the "Six Confusing Quirks in Russell" handout on the web, and the Sample "Questions about the Russell reading."*

As I said in the "Six Confusing Quirks" handout, some of Russell's "proposition" talk is about sentences and some is about the meanings or contents of sentences. The same is true for **propositional function.**

Understood *non*-linguistically, we can understand propositions to be complexes consisting of the objects and properties and relations we have judgments about. These will be something like the "complexes" that Russell talks about, except that for Russell such complexes always have to be true, and we're not understanding propositions that way. For us, the proposition that Tom loves Skunky is a structure that includes Tom, Skunky, and the loving relation; and this proposition can exist even if Tom doesn't love Skunky. One propositional function then will be, for example, a function from objects x to the proposition that Tom loves x. This will map Skunky to the proposition that Tom loves Skunky, Spiny to the proposition that Tom loves Spiny, and so on.

Russell also talks about propositional functions in *linguistic* terms, corresponding to his sometime use of "proposition" to refer to sentences. He defines propositional functions this way as:

> an expression containing one or more undetermined constituents, | such that, when values are assigned to these constituents, the expression becomes a proposition. In other words, it is a function whose values are propositions. (IMP p. 155-6)

In the preceding text, Russell had been using "proposition" to refer to sentences. And after this passage, he goes on to give as examples of propositional functions, mathematical equations containing (unbound) variables that don't have a predetermined value. So here he seems to be thinking of propositional functions as a kind of expression, or as a function that maps "values" to sentences. This would be easy to make sense of if the *arguments* of that function — the "values" it maps to sentences — were *also* linguistic expressions like names. For example, a function that maps the name "George" to the sentence "George won the race," maps the name "John" to the sentence "John won the race," and so on. However, Russell doesn't seem to be thinking like that. He seems to be thinking of his propositional functions as taking *extra-linguistic objects in the world* as their argument: the person George himself, rather than the name "George." But how do you put *a person* together with a linguistic expression, such as "x won the race," to get another linguistic expression? A person may have many names, or no name: what then should go into the linguistic result? Perhaps some sense can be made of this, but it will be complicated. It's much easier to think of propositional functions in the non-linguistic way described before.

When Russell talks of the propositional function from x to the proposition that x is H *always being true*, he means that all of these propositions are true: Skunky is H, Spiny is H, and so on for every object that can be an argument to that propositional function. When he talks about the propositional function *sometimes being true*, he means that at least one of those propositions are true.

By **denoting phrase** Russell means an article (a, some, the) or quantifier plus a Noun Phrase (NP). This is a large subset of what many linguists would now call Determiner Phrases (DP).

A simple view of how these work is that they stand for some object. That can seem natural for some cases, for example, if I say "A student stayed after class," where I have some particular student in mind but just refrain from identifying them. Also in sentences like:

1. I greeted <u>Sarah</u>, <u>most of the puppies</u>, and <u>a man</u>.

the parallel construction makes it look like the underlined phrases are functioning in the same kind of way. If we thought the role of "Sarah" was just to stand for some object, then prima facie that should also be the role of "most of the puppies" and "a man."

Russell does think there are a few expressions that work that way. We're calling them **logically proper names**. (See the "Six Confusing Quirks" handout on how Russell talks about these.)

But doubts arise almost immediately for the proposal that all denoting phrases work like that. What object should "most of the puppies" stand for? Or "a man" when there is no particular man I have in mind (last week I gave the example "I don't expect there to be <u>a student who stays after class</u>")? Or when I attribute being a man to multiple people? Russell writes:

> When we have enumerated all the men in the world, there is nothing left of which we can say, "This is a man, and not only so, but it is *the* 'a man,' the quintessential entity that is just an indefinite man without being anybody in particular." (IMP p. 173)

> What do I really assert, when I assert "I met a man"? Let us assume, for the moment, that my assertion is true, and that in fact I met Jones. It is clear that what I assert is *not* "I met Jones." I may say "I met a man, but it was not Jones"; in that case, though I lie, I do not contradict myself, as I should do if when I say I met a | man I really mean that I met Jones. It is clear also that the person to whom I am speaking can understand what I say, even if he…has never heard of Jones.
>
> But we may go further: not only Jones, but no actual man, enters into my statement. This becomes obvious when the statement is false, since then there is no more reason why Jones should be supposed to enter into the proposition than why anyone else should. Indeed the statement would remain significant, though it could not possibly be true, even if there were no [men] at all. (IMP p. 167-8)

Issues about **how to understand "an F" and "the F" when there are no Fs** are one of the main driving forces motivating Russell's views here. (Also Frege's.) We can boil these issues down to two observations:

- "I met the present king of France" should be meaningful, even if it's not true. But how can it be meaningful if the role of "the present king of France" is just to stand for an object, and there is no such object to stand for?
- "The present king of France does not exist" should be not merely meaningful but true. (This is called the problem of **negative existentials**.)

Meinong seems to have thought *there were* objects to be what expressions like "the present king of France," "the golden mountain," and so on stood for. He said these objects had some kind of "being," even though there's no golden mountain *in reality*. Russell argues forcefully against this view at IMP pp. 168-9.

Frege and Russell instead responded to these issues by denying that expressions like "the F" (and also ordinary names, like "Socrates") are logically proper names. Their meaning does not consist in the object they stand for — even when there is such an object. The details of what Frege and Russell say instead differ.

For Russell, his key move is to deny that denoting phrases contribute any single unit to our judgments:

> [the description] must not, as a whole, have a meaning which enters into the judgment [as a constituent]. (KAKD p. 120; see also pp. 121, 125-6 and IMP pp. 168, 170-72)

Instead the sentences in which denoting phrases occur get analyzed into more complex claims involving quantifiers, which in turn are understood as claims about "propositional functions" being *sometimes* or *always true.* For Russell, "The F is H" is analyzed as:

2a. $\exists x.\ Fx \ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)\ \&\ Hx$

2b. The propositional function from x to "$Fx\ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)\ \&\ Hx$" is sometimes true.

2c. The propositional function from x to "Fx & The propositional function from y to '$Fy \supset y=x$' is always true & Hx" is sometimes true.

"A/Some F is H" is analyzed like 2a but without the "$(\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)$."

When it comes to claims like "The F isn't H," these will usually be ambiguous between:

3a. $\exists x.\ Fx\ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)\ \&\ {\sim}Hx$

3b. ${\sim}(\exists x.\ Fx\ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)\ \&\ Hx)$

We say that in 3a the quantifiers introduced by "the F" have **wider scope** than the negation, and in 3b the negation has wider scope. Russell also says that a description has a "primary occurrence" when it has widest scope; else it has a "secondary occurrence." (IMP pp. 179-80)

When it comes to claims like "The F does/doesn't exist," Russell doesn't just use 2 or 3 and plug in "exists" for "H." Instead, he analyzes "The F exists" as:

4. $\exists x.\ Fx\ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x)$

(like 2a but with last conjunct omitted) and "The F doesn't exist" as its negation:

5. $\sim(\exists x.\ Fx\ \&\ (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y=x))$

So for “The F doesn’t exist” there is no ambiguity.

Russell thinks that for logically proper names **a**, sentences like “a exists” are meaningless:

> Where “a” is a logically proper name,] the words “a exists” are meaningless… | for, if “a” is a name, it *must* name something: what does not name anything is not a name, and therefore, if intended to be a name, is a symbol devoid of meaning. (IMP pp. 178-9)

Thus, he says, since we can “inquire significantly into whether Homer existed,” “Homer” must not really be a logically proper name.

> There’s a different strategy Russell could have taken here. He says that for predicates F, claims like “Fs exist” mean that the propositional function from x to “x is F” is sometimes true (that is, $\exists x.\ Fx$). He might have continued by saying that for logically proper names a, claims like “a exist” mean that the propositional function from x to “x = a” is sometimes true (that is, $\exists x.\ x=a$). Then instead of saying that “a exists” is meaningless for logically proper names, he’d say instead that it’s logically necessarily true. It would then still be impossible to “inquire significantly” into whether a exists.

A second major group of issues that motivated Russell (and also Frege) had to do with **informative identity statements**, like 6:

6. Scott is the author of Waverley.

When discussing this example, Russell pretends that “Scott” is a logically proper name (rather than a disguised description as he officially holds). Contrast 6 to 7:

7. Scott is Scott.

Intuitively, 6 and 7 don’t mean the same thing. Russell says that 6 is “a fact in literary history,” whereas 7 is “a trivial truism” (IMP p. 174). Some evidence for this is that we think 8 could be true while 9 is false:

8. King George wondered whether Scott is the author of Waverley.
9. King George wondered whether Scott is Scott.

But if 6 and 7 meant the same thing, then presumably 8/9 would both be saying that George stood in the wondering relation to that single meaning. So one would be true iff the other is.

Russell mentions a distinction between the **meaning** and **denotation** of expressions like “the author of Waverley.” The meaning is what constituents the expression contributes to the propositions we express/judge using the expression. The denotation is the person Scott who is the description’s unique satisfier. Russell’s view (like Frege’s) is that the meaning of the description can’t be identified with that denotation. But whereas for Frege the denotation plays *some* role in the meaning, for Russell it plays no role. (Also, as we said above and will discuss further below, Russell will deny that descriptions strictly speaking *have* a meaning of their own.) Sometimes Russell says that for logically proper names, their denotation, the object they stand for, is their meaning (KAKD p. 121, 123). Other times he uses “denotation” in a more limited way, and says we should only talk about denotations when there’s the kind of indirectness we see with descriptions. Talking this way, for logically proper names we should say they have a

meaning (again, the object they stand for) *but no denotation* (pp. 123-4). Because of this shiftiness in how Russell uses "denotation," I'll avoid that word.

I'll instead say that both logically proper names and descriptions can "stand for or designate" objects, but it's only logically proper names where that designated object is their meaning. (Russell's official "definition" of denotation at KAKD p. 126 is even more problematic because it's expressed in terms of what we know, and also in terms of having logically proper names for any denotation.)

On Russell's view, the meaning of a description like "the author of Waverley," what constituents it contributes to propositions we express/judge using it, will include quantifiers, the relation of authoring, and whatever the meaning of "Waverley" is. (Presumably this won't be the actual book, since "Waverley" isn't really a logically proper name either.) Remember though that for Russell it's important that descriptions don't contribute these *as a single unit* to the proposition. He sometimes puts this by saying that the phrase "the author of Waverley" doesn't "by itself" or "as a whole" have any meaning, but larger sentences in which it occurs, like "The author of Waverley is H," or "The author of Waverley does/doesn't exist," do have meanings (which include quantifiers, the relation of authoring, and so on).

One view about informative identities like 6:

6. Scott is the author of Waverley.

is that what they say is that the expressions "Scott" and "the author of Waverley" have the same denotation. In other words, these sentences are in part about language. This is the view that Russell says "Miss Jones" argued for in a 1910 article in the journal *Mind*. In our texts, Russell and Frege both spend time arguing against this proposal. (Frege at least *used to* think it was correct; but by the time he wrote "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" he had rejected it.) Russell's argument is on KAKD pp. 123ff.

The discussion looks somewhat complicated.

I. One point Russell wants to make is that "the author of Waverley" is not a logically proper name. (In this discussion he's pretending that "Scott" is.)

Ia. One of his reasons for saying this is that, for logically proper names, it's arbitrary what name an object is called, and if we call an object by the name "a," then it will thereby be true that the object "is a." But it's not arbitrary who we call "the author of Waverley," and even if we call somebody by that expression, that's not yet enough for it to be true that they're the author of Waverley. They had to also write the book. (KAKD p. 123)

Ib. He also gives other arguments thinking that "the author of Waverley" is not a logically proper name. One of them is what we considered before, that propositions involving "the F" are possible even when there is no unique F (see KAKD p. 122). The other is that "we can understand propositions about 'the author of Waverley,' without knowing who he was" (KAKD p. 125, see also pp. 121-2; we'll discuss this more below).

II. The next point Russell makes is that it'd have to be *the meaning* of "the author of Waverley" not its denotation which gets into what we assert when we say 6. If it were *just* the denotation which got into what we asserted, then 6 and 7 and 10 would say the same thing:

7. Scott is Scott.
10. Scott is the author of Marmion [this is another book Scott wrote].

> This argument supports that the meaning of "the author of Waverley" isn't *just* its denotation, but it leaves open that the meaning might be the denotation plus something more. It looks like Russell thinks that possibility can be excluded:
>
> > [I]n any proposition about "the author of Waverley," provided that Scott is not explicitly mentioned [that is, the name "Scott" is not used, as it is in 6], the denotation itself, i.e., Scott, does not occur… (KAKD p. 125)
>
> But I don't see him explicitly arguing against this view anywhere.

Let's grant Russell points I and II. How are those supposed to combine into an argument against the proposal advocated by Miss Jones, that what 6 says is that the expressions "Scott" and "the author of Waverley" have the same denotation? I don't know. The core of Russell's argument continues on pp. 124-5, and has something to do with an "endless regress." But how exactly it's supposed to work isn't clear.

It's enough for our purposes that Russell rejects that view of what 6 means. And he sets out and argues for the virtues of his own different view. On Russell's view, 6 gets analyzed as 11 (here we pretend that "Scott" and "Waverley" are logically proper names):

6. Scott is the author of Waverley.
11. ∃x. x wrote Waverley & (∀y. y wrote Waverley ⊃ y=x) & x = Scott.

11 could be glossed as "Someone wrote Waverley (and no one else did) and that someone is identical to Scott." Whereas (continuing to pretend that "Scott" and "Sir Walter" are logically proper names) 7 and 12 just have the form "a = a" or "a = b."

7. Scott is Scott.
12. Scott is Sir Walter.

These would be the same meanings as each other, but a different meaning than is had by 6. That's why King George could wonder whether 6 was the case without wondering whether 7 was.

Try now to track/explain what Russell is saying in this passage:

> The reason why it is imperative to analyze away the phrase "the author of Waverley" may be stated as follows. It is plain that when we say "the author of Waverley is the author of Marmion," the *is* expresses identity. We have seen also that the common *denotation*,

namely Scott, is not a constituent of this proposition, while the *meanings* (if any) of "the author of Waverley" and "the author of Marmion" are not identical. | We have seen also that, in any sense in which the meaning of a word is a constituent of a proposition in whose verbal expression the word occurs, "Scott" means the actual man Scott, in the same sense in which "author" means a certain universal. Thus, if "the author of Waverley" were a subordinate complex in the above proposition, its *meaning* would have to be what was said to be identical with the *meaning* of "the author of Marmion." This is plainly not the case; and the only escape is to say that "the author of Waverley" does not, by itself, have a meaning, though the phrases [sentences] of which it is part do have a meaning. That is, in a right analysis of the above proposition, "the author of Waverley" must disappear. This is effected when the above proposition is analyzed as meaning "Some one wrote Waverley and no one else did, and that some one also wrote Marmion and no one else did." This may be more simply expressed by saying that the propositional function "x wrote Waverley and Marmion, and no one else did" is capable of truth, i.e., some value of x makes it true. (KAKD pp. 125-6)

We've now looked at two driving forces behind Russell's view of descriptions: first, how to understand "the F" (and "an F") when there are no Fs, and second, how to understand informative identity statements.

There are two other groups of arguments Russell sometimes appeals to.

One of these has to do with the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), which says that every sentence or its negation must be true. Russell doesn't appeal to this argument in our texts, but he does in his earlier article "On Denoting" (1905). There's an initial challenge to the LEM in that "The present king of France is bald" doesn't seem to be true, but neither is "The present king of France isn't bald" obviously true. However Russell's account of descriptions enables us to distinguish between:

3a. $\exists x.\ Fx \,\&\, (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y{=}x) \,\&\, {\sim}Hx$

3b. ${\sim}(\exists x.\ Fx \,\&\, (\forall y.\ Fy \supset y{=}x) \,\&\, Hx)$

And whereas 3a won't be true when there is no unique F, 3b will be. Russell can say that the negation of "The present king of France is bald" has the latter form. So on his view, LEM can be preserved. How strongly this supports Russell will depend on how confident we are in advance that LEM has to be correct. Many logical systems uphold it, but some others do not.

The last group of arguments has to do with Russell's notion of **acquaintance**, and play a large role in the KAKD article.

Russell says you are **acquainted** with an object whenever the object itself is presented to your mind:

I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e.… I am directly aware of the object itself. (KAKD p. 108, see also p. 127)

Russell thinks we're not really acquainted with very many things. The list may just be relations and properties (which he also calls "universals") like being before or being yellow, our own selves (though he admits this needs arguing), and our own "sense-data" or perceptual

appearances: the particular color patches you see, or noises you hear, which on Russell's view are sensations or appearances in your mind, not objective phenomena in the external world. We're not acquainted with any physical objects nor with anyone else's mind (see p. 112, though on the next page Russell does speak *loosely* of being acquainted with the candidate who will in fact get the most votes).

The main reason Russell thought we were acquainted with so little was that in cases where you could be mistaken about whether something exists, or mistaken about its properties, then (as he argues elsewhere, for example in *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912, Chapter 1) he thinks that object and its properties can't be what you're directly aware of. You're only directly aware of your own sensations or appearances, which some external object may have caused and to which it may/may not correspond.

As we'll see later in the course, some theorists want to use a notion akin to Russell's acquaintance, and they'll even *call it* "acquaintance" (or "being en rapport"), but they'll want to allow that we *can* be acquainted with objects we could in principle be mistaken about. For example, you'd be acquainted with the sister you grew up with. But you may not yet be acquainted with other people who you're merely "in a position to describe."

Russell talks about knowing some propositions where the subject is "merely described," for example as the candidate who will get the most votes, but you don't yet know who that person is (p. 108). There's no specific person you have in mind and could knowingly identify (not by name, nor by picking them out of a lineup, nor by using an independently informative description). You can only think "the candidate who will get the most votes, whoever that is."

Now, even if that candidate is *in fact* someone you're acquainted with — perhaps it's your sister, and unlike Russell we say you can be acquainted with her, or perhaps it's *you* — and you know that *there is* a single candidate who will get the most votes, Russell will still count you as having "merely descriptive knowledge" about that candidate until you're in a position to know *a is the candidate who will get the most votes* for some logically proper name "a." The candidate themselves have to be a constituent of this judgment (see KAKD p. 113).

This notion of acquaintance bears on Russell's account of descriptions (and ordinary names) because he holds a "fundamental epistemological principle" that:

> Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted (KAKD p. 117, see also p. 128)

Russell purports to offer "reasons" for accepting this principle, but they seem to boil down to "the truth of this principle is evident as soon as the principle is understood" (p. 118).

If we combine this epistemological principle with the earlier claim that I can't be acquainted with Julius Caesar, we get the result that Julius Caesar himself can't be a constituent of any judgment I can understand or make (pp. 117-19).

A natural alternative might then be to say that it's instead only my *ideas* (images, associations, beliefs) about Julius Caesar that are constituents of my judgment. But Russell argues against this (pp. 119-20; Frege also forcefully resists the proposal that what public words mean and contribute to our judgments are episodes or items from our individual psychologies).

> Something that may obscure this is that Russell calls universals (properties, relations) we're aware of "concepts" (p. 111), and these he *would* allow to be part of the judgments we express with "Julius Caesar." For a contemporary, on the other hand, a "concept" might more likely be the *ideas* that Russell is here trying to exclude.

Russell's own alternative, as we've seen, is to say that "Julius Caesar" in my mouth really should be understood as some kind of description, which doesn't contribute any single meaning to my judgment as a self-standing unit. Instead my judgment will be composed of quantifiers and whatever properties/relations I describe Julius Caesar in terms of.

What does Russell mean when he says that **ordinary proper names like "Julius Caesar" and "Scott" are usually "really descriptions"**?

One interpretation of this might be that there's some one description, and everyone who uses and understands the ordinary name "Scott" uses it as shorthand or abbreviation for that single description. For example, perhaps the name "Hesperus" is really an abbreviation for the description "the first and brightest star-like light to appear in the evening sky."

But for the name "Scott," what should this description be? Certainly not "the author of Waverley," since people used the name "Scott" for many years before that novel was written, and then for many years more before they knew that Scott wrote it. When discussing the name "Julius Caesar," Russell says:

> Now I am admitting, and indeed contending, that in order to discover what is actually in my mind when I judge about Julius Caesar, we must substitute for the proper name a description made up of some of the things I know about him. (A description which will often serve to express my thought is "the man whose name was Julius Caesar." For whatever else I may have forgotten about him, it is plain that when I mention him I have not forgotten that that was his name.) (KAKD p. 119)

However, Russell doesn't think that "Julius Caesar" always means any single description, even this one. Instead he thinks that speakers will generally associate *different* descriptions with a public name:

> The thought in the mind of a person using a [ordinary] proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description. Moreover, the description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times. The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies. (KAKD p. 114)

But this raises a difficulty: If you and I associate different descriptions with a name, how can we communicate successfully using the name? If I think of Bismarck as "the first Chancellor of Germany" and you think of him as "the architect of the first modern welfare state," and I assert "Bismarck was an astute diplomat," will you understand what I meant to say?

Russell's picture of this is a bit complicated. The relevant texts include the passage from p. 114 quoted above, which continues:

> … But so long as this [the object to which the name applies] remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears.

and this later passage:

> It would seem that, when we make a statement about something only known by description, we often *intend* to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgment which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgment of which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. But we know that there is an object B called Bismarck, and that B was an astute diplomatist. We can thus *describe* the proposition we should like to affirm, namely, "B was an astute diplomatist," where B is the object which was Bismarck. What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know *it*, though we know it is true. (KAKD p. 116)

What I think Russell is saying here is that there's a proposition "B is an astute diplomat" that contains Bismarck as a constituent. I'm not in a position to judge this proposition, but I can think things about it, because I can describe it. (It's the proposition that ascribes *being an astute diplomat* to the person who was the first Chancellor of Germany.) Among the things I can think about this proposition is that it is true. And I can also *affirm* this proposition, and communicate it to you, by using the public name "Bismarck," even though you associate different descriptions with that name. And you can understand me, and come to know that this proposition is true, even though you aren't yourselves in a position to judge it, either. The "information we convey to others" using the name are these propositions about the actual Bismarck (p. 115), which neither of us are able to judge or suppose.

Though this view is a bit complicated, it makes sense. It is one possible view about how we manage to communicate about Bismarck even though we're not acquainted with him and don't have any logically proper names for him. We'll see other people this semester saying things that overlap to some degree with this proposal of Russell's.

Still, many philosophers who liked Russell's proposal that names are really descriptions in disguise didn't follow him here. They'd say instead that if we do manage to communicate using a public name "Bismarck," we *would* have to associate the same descriptions with it. Often the only descriptions we can be confident are shared will be the metalinguistic ones, like "the man whose name is 'Bismarck'."