

**RUSSELL AND WITTGENSTEIN ON
THE BEARER THEORY OF MEANING : SOME REFLECTIONS**

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In this paper, I attempt to do three main things. First, I intend to outline briefly Russell's theory of description as elucidated in his article "On Denoting" and show the implicit theory of meaning at work there. Then, having shown the importance of this theory of meaning of Russell's early work, I want to consider some objections to this theory, with special emphasis on Wittgenstein's argument as outlined in *Philosophical Investigations* against a bearer theory of meaning. Finally, I want to look at Russell's later work in *An Inquiry into meaning and Truth* (hereafter *Inquiry*) on proper names. Here I show that Russell's later view concerning proper names constitutes an individual or bearer overcomes Wittgenstein's objection to a "bearer" theory of meaning.

One central point of Russell's paper "On Denoting" is that denoting phrases like "the author of Waverley" have no meaning in isolation, but rather only contribute to the meaning of a sentence. Consider the following proof of Russell's point that accurately reflects his early view.¹

Assumption: if "the author of Waverley" means anything, it means either Scott or not-Scott:

- (1) If "the author of Waverley" means not-Scott", then the proposition "Scott is the author of Waverley" is false, which it is not.
- (2) If "the author of Waverley" means Scott, then the same proposition is a tautology. Therefore, "the author of Waverley" means neither Scott nor anything else, it means nothing.

The assumption at work here for Russell is that the meaning of a word or phrase is the object or individual which the word or phrase denotes. For Russell only logically proper names have meaning in isolation from propositional contexts. The concept of a logically proper name is elucidated in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*.²

In *Introduction*, Russell still holds to his views of "On Denoting"³ and thus, the distinction drawn here between names and descriptions is applicable to his work in "On Denoting". The criteria for a word being a name are :

- (i) it is a simple symbol,
- (ii) it directly designates an individual,
- (iii) this designated individual is the meaning of the word,
- (iv) the word has this meaning independently of the meaning of all other words.⁴

A denoting phrase, for example, "the author of Waverley" does not fulfil the above criteria. It is a simple symbol, rather it is a complex one composed of other symbols which possess meaning - "the", "author", "Waverley" - and whatever meaning the phrase will have, it will have it only in a propositional context. Thus, a denoting phrase has no independent meaning. It is not a name, but rather a description, when rightly analyzed, "drops out" of the proposition in which it was originally a constituent; the proposition becomes a uniquely existential proposition not, as first appeared, a subject - predicate proposition. Without Russell's distinction, we might conclude that any grammatical subject of a sentence of subject-predicate grammatical form is a proper name, and that it necessarily refers to an existent object. Thus, given the proposition "the round square does not exist", the object denoted by "the round square" should exist, although, we are predicating of this existing object that it does not exist.⁵ Thus, the proposition seems to require both exists and does not exist. However, given Russell's distinction, we can say that "the round square" is a description, not a name, and that, in fact, it designates nothing.

But the problem for Russell lies in his assumption, namely that there are names, that is, there are words which directly designate existent individuals, which

individuals are the meanings of the words. Russell's assumption is that there are words or expressions which satisfy the aforementioned four criteria. In consequence of this name-description dichotomy, he has proceeded to prove that denoting phrases do not fulfil the four criteria, and that they are not names. Therefore, the propositions in which they occur are not subject-predicate propositions. They are existential propositions. Russell's theory of denoting phrases follows, given the assumption that there are words fulfilling the four criteria, that is, given that there are names in his sense. This assumption cannot be justified. While Russell in his early works certainly does not justify his assumption that there are in fact expressions fulfilling the four criteria, I believe that such a justification is accomplished in *Inquiry*.

Russell's view of meaning in "On Denoting" and *Mathematical Philosophy* has been criticized as a "bearer" theory of meaning. The main critic of this theory is Wittgenstein, who investigates whether Russell's later work in *Inquiry* on the elucidation of what an individual or bearer is, can overcome his (Wittgenstein's) objection. There are mainly two objections to this bearer theory of meaning.

An immediate objection to this theory is that the word "Scott" has been the name of countless individuals throughout history. The only way we can tell which individual denoted by a given use of the name is through context, which seems to contradict the criterion to the effect that a name has its meaning independent of all other words. However, this need for context to determine particular individual by a particular use of word is never denied by Russell. Of course, we need context to know whether "Scott" is used to refer to "the man who wrote Waverley" or to someone else called "Scott". All that the bearer theory of meaning states is that if a word is a name it necessarily refers to an existent object. Once we determine through context which individual is denoted, all that is changed is our knowledge of the individual referred to by the word, not any fact about the reference of the word. The name still has its meaning independently of other words, since the context required in this case is not a context of words.

A deeper objection is that of Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*.⁶ Take the proposition "Mr. N is dead". If the meaning of a name is the bearer, and in this case, the bearer has ceased to exist, the name no longer has meaning - the

proposition should be meaningless. But obviously, the proposition is not meaningless, but, on the contrary, very informative and regretful to Mrs. N. Wittgenstein concludes that the whole bearer theory of meaning is false; meaning is not denoting.

The implications of this objection to Russell's theory of meaning are the following. Russell's work on denoting phrases is dependent on a "bearer" theory of meaning. Russell distinguishes between names, which are expressions fulfilling the four stated criteria, and descriptions which do not fulfill these same criteria. Wittgenstein's argument seems to falsify the third criteria for all expressions, and thus purportedly shows that no expressions satisfy Russell's four criteria. However, if no proper names can be found, that is, if we cannot discover expressions that fulfill the four criteria, then Russell has set up bogus criteria. Thus his name description dichotomy, so necessary to his work on to say that descriptions "mean nothing"⁷ is to imply that names do mean something. If no proper names are found, his statements concerning denoting phrases also fall.

Returning to Wittgenstein's argument: it would seem that it has wider application than merely ordinary proper names. There seem to be no good reasons why the force of his argument cannot be generalized beyond all ordinary proper names. Wittgenstein points out that "Mr. N. is dead" meaningful even though the proper name's bearer no longer exists. Generalizing, we can say that given the bearer theory of meaning, any words that refer to anything that can pass out of existence cannot be names. We can always meaningfully say I "remember X" where "x" refers to a once-existent thing which now no longer exists. This statement would always seem to be meaningful. Yet the object referred to by "x" no longer exists, and thus given the bearer theory of meaning, the statement should be meaningless. Thus, the bearer theory of meaning seems to have run into grave difficulties.

However, let us investigate Russell's work on proper names as outline in chapter Two of *Inquiry* We will deal herewith Russell's work with the purpose in mind of seeing how, in his later work, he criticizes the "bearer" or "individual" which is the heart of the bearer theory of meaning. This theory is necessary to Russell's work on denoting phrases. We have already seen that Wittgenstein's

criticism has grave consequences for a bearer theory of meaning. However, has Russell so characterized the individual or bearer in his later work that Wittgenstein's objection does not hold water against this later view? If this is true, then, further, we must show whether Russell's later view of individuals or bearer is still compatible with the four aforementioned criteria of his early work.

We might consider the following quotes of Russell's from *Inquiry*:

1. "We give proper names to certain continuous stretches of space-time, such as Socrates, France or the Moon".
2. "A proper name, in practice, always embraces many occurrences, but not as a class name does; the separate occurrences are parts of what the name means, not instances of it".
3. "... 'The Universe' may be regarded as a proper name for the whole of space-time".⁸

Thus for Russell, proper names directly designate any continuous portion of space-time. While we can name any such portion, in practice we only name those portions of space-time, which are of any interest for us. For example, if I say, "ouch", we could name this noise, for example, "Harry" would be the name which would directly designate the aforementioned "ouch" as the meaning of "Harry".

Thus logically, we may directly designate any continuous portion of space-time from the smallest, like a particular uttered sound like "ouch", all the way to the whole of space-time - "the universe". This naming of the whole space-time, the universe demonstrates a second and very central point of Russell's view of individuals in *Inquiry*, namely, their atemporality. Thus this naming is not confined to our present lifetime nor to the lifetime of the "bearer", rather, there exists the whole of space-time and we can directly designate any continuous portion of it, that is, name it. This continuous portion always possesses this name (atemporality). It never loses it, since when things are considered from a space-time perspective (if one can even talk of perspective when it comes to space-time) things do not exist; rather, a thing occupies its portion of space-time eternally. Thus, "Caesar" is a name directly designating that continuous interconnected portion of space-time beginning with the event "Caesar's birth" and ending with the event "Caesar's

death". This continuous stretch of space-time is named "Caesar" for all time, since this stretch of space-time always is (is "in an atemporal sense).

Let us now turn to Wittgenstein's argument: "Mr. N is dead". If a theory of meaning is a bearer theory, bearer now in the usual sense characterized, in a common-sensual way as passing in and out of existence. When once our bearer dies, the name no longer has meaning and the above sentence is meaningless. But its obvious meaningfulness demonstrates the falsity of the bearer theory of meaning, if this theory characterizes its bearer or individual in this common-sensual way. Consider, Russell's view of individuals or bearers as I have outlined it above, that is, his view in the *Inquiry* in relation to this sentence. "Mr. N" is a name referring to those collective events having to each other a spatio-temporal connection from the event of? Mr. N's death". "Death" is a generic word for a number of occurrences all having a similarity to each other, that is, the class of all deaths, past, present, and future. But, these occurrences are not spatio-temporally interconnected, and this "death" is not a name, whereas "Mr. N" is a name.⁹ The statement "Mr. N is dead" merely states that one of the spatio-temporal events of that portion of space-time designated by the name. "Mr. N" is also a member of the class of occurrences referred to by the generic term "death". This conjunction of these two sets is the event "Mr. N's death". This event is the verifier to the statement "Mr. N is dead"

For Russell, the name does not lose meaning after the bearer dies. Thus, Russell's later view of what a bearer is not a common-sensual view, that is, a view in which things pass in and out of existence. Rather naming is akin to an act of God, where one directly designates a continuous portion of space-time and names it for example, "x" and "x" is eternally the name for this continuous portion of space-time. Thus "Caesar" eternally means that series of events related continuously in space-time beginning with the event "Caesar's birth" and ending with the event "Caesar's death". Names possess meaning eternally, and thus never lose their meaning, since the bearer never ceases to exist—for when speaking in terms of space-time things always exist. Thus, we can conclude that Wittgenstein's argument is inappropriate to Russell's view of individuals or bearers as he has outlined it in *Inquiry*.

What remains is to show that this later view of Russell's is still compatible with the four criteria of his earlier work. Take the name "Scott" as an example. As for the expression ("Scott") being a simple symbol (criterion 1), this is unchanged, Scott is a simple symbol, that is, it has no parts which are symbols -unlike "the author of Waverley" which has component symbols possessing meaning. Scott still directly designates an individual (criterion 2), this designated individuals is the meaning of "Scott" (criterion 3), and Scott has his meaning independent of all other words (criterion 4).¹⁰ What has changed is Russell's work in "On Denoting" to *Inquiry*, or rather, what has been clarified, is the notion or conception of what an individual or bearer is. In "On Denoting" and in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Russell never clearly characterized his conception as to what constitutes an individual or bearer. However in *Inquiry*, he explicitly characterized his view of what constitutes an individual or "Bearer" which denotes a proper name. Thus, far from contradicting his earlier four criteria in reality, he makes clearer and more precise these criteria. All that has changed in his four criteria is his characterizaion of the constitution of an individual characterization. In *Inquiry*, his view is outlined and an individual or bearer is any continuous stretch of space-time from the smallest imagined portion to the whole as space-time. This clarification in turn has contributed to the plausibility of Russell's' earlier work on denoting phrases, since with this conception, Wittgenstein's argument stands defeated.

My claim in this paper has been very simple, the following:

- (i) Russell's early work on denoting phrases is dependent on the four criteria I have mentioned.
- (ii) These criteria constitute a bearer theory of meaning.
- (iii) This theory of meaning has been challenged, among others, by Wittgenstein;
- (iv) I claim that if we use Russell's characterization of individuals in *Inquiry*-and such a use is dependent on my ability to have shown that such a characterization as outlined in *Inquiry* is consistent with the four criteria of the earlier work —with such a utilization, we can fill out the bearer theory of meaning so that this particular objection of Wittgenstein's is thwarted.

NOTES

1. Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, (London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1959), p.85
2. See, chapter XVI, p.173. I use *Introduction* here since Russell in "On Denoting" does not give criteria for distinguishing between a name and a description (except to show that any phrase in which a denoting phrase occurs is really a propositional function, whereas names are what make propositions out of propositional function.
3. See Russell "Descriptions" in *Introduction of Mathematical Philosophy*, (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1971), pp.167-73.
4. *ibid.* p.174
5. The expression "the round square" is a grammatical subject and we are here not assuming Russell's distinction.
6. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. By GEM anscombe (Oxford, Basil, Blackwell, publisher, 1967, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 1973). P.20e, paragraph 40.
7. Russell, "On Denoting" in *Readings in Logical Theory*, I.M. Copi.
8. Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1940),p.33
9. *Ibid.* for a similar discussion, Russell's work here seems to uphold my contention