

## THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE

SUDESHNA MITRA

The problem of Reference has occupied a central position in the field of Analytic Philosophy from the beginnings of twentieth century. Bertrand Russell was concerned with the concepts of referring, denoting and naming, which he stated in his *theory of descriptions* that appeared in his celebrated paper "On denoting" in 1905. But it would be incorrect to assume that Russell was the first one to be concerned with the problem of reference. Two of his great predecessors, Alexius Meinong and Gottlob Frege were also thinking on the same line. Some of these problems were also noted by Plato in his work -*Sophist* and after the publication of P. F. Strawson's "On Referring" in 1950 in which he criticized Russell's theory of descriptions, there has been an active controversy between the followers of Russell and Strawson. The subject of reference thus has become a lively issue in the debate between opposing schools of philosophical analysis.

The main problem of reference revolves around the question - "are the sentences containing subject terms which are non-denoting significant? What do these terms refer to?" Russell's interest in the problem has its source in his interest in ontology. In "On Denoting" Russell points to a group of 'puzzles' to which he claims to have provided solution through his description theory.

By a description, Russell means any linguistic expression having the logical forms, namely, 'the-so-and-so' and 'a-so-and-so'. Phrases of the former sort he calls "definite descriptions" since they connote uniqueness while phrases of the latter sort he calls "indefinite descriptions" since they are not subject to uniqueness limitation.

Let us now state the first puzzle : The first of the puzzles is known as the Problem of Negative Existential statements and was of the most concern to him. When we consider the proposition "A differs from B" - the truth of it means that there is a difference between A and B, which may be expressed in the form: "the difference between A and B subsists." But if the proposition is false then there is no difference between A and B which fact may be expressed in the form: "the difference between A and B does not subsist". But, how can a nonentity be the subject of a proposition?<sup>1</sup> If a thing does not exist, it is not possible to say anything about it. On the other hand, if the proposition is about something then it must exist. It seems as if it is always contradictory to deny the being of anything.

According to Plato, problems arise when we ascribe non-being to something. For example, if I say "dragons do not exist" then the sentence seems to be about dragons, But, if the sentence is true then there are no dragons to talk about. So is a sentence about nothing meaningless? But we are all aware of what it means. Therefore the sentence must be about something. Hence, dragons must have some kind being in order to make statements of this kind.

This view, which Russell claims, and initially supports, was given by Meinong. According to Meinong metaphysics has a 'prejudice in favour of the actual', which leads us to believe that what is not real or do not have any kind of being can be neglected because they are not worth any consideration. Meinong advanced two main theses opposing this view. In the first place, he says, there are "ideal objects", i.e. there are objects that do not exist and secondly he devises the theory of *Aussersein* which means "the principle of the independence of so-being (Sosein) from being (Sein)."<sup>2</sup>

It is argued by Meinong that we can speak about "the Golden mountain", "the round square" etc. and can make true statements of which these are subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being since otherwise the statements in which they occur would be meaningless. Meinong held that even if there are no such things as "Golden mountain", they do have being. Meinong called them ideal objects. Such things will not be said to exist, they are rather subsistent entities.

The Aussersein theory of Meinong was devised as a solution to the problem of Negative Existential. The attempted solution was that, things like round square,, Pegasus etc. were objects which were non-real and they were 'beyond being and non-being'. Meinong carefully pointed out here that the existence of these non-real objects is never asserted. His argument is as follows: that, 'A is not' (the Nichtsein of A) is an objective, as much an objective as the 'being of A' (the sein of A). An objective can be an objective of being (Seins objektiv) or an objective of non-being (Nichtseins objektiv). This being however must not be confused with existence.<sup>3</sup>

This theory of Meinong was greatly misunderstood by Russell who thought that Meinong wanted to say that non-real objects like Pegasus both exist and do not exist. Thus, this line of thinking (which Russell mistakenly thought as Meinong's view) led Russell into admitting varieties of being.

In order to solve problem of negative existentials, some philosophers like Russell tried to hold one horn of the dilemma. The dilemma was that, either the statement 'Pegasus does not exist' is false or it is not about Pegasus. Russell held that the statement 'Pegasus does not exist' is false-that Pegasus has some kind of being.

But soon after this view was expressed, Russell violently rejected it for being totally incompatible with his sense of reality. He vehemently criticized Meinong accusing him of overpopulating the universe with entity upon entity. This time he picked the other horn of the dilemma, i.e. 'Pegasus does not exist' is not about Pegasus and in order to establish this, devised his theory of description.

Another puzzle of reference, which may be called the puzzle of substitutivity runs thus : If 'a' is identical with 'b', whatever is true of 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 *Waverley* and in fact Scott was the author of *Waverley*. Hence we substitute Scott for the author of *Waverley*, and from which it follows that George-IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott which is trivial.<sup>4</sup>

The third of the puzzles that Russell tries to solve deals with 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 things that are not bald, 'the present King of France' could not be found in either of the two lists for there is no monarchy in France at present.<sup>5</sup> So both the propositions are false, yet according to the law of excluded middle either of the two propositions must be true. Russell tries to solve these puzzles by means of his theory of descriptions.

The special character of Russell's theory of descriptions is best understood and approached when seen against the background of Frege's distinction between proper names and predicate expressions. In Frege's view proper names stand for something complete; they have sense associated with them. Concept words and relation expressions are incomplete. Frege also tried to offer a solution to the problem of reference. Frege's interest in the problem comes from a desire to solve certain problems which arise in connection with the concept of identity. Identity is a relation which holds between objects, but only between an object and itself. The puzzle may be expressed thus: How then can an identity statement,  $a=b$  tells us anything other than just  $a=a$ , if  $a=b$  is true? Yet there are statements of identity which add to our knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

In order to solve this problem Frege introduced a distinction between the sense of an expression and what it refers to. Roughly speaking, two expressions may differ in sense or meaning, while their referent may be the same. Frege's famous example in this matter was 'Venus=the morning star'. Let us consider the expressions 'the evening star' and 'the morning star'. Both these expressions refer to the same object, namely Venus; nevertheless it was an important astronomical discovery that the morning star is identical with the evening star. To reconcile the fact that the two expressions refer to the same object with the fact that the assertion - "'the evening star' is identical with 'the evening star'" - is not informative - we have to recognize that the two expressions differ in 'sense', although they refer to same 'object'. Frege concluded that this puzzle over identity arises through confusion between 'sense' and 'reference' of expressions. Though

Russell leans on this distinction, his acceptance and use of it is not precisely the same as that in which Frege understood it.

Russell does not accept Frege's solution either. He argues that a problem may arise when some word is used as a name which does not actually refer to any thing-when it has no denotation. Russell rejected Meinong's overpopulation of the metaphysical universe because it is averse to one's sense of reality, but rejects Frege's conventional denotation because it is purely arbitrary. Russell thought that the difficulty over identity rested not on the confusion between sense and reference of expressions but on the confusion between proper names and definite descriptions.

Russell makes a sharp distinction between what he calls a 'description' and what he calls a 'proper name'. Whereas a proper name, if it has a meaning, must denote an object, there are definite descriptions that have no denotation and in that sense have no "meaning". Definite descriptions have meaning only in the context of a sentence. In realizing all this we shall be spared the excesses of a 'Meinongian' ontology.

Russell gives the following as examples of sentences containing definite description:

1. Scott is the author of *Waverley*.
2. The present King of France is bald.
3. The golden mountain does not exist.

Russell's theory of Descriptions offers us an analysis which enables us to eliminate descriptive phrases from a context in which they occur. The descriptive phrases here are 'the author of *Waverley*', 'the present king of France', 'the golden mountain', Russell holds that sentences containing descriptions are to be analysed into an equivalent set of statements in which no descriptive phrases occur and which make explicit the logical structure of what is being asserted. In case 2 above, the analysis yields:

- 2(a) There is a king of France
- 2(b) There is not more than one king of France.
- 2(c) Anything which is king of France is bald.

Or more accurately,

$$(\exists x) \{Fx. [(y) (Fy \rightarrow y = x)]. Bx\}$$

Sentence 2(a) is captured by the existential generalization; 2(b) is the uniqueness condition encapsulated by definite article 'the' and 2(c) asserts that the unique existent  $x$  has a certain property—in this case baldness. In 2, the description appears to have a denoting role, whereas in the formal paraphrase of the entire sentence there occur no singular terms, but only variables bound by quantifiers, predicates and signs of identity. It seems to Russell that any meaningful sentence has truth value. Thus if "the present king of France" were a logical as well as a grammatical subject expression, either it would have to denote something—a subsistent entity, or sentences in which they occur would be meaningless. The theory of descriptions provides a masterly way out, by saying that sentences with descriptions in subject are not logically subject predicate form of sentence and that descriptions, far from being representable as singular terms in a formal language, are in fact concealed existence and uniqueness assertions.

Criticisms have been raised by some philosophers against this theory, P. F. Strawson being the most prominent and sharp among them. Strawson's criticism of the theory of descriptions consists in a rejection of the theory of meaning underlying it. In Strawson's view no words or expressions have as their meaning a designated object. If meaning is not denotation then there cannot be logically proper names, nor descriptions in Russell's sense, for in Strawson's view no one uttering such a sentence as 'the present king of France is bald' is asserting that there is a king of France. Strawson argues that whenever one refers to an entity, he presupposes that the entity exists; but this presupposition is not to be confused with entailment, because the presupposition of the speaker does not entail the existence of the entity. Russell, as Strawson saw it, had also failed to distinguish between, (a) the use of an expression to make a unique reference and (b) asserting that there is one and no more than one individual possessing certain characteristics.

To make out his case Strawson draws a three way distinction among a sentence, a use of a sentence, and an utterance of a sentence. One can imagine the sentence 'the king of France is bald (K) being uttered in

successive reigns of French kings. Evidently however, there are differences between the occasions of use each time; users of K would be talking about different kings, and depending on the appearance of kings in question would be saying true or false statements. On Strawson's view, it follows from these distinctions that it is not the sentence which is true or false, but instead, that what is true or false is the assertion or proposition which the sentence is used to make. In using the sentence 'the king of France is bald', now, when France is not a monarchy, we would be making a statement that is neither true nor false, although the sentence is perfectly significant.

Russell's contention that the meaning of a name is identical with its bearer has not been accepted by many contemporary philosophers including Strawson and Wittgenstein. Russell held that if "the author of *Waverley*" was a name, then it would name something *c*, and hence "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" would mean "Scott is *c*". But this would follow only if it somehow followed that if "the author of *Waverley*" were a name for *c*, then it would mean the same thing as any other name for *c*, say "*c*". As Russell held that the meaning of a name was its bearer, his argument becomes valid for, in that case two names having the same bearer, have the same meaning. Strawson even goes further and objects to Wittgenstein's dictum - "Don't confuse the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name." It appears that though Wittgenstein holds that the meaning of a name was not its bearer, he assumes it to be something else. But according to Strawson names do not in general have meanings at all.

Another serious criticism is that Russell starts from a false premise. The theory is intended to show how it is possible for a descriptive expression to be meaningful, even though there is nothing which it denotes. And it does this in effect by maintaining that these expressions are not referential. The underlying assumption is then that the meaning of a referential expression is to be identified with its denotaton. It is argued that, even in the case of proper names, this theory of meaning is mistaken. Then it follows that Russell's reasoning for theory of descriptions is not above criticism. However, its importance in the history of analytic philosophy can in no way be minimized.

Reference, we thus observe, is a subject which has intrigued philosophers and raised questions in their minds which they have tried to answer over the years, and the quest is still continuing.

#### NOTES

1. 'On Denoting', B. Russell, in *Mind*, Vol-14,1905, reprinted in *Logic and Knowledge* ed. by R. C. Marsh, Routledge, 1994, p48.
2. 'The Theory Of Objects', A. Meinong in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. R. M. Chisholm, Free Press, 1960, p8.
3. *Ibid*
4. B. Russell *op-cit*, p.47.
5. *Ibid*, p.48.
6. 'On Sense and Reference' in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Max Black and P.T. Geach, Philosophical Library, New York, 1952.
7. Edwards, P. (ed.) : *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967- "Referring" by L. Linsky, in vol-VII pp 98.
8. Grossman, R. : *Meinong*, ed. T. Honderich, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1974.
9. Linsky, L.: *Referring*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1967.
10. Russell, B. : 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism' in *Logic & Knowledge*, *op-cit*.
11. Staluga, H. : *Gottlob Frege*, ed. Ted Honderich, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
12. Sainsbury, R. M. : *Russell*, ed. T. Honderich, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979.