

Report on Milan Soutor's Ph.D. thesis  
*The Theory of Descriptions:*  
*Bertrand Russell's Road Towards Ontological Austerity*

The main objective of Milan Soutor's thesis is to confirm W.V.O. Quine's contention that Bertrand Russell's Theory of Description, presented in his "On Denoting" (1905) for the first time, was the decisive turning point on his journey towards purging his ontological realm of various kinds of suspicious entities such as the existent king of France, unicorns, and round squares. To attain this objective, Soutor pays close attention to a detailed elaboration of Russell's relevant logical and ontological doctrines from his pre-1905 period. The main source for Soutor is Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) as well as some of his shorter works. Soutor's dialectics is framed by his critical assessment of certain recent attempts to part with the Quinean orthodoxy regarding the interpretation of Russell's philosophical development during the earliest years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The recent attempts aim to show that, contrary to the received views that concord with Quine's classical interpretation, Russell's pre-1905 ontology was actually free from problematic entities, meaning that Russell was in a position to make room for genuine referential failures that occur with respect to "the present king of France" and "the round square". It is argued that Russell's pre-1905 theory of denoting concepts makes the invocation of possibilities and contradictory entities unnecessary, in which case /the present king of France/,<sup>1</sup> i.e. the denoting concept associated with the denoting phrase "the present king of France", does not identify a mere possible, the present king of France. Soutor disagrees. He demonstrates that Russell assumed the Intentionality Rule (as Soutor baptized it) according to which "Every sentence is meaningful if and only if there is an  $x$  such that one can use that sentence to make a statement about that  $x$ , i.e., one can use that sentence to assert something of  $x$  or deny something of  $x$ " (p. 124). In this sense, statements featuring "the present king of France" are not *about* the denoting concept, /the present king of France/, but about an entity that is somehow identified by the concept, i.e. a possible. Based on this, the so-called puzzle of negative existentials proved to be a real puzzle for Russell and he was not able to cope with it in *The Principles of Mathematics* in a satisfactory manner. Russell's struggles with the puzzle and related issues are explained in details in Soutor's work.

In his Ph.D. thesis, Soutor embarks on a large number of issues, which were developed in *The Principles of Mathematics* and some other works, to provide a solid philosophical background for Russell's logicism. It would be pointless to describe them in this report; a brief list of the most important ones suffices: Russell's notion of reality and the language-reality interface; the problem of false propositions and their reality; the problem of propositional unity, Bradley's regress and Russell's attempts at providing satisfactory solutions to it; Russell's views on variables and propositional functions; the theory of denoting concepts and the development of Russell's views on the semantics of denoting phrases; Russell's explanation of plurals; Russell's inclinations to what is nowadays known as Meinongianism; the availability of contradictory entities for Russell's pre-1905 positions; the puzzle of negative existentials; the notion of aboutness; the Theory of Descriptions developed in 1905; etc.

The discussions regarding all of these issues contribute to the derivation of the author's overall conclusion that, in his pre-1905 thought, Russell was compelled to embrace possibilities into his ontology and that the Theory of Descriptions proposed in 1905 was the decisive step towards purging them from his ontological realm, as claimed by W.V.O. Quine in his classical interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> The slashes to mark denoting concepts as opposed to denoting phrases are used by Soutor himself; see p. 13.

Soutor's considerations are very meticulous and the overall quality of his thesis is high. I would like to make some comments on the doctrines presented in the thesis and eventually pose some queries to the author.

1. It is argued (pp. 13–14) that /someone else/ in <I am as tall as /someone else/> functions differently from John in <I am as tall as John> because the former proposition is not about the constitutive denoting concept /someone else/ but about what is denoted by the concept, unlike the latter proposition which is about John, i.e. a constitutive item. This is supposed to be a crucial feature of denoting concepts and their occurrences in propositions. Now it might be asked whether the pre-1905 Russell is in a position to cope with propositions such as </the U.S. president/ is always /a male/> and </the U.S. president/ is eligible> (meaning that the office of the U.S president is occupied by someone who won elections). The former proposition is not supposed to say that the person who occupies the U.S. presidency office has been always a male (i.e. did not undergo a sex change), but is supposed to say that the office has been occupied exclusively by males so far. Analogously, the latter proposition is not supposed to say that the person who occupies the U.S. presidency office is eligible, but that the office itself is, i.e. that its occupiers must be elected. These readings assume that /the U.S. president/ is what the propositions are about. Thus, the propositions seem to be on a par with <I am as tall as John> when it comes to the idea that they are about their constitutive items.

2. Soutor argues that Russell's responses to Bradley's regress are unsatisfactory because they consist in selling something else as the regress (see section 1.5). Now there is an interesting point in subsection 1.4.2 which consists in saying that, according to Russell, "*a* differs from *b*" is materially equivalent with "difference relates *a* and *b*" which is materially equivalent with "relating-ness relates\* difference, *a* and *b*", etc. ad infinitum. If this is indeed the case, all of these sentences must be true if one of them is. Based on this, if "*a* differs from *b*" is true, the relation of *being different from* must be what relates *a* and *b*, because otherwise "difference relates *a* and *b*" could not be true and, hence, materially equivalent with "*a* differs from *b*". It means that there can be nothing else beyond the relation in question that is to be supposed to relate *a* and *b*. Consequently, it seems that the nature of relating the items to each other must be inherent to the relation, and cannot be guaranteed by anything external to it. Two things bear noting in this connection. First, if this is the case, Bradley's regress does not threaten Russell's theory of propositions. Second, there is a certain tension in what Russell claims in §49 of *The Principles of Mathematics* (quoted on p. 43 in Soutor's thesis), namely that the difference between relations used as terms (such as *difference* in <difference relates *a* and *b*>) and relations used as relations (such as *differ* in <*a* differs from *b*>) consists in something external. The overall impression is that Russell's explanations are plagued with inconsistencies. Nonetheless, one might admit that Russell proposed a solution to Bradley's regress, albeit not quite consistent with some of his other doctrines, but ask for polishing the other doctrines to preserve consistency. Now it seems that Soutor would not accept this diagnosis; he claims that Russell failed to provide a solution to Bradley's regress in the first place. Is not this assessment a bit unfair to Russell?

3. If the reasoning summarized in the above paragraph is correct, Soutor's argument proposed in subsection 1.5.2 is based on a false premise. Given the material equivalence of <*a* differs from *b*> and <difference relates *a* and *b*>, Soutor claims that "relating-ness which is relating in the latter is responsible for the unity of the former" (p. 47). I beg to disagree. The latter proposition is true because the former is and vice versa, which means that it must be the relation of *being different from* that relates the items in the former proposition rather than the relation of *relating*. Otherwise Bradley's regress would rear its head again. If this were not the case, <difference relates *a* and *b*> would be true only provided there is a relation of *relating\** that relates the relation of *being different from* with the items *a* and *b* (i.e. provided the proposition <relating-ness relates\* difference, *a*, and *b*> is true) which

would be the case only on the condition that there is a relation of *relating*\*\* etc., ad infinitum. In sum, the truth of a certain proposition in which a relation is a relating term is dependent on the truth of another proposition in which the relating relation occurs as an argument of another relating relation, etc. ad infinitum. Given the infinity of this series, no proposition could be true, contrary to what Soutor claims.

4. It seems to me that Soutor's reasoning about object-dependent and object-independent propositions on pp. 56–57 is somewhat confused, and needs some polishing. The confusion is brought about by an improper application of the addition of "unless *d* picks out some object *o* and the sentence contains a (logically proper) name whose bearer is *o*" to definition (D2) (p. 56). The addition is correct, but Soutor's comments on it might mislead readers. Unlike logically proper names, definite descriptions are said to refer indirectly, meaning that what they refer to are not constituents of propositions expressed by sentences featuring the descriptions. Comparing "The first African American president of the U.S.A. is Barack Obama" and "The first African American president of the U.S.A. is Charlie Chaplin" Soutor claims that the latter "expresses an object-independent proposition because we can understand this sentence without being acquainted with the denotation of 'the first Afro-American president of the US'" (p. 57), while the former expresses an object-dependent proposition because of the occurrence of "Barack Obama". This is not the case. Both propositions are on a par, namely both are object-dependent – the former because of containing Barack Obama and the latter because of containing Charlie Chaplin.

5. There is a minor inaccuracy regarding Frege's theory of proper names on p. 72. The author claims that, for Frege, "every name carries some descriptive content". This is not the case given what Frege claims in *Der Gedanke* about certain utterances of "Gustav Lauben". There are situations in which the name expresses the so-called primitive sense that is non-descriptive, namely when the name is uttered by Lauben himself.

6. When it comes to the notion of acquaintance, Russell's way of expression is often rather sloppy. It sometimes appears as if physical objects themselves rather than sense data were the objects of acquaintance (however, Russell was aware of these inaccuracies and used the somewhat sloppy formulations mainly in the contexts in which he made illustrative comparisons between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description). The same holds for Soutor's ways of expressing. On p. 146 (fn. 204), for example, he claims that "Had someone invented a time machine, a possibility to get acquainted with the French ingenious leader [= Napoleon Bonaparte] would emerge." Strictly speaking, this is not the case. One might get acquainted only with certain sense data that somehow correspond to Napoleon Bonaparte rather than with the emperor himself.

7. Russell's Theory of Descriptions takes advantage of the difference between grammatical form and logical form, and the related difference between grammatical subject/predicate and logical subject/predicate. Strictly speaking, grammatical subject and grammatical predicate are irrelevant from the semantic perspective. Soutor's claim that "There is an asymmetry in the way how the grammatical subject and grammatical predicate contribute to the meaning of the whole sentences" (p. 153) is thus literally inaccurate. It is only logical subjects and logical predicates that are in a position to make any contribution to the meanings of sentences. I take it that this is just a matter of formulation. There is, however, a more substantial issue in Soutor's presentation of the Theory of Descriptions. Russell's analysis of "The *F* is *G*" is the following:  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y) \wedge Gx)$ . Soutor suggests that, in the formal rendering of "The *F* is *G*", "the *F*" makes a semantic contribution that corresponds to the following part of the formula:  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y) \wedge \dots)$ , where " $\dots$ " can be replaced by a propositional function. Now I think that this is not correct. This is because "The *F* exists" is rendered in Russell's theory as  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y))$ , which is represented in the notation of *Principia*

*Mathematica* as “ $\exists!(x)(Fx)$ ”.  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y) \wedge \dots)$  seems to be inaccurate because there is no way of eliminating “ $\wedge \dots$ ”; one might just insert a propositional function in place of “ $\dots$ ”. Let us assume that we insert “ $Fx$ ” there, as this might appear to be the best choice in the present context. Regardless of the fact that the resulting formula  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y) \wedge Fx)$  is equivalent with  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y))$ , the former is different from the latter. Consequently, “The  $F$  exists” cannot be identified with “The  $F$  is (an)  $F$ ”. Based on this, I would prefer to say that it is impossible to identify any particular constituents of  $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge (\forall y)(Fy \supset x = y) \wedge Gx)$  as representing the semantic contribution of “the  $F$ ”.

To conclude, the above remarks and critical notes are inessential to the overall picture of Russell’s early philosophy that Soutor offers in his work. I take hsi Ph.D. thesis as a valuable and original contribution to the current Russell studies. The thesis is full of ingenious insists and deserves close attention of everyone in the field.

This being said, I recommend Milan Soutor’s Ph.D. thesis for defense and, if successful, I recommend awarding him with the Ph.D. degree in philosophy.

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