

The Philosophy of Language

Lecture Three

Russell on Definite Descriptions

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Russell on Definite Descriptions

Introduction

Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

Four Puzzles

Strawson on Referring

Donnellan's Referential/Attributive Distinction

Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Re-Cap: Frege's Theory of Reference

- Frege started off with a very sophisticated version of the Name Theory
- Meaningful expressions refer to things in the world, and that's all there is to their meanings
 - Singular terms, like 'Donald Trump', refer to objects
 - Sentences, like 'Donald Trump is president', refer to truth-values
 - Predicates, like 'x is president' refer to concepts, i.e. functions from objects to truth-values
 - Sentential connectives, like 'and' and 'not', refer to functions from truth-values to truth-values
 - Quantifiers, like ' $\exists x(\dots x \dots)$ ' refer to functions from concepts to truth-values

Re-Cap: Problems for Frege's Theory of Reference

- **The Problem of Informative Identities**

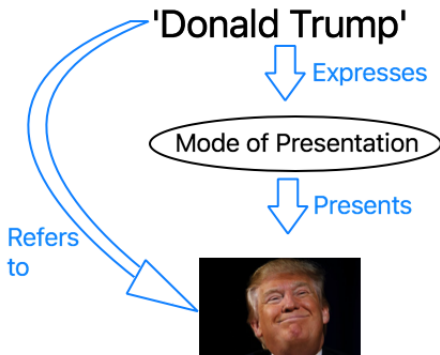
- The Name Theory implies that 'Hesperus = Hesperus' means the same thing as 'Hesperus = Phosphorus'; but the former is totally trivial, and the latter is very informative

- **The Problem of Empty Terms**

- The Name Theory implies that empty terms, like 'Vulcan', are meaningless; but 'Vulcan orbits the Sun' looks like a perfectly meaningful sentence

Re-Cap: Frege's Theory of Sense

- Frege tried to solve these problems by saying that there is more to meaning than reference; there is **sense** too
- The sense of an expression is, roughly, the **way** in which it presents its reference



Re-Cap: Sense and Informative Identities

- 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' co-refer, but they have different senses
 - They both refer to Venus, but they present Venus in different ways
- This is meant to explain the difference between these two identities:
 - (1) Hesperus = Hesperus
 - (2) Hesperus = Phosphorus
- (2) is informative because we pick out one object in two different ways

Re-Cap: Sense and Empty Terms

- 'Vulcan' still has a sense, even though it doesn't refer to anything
- Sentences containing 'Vulcan' still have senses, but they don't refer to anything
 - 'Vulcan orbits the Sun' has a sense; it expresses a thought; it has a truth-condition
 - But 'Vulcan orbits the Sun' does not refer to anything; i.e. it does not have a truth-value

Re-Cap: Indirect Contexts

- Intuitively, the following **Substitution Principle** looks very plausible:
 - If two expressions co-refer, then substituting one for the other should never turn a true sentence into a false sentence
- But there seem to be cases where this Principle fails:
 - (1) Lois Lane believes that Superman flies
 - (2) Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies
- We can create similar pairs of sentences by using contexts starting 'X hopes that...', 'X fears that...', 'X wonders whether...', etc
- Frege calls contexts like these **indirect contexts**; all other contexts are called **direct**

Re-Cap: Indirect Contexts and Reference-Shifts

- Frege's solution was to say that expressions change their reference when they go into indirect contexts
 - In an indirect context, 'Superman' refers to the sense that 'Superman' has in direct contexts
 - In an indirect context, 'Clark Kent' refers to the sense that 'Clark Kent' has in direct context
- As a result, the Substitution Principle isn't really violated by this pair of sentences:
 - (1) Lois Lane believes that Superman flies
 - (2) Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies
- Although 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' co-refer in direct contexts, they do not co-refer in indirect contexts like (1) and (2)

Where Now?

- Frege's theories of sense and reference come together to make a very robust approach to language
- Unfortunately, lots of philosophers have found the whole idea of *sense* just too weird
- In particular, Bertrand Russell thought that the Frege's sense/reference was flat out *incoherent*
- He presented an intriguing but *confusing* argument against sense in 'On Denoting' (which is known today as the **Gray's Elegy Argument**)
- We won't try to figure out what was going on in that argument today!

Where Now?

- Instead, we will assess Russell's positive proposal for how to do without sense
- Whether or not the notion of *sense* is really incoherent, it would still be a big achievement to show that we can build a decent theory of meaning without invoking *sense*
- In general, theories which appeal to fewer strange entities are better than ones which appeal to more

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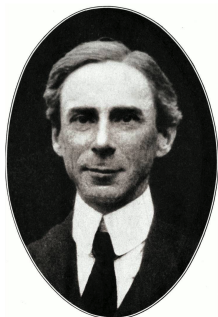
Donnellan's Referential/Attributive Distinction

Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Introducing Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

- Russell first presented his Theory of Definite Descriptions in 'On denoting' (1905), although it is presented a bit more simply in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*
- It is generally regarded as a landmark success in philosophical analysis

I would give the doctrine of [the word 'the'] if I were "dead from the waist down" and not merely in a prison



What is a Definite Description?

- A **definite description** is any expression of the form, 'the *F*'
 - The author of *Harry Potter*
 - The first person to walk on the Moon
 - The present Queen of England
 - The present King of France
- We also want to include expressions which can be **re-written** as 'the *F*'
 - Donald Trump's mother \Rightarrow the mother of Donald Trump
 - Your car \Rightarrow the car you own

What Kind of Expression is a Definite Description?

- On the face of it, definite descriptions look like a kind of singular term
 - (1) Philip is having lunch
 - (2) The Queen of England is having lunch
- In (1), 'Philip' refers to Philip, and the rest of the sentence says of him that he is having lunch
 - (1) is true/false just in case it is true/false of Philip that he is having lunch
- It seems that in (2), 'the Queen of England' refers to the Queen of England, and the rest of the sentence says of her that she is having lunch
 - (2) is true/false just in case it is true of the Queen of England that she is having lunch

Frege's View of Definite Descriptions

- This is exactly how Frege thought about definite descriptions
- Definite descriptions are a kind of singular term; they are expressions which refer to objects
- Of course, Frege thought that definite descriptions did **more** than just refer; they express *senses* too

Frege's View of Definite Descriptions

- We can certainly use definite descriptions in informative identities:
 - The author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling
- Frege thought that this was informative because 'The author of *Harry Potter*' and 'J.K. Rowling' present the same object in different ways
- And it is easy to construct empty definite descriptions
 - The present King of France
- Frege thought that this term counted as meaningful because it still had a sense, even though it does not refer to anything

Millianism

- Russell rejected Frege's treatment of definite descriptions, because he didn't want to invoke a realm of senses
- Russell wanted to return to something much closer to the Name Theory, at least as applied to singular terms:
 - There is nothing more to the meaning of a term than *reference*
 - When I have told you what a term refers to, I have told you all there is to know about what it means
- This theory of how terms work is often called **Millianism**, because it was advocated by John Stewart Mill
 - The Name Theory is a general theory about every kind of expression
 - Millianism is what you get when you restrict the Name Theory so that it only deals with singular terms

Definite Descriptions are not Terms

- Russell denied that definite descriptions were singular terms
 - (1) Philip is having lunch
 - (2) The Queen of England is having lunch
- (1) is of the form '*Fa*'
 - (1) is what you get when you plug the singular term 'Philip' into the predicate 'x is having lunch'
- On the surface, (2) looks like it has that form too
 - (2) is what you get when you plug the singular term 'the Queen of England' into the predicate 'x is having lunch'
- But this surface form is misleading; underneath, it has a *very* different **logical form**

Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

- The Queen of England is having lunch
 - (a) There is at least one queen of England; and
 - (b) There is at most one queen of England; and
 - (c) Every queen of England is having lunch
- The author of *Harry Potter* is very rich
 - (a) There is at least one author of *Harry Potter*; and
 - (b) There is at most one author of *Harry Potter*; and
 - (c) Anyone who authored *Harry Potter* is very rich

Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

- The F is G
 - (a) There is at least one F ; and
 - (b) There is at most one F ; and
 - (c) All F s are G s
- In a short sentence:
 - There is exactly one F , and it is G
- In formal symbols:
 - $\exists x(Fx \& \forall y(Fy \supset y = x) \& Gx)$
 - $\exists x(\forall y(Fy \equiv y = x) \& Gx)$

Incomplete Symbols

- The F is G
 - (a) There is at least one F ; and
 - (b) There is at most one F ; and
 - (c) All F s are G s
- Russell's theory does not give us a definition of the word 'the', or even 'the F '
- Instead, it gives us a way of understanding entire sentences of the form 'The F is G ', but without assigning any meaning to 'the F '

Incomplete Symbols

- The F is G
 - (a) There is at least one F ; and
 - (b) There is at most one F ; and
 - (c) All F s are G s
- On Russell's analysis, 'the F ' disappears entirely; there is no expression in (a)–(c) which takes the place of 'the F '
- Russell called definite descriptions **incomplete symbols**, by which he meant that they appear in meaningful sentences, but do not themselves mean anything

(Warning: Frege also called some symbols 'incomplete', but he meant something very different: Frege's incomplete symbols are expressions which have gaps in them, like the predicate '.... is wise')

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Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Why Should We Accept Russell's Theory?

A logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science.

(Russell, 'On denoting', pp. 484–5)

- We can use Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions to solve four logical puzzles

Informative Identities

- (1) J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling
 - (2) The author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling
- (1) is trivial, but (2) is informative
 - Given Millianism, this would be impossible to explain if 'the author of *Harry Potter*' were a singular term
 - If 'the author of *Harry Potter*' were a singular term, then it would co-refer with 'J.K. Rowling'
 - According to Millianism, there is no more to the meaning of a term than its reference
 - So 'the author of *Harry Potter*' would **mean the same thing** as 'J.K. Rowling'
 - So (2) would **mean the same thing** as (1)

Informative Identities — SOLVED

- (1) J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling
- (2) The author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling
 - On Russell's analysis, (2) becomes:
 - (a) There is at least one author of *Harry Potter*; and
 - (b) There is at most one author of *Harry Potter*;
 - (c) Anyone who authored *Harry Potter* is identical to J.K. Rowling
 - **Equivalently:** Exactly one person authored *Harry Potter*, and that person is J.K. Rowling
 - It is now clear that (2) means something very different from (1)
 - (1) is just a statement of identity
 - (2) includes a statement of identity, but also includes a lot of descriptive content

Indirect Contexts

- (1) Sharon wonders whether J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling
 - (2) Sharon wonders whether the author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling
- (1) is false and (2) is true, but given Millianism, that would be impossible if 'the author of *Harry Potter*' were a singular term
 - 'The author of *Harry Potter*' would mean the same thing as 'J.K. Rowling'
 - So (2) would mean the same thing as (1)

Indirect Contexts — SOLVED

- (1) Sharon wonders whether J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling
- (2) Sharon wonders whether the author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling

- On Russell's analysis, (2) becomes:

Sharon wonders whether: exactly one person authored *Harry Potter*, and that person is J.K. Rowling

- It is easy to see how Sharon might wonder that without wondering whether J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling!

Negative Existentials

- (1) The present King of France does not exist
 - If 'the present King of France' were a singular term then, given Millianism, (1) would be meaningless
 - 'The present King of France' wouldn't refer to anything, and according to Millianism, terms which do not refer to anything don't mean anything
 - More generally, no sentence of the form 'The F does not exist' could be true
 - Either 'the F ' refers to something, or it doesn't
 - If it does, then 'The F does not exist' is false
 - If it doesn't, then 'The F does not exist' is meaningless
 - **But that is absurd! (1) is clearly true!**

Negative Existentials

- (1) The present King of France does not exist
 - Russell used his Theory of Definite Descriptions to solve this problem, but we must take care explaining exactly how
 - If we straightforwardly apply the theory to (1), we get:
 - (a) There is at least one present king of France; and
 - (b) There is at most one present king of France; and
 - (c) Anyone who is a present king of France doesn't exist

Negative Existentials

- (1) The present King of France does not exist
 - Russell used his Theory of Definite Descriptions to solve this problem, but we must take care explaining exactly how
 - If we straightforwardly apply the theory to (1), we get:
 - (a) **There is at least one present king of France;** and
 - (b) There is at most one present king of France; and
 - (c) Anyone who is a present king of France doesn't exist
 - On this analysis, (1) is false, because (a) is false
 - But that is obviously wrong: **(1) is true!!!**

Negative Existentials — SOLVED

(1) The present King of France does not exist

- The mistake is to think that 'exists' is an ordinary predicate, like 'is wise' or 'is alive'
- Following Frege, Russell said that existence is really expressed by the quantifiers
 - Horses exist $\Rightarrow \exists x(x \text{ is a horse})$
 - Socrates exists $\Rightarrow \exists x(\text{Socrates} = x)$
- This led Russell to analyse (1) as:
 - It is not the case that: there is at least one present king of France and there is at most one king of France
 - **Equivalently:** It is not the case that there is exactly one present king of France
- This sentence is true, just as it should be

The Law of the Excluded Middle

- This last puzzle is a problem for anyone who thinks that definite descriptions are terms, whether or not they accept Millianism
- Consider these two sentences:
 - (1) The present King of France is bald
 - (2) The present King of France is not bald
- Sentence (1) is not true, and (2) doesn't seem to be true either
 - If you drew up a list of all the bald people and a list of all the not-bald people, the present King of France wouldn't appear on either list

The Law of the Excluded Middle

- (1) The present King of France is bald
 - (2) The present King of France is not bald
- But if 'the present King of France' is a singular term, then (1) is of the form ' Fa ', and (2) is of the form ' $\sim Fa$ '
 - It is generally thought that the following is a logical law:
 $Fa \vee \sim Fa$
 - This is just a special case of the **Law of the Excluded Middle**: $P \vee \sim P$
 - Given this law, one of (1) and (2) must be true!

The Law of the Excluded Middle — SOLVED

- (1) The present King of France is bald
 - (2) The present King of France is not bald
- Russell's theory re-writes (1) as:
 - (a) There is at least one present king of France; and
 - (b) There is at most one present king of France; and
 - (c) Anyone who is a present king of France is bald
 - This sentence is false, because (a) is false
 - What about (2)?

The Law of the Excluded Middle — SOLVED

- (1) The present King of France is bald
- (2) The present King of France is not bald
 - Russell says that (2) is ambiguous
 - On one reading, (2) mean this:
 - (a) There is at least one present king of France; and
 - (b) There is at most one present king of France; and
 - (c) Anyone who is a present king of France is not bald
 - If this is what (2) means, then it is false, but that doesn't violate the Law of the Excluded Middle
 - On this reading, (2) isn't really the negation of (1)!

The Law of the Excluded Middle — SOLVED

(1) The present King of France is bald

(2) The present King of France is not bald

- To get the negation of (1), we need to read (2) as:

It is not the case that:

(a) There is at least one present king of France; and

(b) There is at most one present king of France; and

(c) Anyone who is a present king of France is bald

- On this reading, (2) is true!
 - (2) is the negation of a conjunction, and so is true if at least one of the conjuncts is false
 - (a) is false, so (2) is true

A Scope Ambiguity

- We can formalise 'The present King of France is bald' as:
 - (i) $\exists x(Fx \& \forall y(Fy \supset y = x) \& Gx)$
- We can formalise the difference between the two readings of 'The present King of France is not bald' like this:
 - (ii) $\exists x(Fx \& \forall y(Fy \supset y = x) \& \sim Gx)$
 - (iii) $\sim \exists x(Fx \& \forall y(Fy \supset y = x) \& Gx)$
- The difference between (ii) and (iii) is a difference over the scope of the negation sign, \sim
 - In (iii), \sim has **wide scope**: it applies to the whole sentence
 - In (ii), \sim has **narrow scope**: it applies only to the formula Gx
- It is a virtue of Russell's theory that it allows us to mark this scope ambiguity so clearly

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Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Strawson versus Russell

- Strawson strongly objected to Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions in his famous paper 'On referring'
- Strawson thought that Russell was wrong about how we use definite descriptions:
 - Definite descriptions **are** singular terms
 - We use definite descriptions to **refer** to things
 - When I say 'The author of *Harry Potter* is very rich', I refer to J.K. Rowling with 'the author of *Harry Potter*', and I say of her that she is very rich

Strawson on Reference Failure

(1) The present King of France is bald

- According to Russell, (1) is false, but according to Strawson, it is **neither** true **nor** false
- If you assert (1), you are trying to refer to someone with 'the present King of France', and say of them that they are bald
- What you say is true just in case you referred to someone bald, and false just in case you referred to someone who isn't bald
- But since there is no present King of France, you don't refer to anyone, and so you haven't said anything true or false

Presupposition Failure

- In Strawson's terminology, saying that 'The present King of France is bald' **presupposes** that there is a present king of France
- If there is no present king of France, then your attempt to say something, true or false, is unsuccessful
 - If ' P ' logically entails ' Q ', then if ' Q ' is false then ' P ' is false
 - If ' P ' presupposes ' Q ', then if ' Q ' is false then ' P ' is neither true nor false

Strawson's Case for his View

- According to Strawson, his view of how definite descriptions work is confirmed by how people actually speak
- If someone came up to you and said, in all seriousness, 'The present King of France is bald', you are unlikely to say, 'No, that's false'
- You are more likely to say something like, 'I think you're confused: there is no present king of France!'
- Strawson takes this as evidence that 'The present King of France is bald' **presupposes** that there is a present king of France
 - If there is no present king of France, then when someone says 'The present King of France is bald', they fail to say anything true or false

Maxims of Conversation

- We can defend Russell, but we need to introduce some important ideas about conversation
- **Basic Idea:** Conversation is a co-operative activity guided by maxims (rules-of-thumb) that speakers are sensitive to
- There's more to using declarative sentences than following a maxim like:
 - It's OK to assert a sentence whenever you know it's true

Maxims of Conversation

- Imagine someone asked you:
 - Have you stopped torturing animals?
- Assuming you have never tortured animals, the right answer to this question is: No!
 - You never started torturing animals, so you can't stop now
- But **no one** would just answer 'No' and leave it there, even though that is the right answer

The Maxim of Quantity

- It is hard to say exactly what the maxims of conversation are, but Grice made an excellent start in his *Studies in the Way of Words*, Chapter 2
- Grice suggested that one of the maxims we follow is the **Maxim of Quantity**
 - Be as informative as is appropriate to the conversation
- A maxim like this would explain why we wouldn't just say 'No' to 'Have you stopped torturing animals?'
 - 'No, I haven't stopped' is true if you never started torturing animals, but it is **also** true if you did start but never stopped
 - It is much more informative to say 'I never started torturing animals!'

Back to Russell and Strawson

- Strawson is right that if someone said 'The present King of France is bald', we probably wouldn't say 'That's false'
- But that doesn't mean it **isn't** false: we can use the Maxim of Quantity to explain why we might want to give a different answer

Back to Russell and Strawson

- According to Russell, 'The present King of France is bald' is equivalent to: There is exactly one present King of France, and he is bald
- That sentence would be false in any of the following scenarios:
 - (a) There is no present king of France
 - (b) There is more than one present king of France
 - (c) There is exactly one present king of France, but he has a lush head of hair
- So just saying 'That's false' isn't very informative: it doesn't specify which of these scenarios we are in
- It is much more informative to come out and say: There is no present king of France

Choosing between Russell and Strawson

- How should we choose between Russell and Strawson?
- There are cases which Russell can deal with and Strawson cannot
- Take the case of Negative Existentials again:
 - (1) The present King of France does not exist
- This sentence seems true, and that is the verdict of Russell's theory; but Strawson's theory says that (1) is neither true nor false
- This gives us reason to prefer Russell's theory to Strawson's

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Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Introducing Donnellan's Distinction

- In 'Reference and definite descriptions', Donnellan argued that Russell and Strawson both got things a bit right about definite descriptions, and both got things a bit wrong about them too
- Donnellan said that there were two different ways of using a definite description
- **The Attributive Use**
 - When you use 'the F ' attributively in 'The F is G ', you are using it to say that whatever is the F is G
- **The Referential Use**
 - When you use 'the F ' referentially in 'The F is G ', you are referring to something with 'the F ', and then saying of it that it is G

An Example of the Attributive Use

- You are a detective at the scene of a gruesome death
- You are confident that Smith was murdered, but you have no idea who did it
- The scene is so disturbing that you say: Smith's murderer is insane
- This is a paradigm example of the **attributive use** of 'Smith's murderer' (i.e. 'the murderer of Smith')
- You are simply saying that whoever murdered Smith is insane

An Example of the Referential Use

- Jones is in court, being tried for Smith's murderer
- You observe Jones, and see him act in some very peculiar ways
- You nudge the person next to you, point at Jones and say:
Smith's murderer is insane
- This is a paradigm example of the **referential use** of 'Smith's murderer'
- You are using 'Smith's murderer' to refer to Jones, and then saying of Jones that he is insane

Back to Russell and Strawson

- To a certain extent, Donnellan thinks that Russell and Strawson are talking past each other
 - Russell is offering a theory of the attributive use of descriptions
 - Strawson is offering a theory of the referential use
 - They both make the mistake of thinking that they are offering a theory of the **only** way to use definite descriptions
- However, Donnellan also thought that Strawson was wrong about how the referential use of definite descriptions works

Disagreeing with Strawson

- According to Strawson, you cannot use 'the F ' to refer to something unless that thing is F (and nothing else is F)
 - If there is no present King of France, then you cannot refer to anything with 'the present King of France'
- But Donnellan thinks that this is a mistake: you can refer to something with 'the F ', even if that thing is not F

Example 1

- Think again of the courtroom case:
 - Jones is on trial for Smith's murder
 - Jones is acting oddly
 - You nudge your friend, point to Jones and say 'Smith's murderer is insane'
- Suppose now that Jones is in fact innocent: he did not kill Smith
- Donnellan thinks that you still referred to Jones with 'Smith's murderer'
- What you said is still true if (and only if) Jones is insane

Example 2

- You are at a party, and see a man drinking from a martini glass
- You nudge your friend, gesture at the man, and say: The man drinking a martini looks interesting
- It turns out that the man is drinking water from his martini glass
- Donnellan thinks that you still referred to that man when you used 'the man drinking a martini'
- What you said is still true if (and only if) that man looks interesting

Does this Refute Russell?

- Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions seems important, but does it really undermine Russell's theory?
- At first it might seem like it does, but in a famous paper called 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference', Saul Kripke argued that it does not
- To explain why, we need to introduce some more ideas

Some Examples of the Basic Idea

- Sometimes people **say** one thing, and **mean** another
- This can sometimes be on purpose:
 - Speaker A asks, 'Is Sartre a good philosopher?', speaker B tactfully replies, 'He is a good playwright'
 - Speaker B has managed to convey that Sartre is not a good philosopher, but that's not the literal meaning of the sentence she used
- Sometimes it can be an accident
 - You have been looking for a book, find it on a dresser, and want to tell your friend where you found it
 - You accidentally say 'The book was on a table', but the person you are talking to knows all about the furniture in the room, and immediately guesses what you meant

Speaker-Meaning and Sentence-Meaning

- Call the literal meaning of a sentence: **sentence-meaning**
- Call the claim someone is trying to express by using a sentence: **speaker-meaning**
- The point of the previous example is that speaker-meaning and sentence-meaning can come apart
- Kripke's suggestion was that Russell gave a correct account of the sentence-meaning of sentences of the form 'The *F* is *G*'
- Donnellan's referential uses are just examples where the speaker-meaning and the sentence-meaning were different

Back to the Murder Case

- Suppose again you are looking at Jones act oddly in the courtroom, and say 'Smith's murderer is insane'
- Jones is actually insane, but he is also innocent; Smith's real murderer got away with it, and is perfectly sane
- Kripke's idea is that the literal sentence-meaning of 'Smith's murderer is insane' is exactly what Russell said:
 - Exactly one person murdered Smith, and that person is insane
- So on the literal sentence-meaning, what you said is false
- However, what you were trying to convey was that Jones is insane; that was the speaker-meaning of what you said

Kripke's Defence of Russell

- If Kripke is right, then Donnellan's claim that there are two ways of using definite descriptions is a little misleading
- There is one **correct** way of using definite descriptions: Russell's ways
- However, people very often speak incorrectly, sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident
- When someone uses a definite description incorrectly, we have to try to figure out what they were trying to refer to: that is the speaker-reference
- But why should we agree with Kripke?

Kripke's Argument

- Imagine a language in which definite descriptions really do work in the way that Russell says
 - The F is $G \Rightarrow$ There is exactly one F , and it is G
- Speakers of this language will still make the same mistakes as we do
 - If a speaker wrongly thinks that Jones murdered Smith, they will still use 'Smith's murderer' when they want to speak about Jones
- So it seems that people using that language would speak **in exactly the same way** as we speak
- So that's good evidence that that is the language we actually speak!

Russell on Definite Descriptions

Introduction

Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

Four Puzzles

Strawson on Referring

Donnellan's Referential/Attributive Distinction

Definite Descriptions in Disguise

Summary: Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

- According to Russell, 'The F is G ' should be analysed as:
 - (a) There is at least one F ; and
 - (b) There is at most one F ; and
 - (c) All F s are G s
- This is a very resilient analysis, and seems to survive attacks from both Strawson and Donnellan
- Russell also claims that this analysis solves four puzzles

Summary: The Four Puzzles

- **Informative Identities**

- ‘The author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling’ is informative, but ‘J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling’ is not

- **Indirect Contexts**

- ‘Sharon wonders whether the author of *Harry Potter* = J.K. Rowling’ can be true even when ‘Sharon wonders whether J.K. Rowling = J.K. Rowling’ is not

- **Negative Existentials**

- ‘The present King of France does not exist’ is true, even though ‘the present King of France’ doesn’t pick anyone out

- **The Law of the Excluded Middle**

- ‘The present King of France is bald’ isn’t true, but neither is ‘The present King of France is not bald’

But Hold On!

- Russell shows that all four of these problems disappear when we apply his analysis to the definite descriptions they contain
- **BUT HOLD ON:** We can construct versions of these problems *without* using definite descriptions!

The Four Puzzles, without Definite Descriptions

- **Informative Identities**

- ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ is informative, but ‘Hesperus = Hesperus’ is not

- **Indirect Contexts**

- ‘Sharon wonders whether Hesperus = Phosphorus’ can be true even when ‘Sharon wonders whether Hesperus = Hesperus’ is not

- **Negative Existentials**

- ‘Vulcan does not exist’ is true, even though ‘Vulcan’ doesn’t pick anyone out

- **The Law of the Excluded Middle**

- ‘Vulcan orbits the Sun’ isn’t true, but ‘Vulcan does not orbit the Sun’ doesn’t look true either

Disguised Definite Descriptions

- Russell's solution was to say that ordinary proper names are really abbreviations for definite descriptions
 - Hesperus \Rightarrow the brightest object in the evening sky
 - Phosphorus \Rightarrow the brightest object in the morning sky
 - Vulcan \Rightarrow the planet which causes the perturbation in Mercury's orbit
- Once these proper names are analysed as definite descriptions, we can apply Russell's solution to the problems they get involved in
- However, this is a **very** controversial view of how names work, and next week we will look at Kripke's famous arguments against it

Tomorrow's Seminar

- The reading for tomorrow's seminar is:
 - Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Chapter 16
 - Donnellan, 'Reference and definite descriptions'
- The Russell chapter is a clear explanation of the Theory of Definite Descriptions, and the paper by Donnellan presents the attributive/referential distinction
- Access to both of these can be found on the VLE Reading List

Next Week's Lecture and Seminar

- For next week's lecture, read:
 - Kemp, *What is this thing called Philosophy of Language?*, Chapter 4, pp. 54–60
- For next week's seminar, read:
 - Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture II
- Access to this lecture can be found on the VLE Reading List