The Short Long Life of Russell's *Denoting Concepts*

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RESUMEN

El trabajo se centra en la Teoría de los Conceptos Denotativos de Russell [TDC], con el objeto de ver por qué la adopta y la abandona después rápidamente. Respecto a la TDC, se detectan tres tipos de problemas: ontológicos (la denotación de los conceptos denotativos vacíos), lógicos (la regresión infinita del significado en el caso de los conceptos denotativos) y epistemológicos (la relación entre conceptos denotativos y conocimiento directo). Discutiremos aquí solamente los dos últimos problemas. En la primera parte se discuten las dificultades lógicas internas a la TDC, mientras que en la segunda se analiza la conexión entre conceptos denotativos y el PoA.[1]

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Russell's *Theory of Denoting Concepts* [TDC], to see why he did both adopt and very soon abandon it. With regard to TDC, I detect three kinds of problems: ontological (the denotation of empty denoting concepts), logical (the infinite regress of meaning in the case of denoting concepts) and epistemological (the relation between denoting concepts and acquaintance). I discuss here only the last two problems. In the first part I discuss the inner logical difficulty of TDC, whereas in the second part I analyze the connection of denoting concepts with the *Principle of Acquaintance* [PoA].[2]

I. THE *LOGICAL* DIFFICULTY OF TDC

Let's begin with Russell's jungle of *terms*.

> Whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition, or can be counted as one, I call a term. This, then, is the widest word in the philosophical vocabulary. I shall use it as synonymous with it the words unit, individual, and entity. […] A man, a moment, a number, a class, a relation, a chimera, or anything else that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term [Russell (1903), p. 43].

I call a term characterized in this way T1. What is important in this characterization is the fact that such a term can be 'counted as one' and thus, because of its unity as an object (of thought), is considered an actual unit or a

whole. But "it seems undeniable that every constituent of every proposition can be counted as one, and that no proposition contains less than two constituents" [Russell (1903), p. 44]. So, every constituent of a proposition is a T1, and no proposition has less than two T1 constituents. Note that T1 is not a linguistic entity, but an ontological one, and Russell endorsed at that time (when he wrote the *Principles*) the view that language and the reality are strongly correlated and share the same logical structure.[3] Wittgenstein similarly thought that "*the limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" [*Tractatus*, 5.6].

For Russell a *proposition* is not merely a linguistic entity, but primarily a logical and ontological unit. A sentence contains words and expresses a proposition. Both sentence and proposition share the same logical structure. On this view, the proposition is constituted by the denotation of the words that occur in the corresponding sentence. Further, there are two different types of T1: things and concepts.

> Among terms, it is possible to distinguish two kinds, which I shall call respectively things and concepts. The former are the terms indicated by proper names, the latter those indicated by all other words [Russell (1903), p. 44].

So far, so good, but a different kind of term will be soon introduced:

> I shall speak of the *terms* of a proposition as those terms, however numerous, which occur in a proposition and may be regarded as subjects about which the proposition is. It is a characteristic of the terms of a proposition that any one of them may be replaced by any other entity without our ceasing to have a proposition. Thus we shall say that 'Socrates is human' is a proposition having only one term; of the remaining components of the proposition, one is the verb, the other the *predicate*. […] Predicates are concepts, other than verbs, which occur in propositions having only one term or subject [Russell (1903), p. 45].

I call a term characterized in this way T2. Again, this is not a linguistic entity, but an ontological one. Any meaningful sentence has a subject and asserts something about this subject. Its subject is an object characterized by the corresponding sentence which contains the name of this object. The sentence is about it and this notion of 'aboutness'[4] plays a crucial role here. Being about an object, the sentence will have a denotation, which is in fact the proposition asserted by the sentence. The subject of the sentence is a constituent of the corresponding asserted proposition.

The distinction between T1 and T2 cannot be found explicitly in Russell's *Principles*, but it is important because without it we obtain a contradiction. In the paragraph quoted above, Russell says explicitly that 'Socrates is human' has as proposition only one term (as T2), namely Socrates, whereas, as we saw previously, since all of the following elements <Socrates, is, human> can be counted as one, then all of them are terms (as T1) as well. But then, 'hu-

man' as a concept is a term and at the same time is not. The contradiction can be simply dismissed by recognizing that we are in fact employing two kinds of terms: T1 and T2, and thus 'human' is a term (as T1), but it is not a term (as T2). The distinction is important because it makes explicit that certain entities, though they are T1 entities, cannot be made to be logical subjects, namely terms in the sense of T2. This will constitute a serious difficulty of TDC. This problem is already acknowledged in the *Principles*, when Russell considered the question 'what logical difference is expressed by the difference of grammatical form'. Here, there is an extended discussion about the difference between "Caesar died" and "the death of Caesar", and the passage ends with the conclusion that: "the contradiction which was to have been avoided, of an entity which cannot be made a logical subject, appears to have here become inevitable. This difficulty, which seems to be inherent in the very nature of truth and falsehood, is one with which I do not know how to deal satisfactorily. […] I therefore leave this question to the logicians with the above brief indication of a difficulty" [Russell (1903), pp. 48-9]. Of course, what Russell called here 'contradiction' doesn't refer to the internal difficulty that urged us to introduce the distinction between T1 and T2, but to what will be later elaborated (in *On Denoting*) as a compelling argument [GEA[5]] against his own theory of denoting concepts [TDC] endorsed at the time of *Principles*. Using the distinction between T1 and T2 we can see now clearly why concepts (mainly adjectives and verbs), if they do not occur as subjects, are terms (T1) *qua* concepts, but not terms (T2) as constituents of the propositions asserted by the initial sentence.

Besides this distinction, I will employ in my analysis another useful one, borrowed from [Demopoulos (1999)], that between the 'proposition *expressed*' and the 'proposition *asserted*'.[6]

> The propositional constituents we 'know' when we understand the sentence belong to the proposition expressed; the constituents of the actual state of affairs, the state of affairs which obtains if the sentence is true, belong to the proposition asserted [Demopoulos (1999), p. 442]. [7]

These distinctions (T1/T2 terms and expressed/asserted propositions) are not useful only *per se*, clarifying a good part of Russell's picture, but they can be successfully employed in showing why some interpretations of Russell's work are wrong or at least unclear. For example, Harold Noonan is considering two arguments against TDC: the first is that this theory is incompatible with PoA, and the second is "the argument that denoting concepts, if they are distinct from their denotations, cannot be terms, since they can never be spoken of at all, either by name or by description" [Noonan (1996), p. 82]. Since I will discuss extensively the first argument in the second part of the paper, I will defer its analysis and I presently consider the second one.

In the light of the previous distinctions, we can see that here there are in fact two distinct questions: whether or not denoting concepts are terms in T1 sense and, similarly, whether or not they are T2 terms. The answer to the first question is that, since denoting concepts are concepts, and all concepts are terms in T1 sense, then they, obviously, always count as T1 terms. With regard to the second question, which involves the meaning-denotation distinction, we must first understand what a denoting concept is.

Russell's explicit characterization of denoting concepts is that a concept "*denotes* when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept" [Russell (1903), p. 53]. Whenever we have a sentence containing a *denoting phrase*, the corresponding proposition expressed by it contains a *denoting concept* (called also by Russell 'denoting meaning', or later 'denoting complex'), whereas the proposition asserted contains the *denotation* of this denoting concept, namely a particular entity to which the denoting concept refers. A denoting concept is a T2 constituent of the proposition expressed, and fails to be a T2 constituent of the proposition asserted. It fails to be a constituent of the proposition asserted only if it is *used* in the sentence which contains the corresponding denoting phrase, because, as we will see shortly, if it is only *mentioned* (by quotation marks, for example) then we are speaking about it and so the denoting concept will be a T2 constituent of the proposition expressed as well. Therefore, Noonan is quite wrong to say that denoting concepts are not terms either way. He might respond that my analysis works only when a denoting concept is distinct from its denotation, but, obviously, this happens all the time, because this is the intrinsic logical role of denoting concepts; 'they are *symbolic* in their nature' and we need them exactly in the cases when we cannot use a logically proper name to denote a certain individual. Also, citing Russell himself, of course we can speak of them and in fact this is exactly what we are doing right now.[8] However, Noonan is here right in the sense that they will never occur simultaneously as T2 constituents of both the proposition expressed and proposition asserted. This point is expressed by Cartwright as well, when he says that: "denoting concepts are never *terms of* propositions: no proposition is about any of the denoting concepts that are constituents of it. It does not follow that no proposition is about a denoting concept. It does follow, however, that no denoting concept is a term *simpliciter*" [Cartwright (1987), p. 126].

Of course, to be exactly right, Cartwright should have firstly had to distinguish between T1 and T2, and also to say not that the proposition expressed is about the proposition asserted, but that the initial sentence is about the denotation of the denoting concept, which is a term of the proposition expressed. However, it is important to notice that the same denoting concepts cannot appear simultaneously as a constituent of both the proposition expressed and the proposition asserted. Let us suppose it is a T2 term of the

proposition expressed, (when the denoting concept is *used*), then the proposition asserted contains its denotation, which presumably is distinct from the denoting concept itself. If, on the other hand, we will have the denoting concept as a constituent of the proposition asserted, that implies that the denoting concept is only *mentioned* and so in the proposition expressed we should have something that denotes our initial concept, but which surely is not the denoting concept itself.

To clarify this, let us consider now the DC captured by the definite description 'the actual president of USA' occurring as a denoting phrase in the following sentence:

(1) The actual president of USA is brave.

We have thus a denoting phrase to which corresponds in the proposition expressed a denoting concept, which has as denotation an actual existing person, namely George W. Bush. Bush is also the constituent/a term of the proposition asserted.

The entire picture can be nicely represented by the following table:

	sentence	proposition expressed	proposition asserted
T2 constituents (terms of)	denoting phrase (used)	Denoting concept (meaning)	an actual individual: G.W. Bush (denotation)

Let's consider now the following statement:

(2) "The actual president of USA" is brave.

This sentence is of course false, since a concept cannot be characterized as brave. This situation can be captured by:

	sentence	proposition expressed	proposition asserted
T2 constituents (terms of)	denoting phrase (mentioned)	the meaning of the denoting concept	a denoting concept (denotation)

Symbolically speaking, we will have thus an entire hierarchy of denoting concepts:

	sentence	proposition expressed	proposition asserted
T2 constituents (terms of)	denoting phrase	denoting concept	denotation
	C	$<C>$	$\{C\}$
	'C'	$<'C'> = <<C>>$ (the meaning of C)	$\{'C'\} = <C>$ (a denoting concept)
	'the meaning of C' = '$<'C'>$'	$<'<'C'>'> = <<<C>>>$ (the meaning of 'the meaning of C')	$\{'<'C'>'\} = <<C>>$ (a denoting concept)

So, by this mechanism, it is clear that whenever we want to speak about a denoting concept we should employ another denoting concept, which is in

fact the meaning of the initial denoting concept, and therefore we will get an infinite series of meanings. This mechanism generates two kinds of problems. One is logical: there is no functional determination of the relation between meaning and denotation, "no backward road from denotations to meanings"; the other one is epistemological: because of this infinite regressing chain of meanings we cannot explain (in accordance with PoA) how we are acquainted with denoting concepts. Since I discuss the second problem in the second part of my paper, where I focus exactly on the relation between denoting concepts and acquaintance, I will approach now only the first one.

"[T]here is no backward road from denotations to meanings, because every object can be denoted by an infinite number of different denoting phrases" [Russell (1994), p. 422]. This point is called by Russell an *inextricable tangle*, which "seems to prove that the whole distinction of meaning and denotation has been wrongly conceived" [Russell (1994), p. 422]. As we saw earlier, the problem here is that whenever we want to speak about a denoting concept, to have it as a T2 constituent in the *proposition asserted*, then in the *proposition expressed* we have to have another denoting concept, which will be in fact the meaning of our initial DC. But this meaning can be expressed by various denoting phrases, in fact an infinite number of denoting expressions. Thus, if we logically start by considering the denotation, then there is no function from denotations to denoting phrases, and since every denoting phrase has a certain meaning, then respectively we will have that there is no function from denotations to meanings either. This last point constitutes a serious problem since the relation must not be only linguistic, but it must be logical as well. Yet, as we saw previously, this relation cannot be logically captured in any satisfactory way, and thus this situation forces us to say either that they are totally disconnected (or at least there is no logical connection), or that they are not distinct at all, but one and the same thing. Neither can be properly accommodated in the TDC and thus Russell was forced to find another theory.

> [T]he relation of meaning and denotation is not merely linguistic through the phrase: there must be a logical relation involved which we express by saying that the meaning denotes the denotation. But the difficulty which confronts us is that we cannot succeed in *both* preserving the connexion of meaning and denotation *and* preventing them from being one and the same; also that the meaning cannot be got at except by means of denoting phrases [Russell (1994), p. 421].

In the light of previous discussion, it is important to note that TDC is not an incoherent or inconsistent theory [Hylton (1990) and Kremer (1994)], but an incomplete one [Noonan (1996) and Demopoulos (1999)]. It contains some intrinsic logical problems, but no contradiction. That means that perhaps somehow it can be fixed. In fact, this is exactly what Russell did by ar-

ticulating his new theory of definite descriptions. This theory contains no logical difficulties, or at least not in the sense of TDC, and also still can employ denoting phrases (definite descriptions in this case) to speak about objects with which we are not acquainted. However, it will be said that a "denoting phrase is essentially *part* of a sentence, and does not, like most single words, have any significance on its own account". Thus, in order to avoid all these logical difficulties, the central claim of the new theory will be that denoting phrases have no meaning in isolation.

Now, I conclude this part by saying that this generative mechanism, which produces an infinite hierarchy of meanings, is characterized as vicious by scholars like Hylton, whereas commentators like Kremer don't see here any objectionable regress. Russell himself didn't say anything explicitly with regard to this mechanism, and thus he left room for various interpretations; moreover, he did not characterize the mechanism as an infinite generative series of meanings either, but he had only suggested in the course of GEA that this is the intrinsic problem of TDC. However, he said in the *Principles* that:

> An infinite regress may be of two kinds. In the objectionable kind, two or more propositions join to constitute the *meaning* of some proposition; of these constituents, there is one at least whose meaning is similarly compounded; and so on *ad infinitum* […]. Thus whenever the *meaning* of a proposition is in question, an infinite regress is objectionable, since we never reach a proposition which has a definite meaning. But many infinite regresses are not of this form. If A be a proposition whose meaning is perfectly definite, and A implies B, B implies C, and so on, we have an infinite regress of a quite unobjectionable kind [Russell (1903), pp. 348-9].

With regard to this distinction Hylton says that "the infinite regress which generates the hierarchy appears to be vicious" [Hylton (1990), p. 251], whereas Kremer responds to this that "while the existence of any denoting concepts *implies* the existence of other concepts which denote them in turn, this generates only a harmless regress of implication, not a regress of analysis, since the 'higher-level' denoting concepts are not constituents of their 'lower-level' denotations" [Kremer (1994), pp. 286-7]. Thus the problem is now what kind of regress do we have here: a vicious 'regress of analysis' or a harmless 'regress of implication'? In the light of our presentation of the mechanism I would say that what we have encountered here is the vicious kind, since we reached the infinite hierarchy through the *analysis of meaning*. I also can detect here an explicit implication among propositions and this means our mechanism points to an objectionable regress.[9] Otherwise, a harmless regress would not constitute an 'inextricable tangle'; what we have here is an intrinsic incompleteness of the system, which turns to be an unavoidable fallacy of TDC.

II. THE *EPISTEMOLOGICAL* DIFFICULTY OF TDC

I will consider now the relation between denoting concepts and *acquaintance*. In the recent literature referred to in the present work, there are various positions concerning this relation, especially with regard of the role of PoA in the rejection of the TDC.

1. PoA is in *direct* conflict with TDC (Cartwright, Kremer, Noonan);
2. PoA is in *indirect* conflict with TDC (Levine, Demopoulos);
3. There is *no* substantial connection between PoA and TDC (Hylton).

I will argue for the second position,[10] even though I do not agree with Levine that: "Russell is committed to holding both that we can be acquainted with denoting concepts and that we cannot" [Levine (1998), p. 426]. I do not consider this characterization to be correct, rather, it should be said that Russell holds that from an epistemological point of view we can be acquainted with denoting concepts, but TDC provides no complete logical explanation of this fact. This point is better expressed by Demopoulos: "the problem with denoting concepts is the asymmetry to which we have called attention, the fact that although denoting concepts are objects of acquaintance, it is not possible to explain our understanding of propositions *about* them in terms of their occurrence as constituents of the proposition expressed" [Demopoulos (1999), p. 451]. However, even though I find Demopoulos' position as the most plausible, I disagree with his claim that GEA is an incomplete argument: "the fault of Grey's elegy argument is that it is incomplete, since the argument establishes only that Russell cannot see how to formulate a theory of denoting concepts which includes a satisfactory means of generating denoting concepts that denote denoting concepts. But Russell has given us no proof that he canvassed all possible options" [Demopoulos (1999), p. 450]. This point is not new in the literature since Noonan has previously expressed a similar idea: "this argument (GEA) is not successful, but the only thing wrong with it is simply that is incomplete; there are possible rejoinders to it which could be made by a defender of the distinction between denoting concept and denotation which Russell just does not consider" [Noonan (1996), pp. 70-1]. But, whereas in Noonan's case it is clear that by its incompleteness GEA becomes ineffective[11], in Demopoulos' case it is not clear at all if this makes the argument unsuitable for its purpose: the rejection of TDC. An argument may be 'incomplete' in at least two ways: in one way, the 'incompleteness' appears as fatal and concerns a logical gap in its underlying argumentative chain; in another way, an argument may be incomplete only in the sense of being 'inexplicitly' valid (for instance, by making appeal to a hidden implicit premise), but still logically correct. I may regard GEA as incomplete only utmost in the sec-

ond sense, since, as I hope that I have successfully shown in the first part, it points out clearly to an irremediable logical deficiency of TDC, and thus it has successfully fulfilled its role of rejecting TDC.

An argument that, for Russell, there is no direct conflict between PoA and TDC may be seen in the fact that by his new theory of definite descriptions he is providing only a new logical way of dealing with denoting phrases, without changing anything in his epistemology.[12] Moreover, in *On Denoting* PoA is explicitly stated and acknowledged as a fundamental principle of our knowledge of the world. But a direct conflict between PoA and TDC is an epistemological conflict, and thus the definite descriptions, as inheritors of the defunct denoting concepts, will be as well in direct conflict with PoA, as objects with which we cannot be acquainted. But something like that is not even suggested by Russell in *On Denoting*.

Let us start at the beginning and try to see what role acquaintance plays in both the acceptance and rejection of the TDC. Acquaintance plays a central role in introducing the TDC because of the simple fact that we cannot possibly be acquainted with infinite (classes of) objects. But, at least in mathematics, we have to deal with such things and to speak about them. Thus we should find a way to make them being T2 constituents of the proposition asserted. Obviously, this (epistemological) role is nicely played by denoting concepts.

> [I]t may be said that the logical purpose which is served by the theory of denoting is to enable propositions of finite complexity to deal with infinite classes of terms: this object is effected by *all, any* and *every*, and if it were not effected, every general proposition about an infinite class would have to be infinitely complex.[…] all the propositions known to us (and, it would seem, all propositions that we *can* know) are of finite complexity [Russell (1903), p. 145].

Thus, generally speaking, I agree with James Levine that the "primary reason Russell introduces denoting concepts is to explain how we can thus 'deal with' entities with which we cannot be acquainted" [Lavine (1998), p. 422]. To be acquainted with an entity means to be in a direct contact with that entity, to have an unmediated epistemological relation between a knowing mind/subject and a knowable object. This rapport constitutes a fundamental and stable point of Russell's view(s) about mind-world relation, even though the point cannot be found explicitly stated in *Principles*. So, the epistemological role of denoting concepts is to introduce in our discourse entities with which we cannot possibly be acquainted. But, in the light of PoA, that means that we should be acquainted with denoting concepts, or at least that we can possibly acquainted with them, and this will be seen by some philosophers as a crucial point in the rejection of TDC.

As I have said previously, there are some commentators (Cartwright, Kremer, Noonan…) who claim that there is a direct conflict between TDC and PoA, and this conflict constitutes a valid argument for the rejection of TDC. With regard to that, I hold in turn that even though there is a conflict between the two, the conflict is not direct and reveals not contradiction in the theory, but only an *incompleteness* of the proposed logical theory of meaning. I will consider in detail only Noonan's argumentation, the others could be reduced/assimilated to his point.

Noonan starts his argument by considering Russell's own words: "Russell notes in 'On Denoting': 'the meaning [of a denoting phrase] cannot be got at except by means of denoting phrases' [Russell (1994), p. 421], that is denoting concepts can only be spoken of by using denoting phrases. […] In short, a denoting concept, unlike all other things and concepts, cannot be spoken of by using a *proper name* in the strict Russellian sense" [Noonan (1996), p. 79]. He will conclude the argument by saying that:

> Denoting concepts, then, cannot be spoken of using Russellian proper names; and it follows directly from this that they cannot be possible objects of acquaintance — for if we could be acquainted with them we could name them, and use their names to express propositions about them. But, if so, the theory of denoting concepts is inconsistent with the Principle of Acquaintance and the explanation Russell thinks it provides of our ability to speak about the infinite is revealed as no explanation at all [Noonan (1996), pp. 80-1].

However, as Noonan himself noted: "in at least one place in 'On Fundamentals' [Russell (1994), p. 369] he refers to 'acquaintance with a denoting concept', while elsewhere [Russell (1994), p. 286] he speaks of 'a presentation of the meaning' of the phrase of the form 'an instance of *a*'. How could he have missed so obvious a point?" [Noonan (1996), pp. 80-1].

But how could Noonan have missed so obvious a point that there is no logical contradiction here? When Russell says that 'the meaning [of a denoting phrase] cannot be got at except by means of denoting phrases', he says only that the meaning of a DC cannot be *logically* accounted, that cannot be expressed (due to intrinsic problems exposed in the first part) in a totally logically satisfactory way. But by this "cannot be got" he surely doesn't mean that we cannot grasp their meaning in the sense that we are intrinsically unable to understand a denoting concept, just because we cannot possibly be acquainted with denoting concepts. On the contrary, the point is simply that we can be acquainted with them but we cannot explain this knowledge by acquaintance with the help of TDC. So, there is no direct conflict here and the problem is that the TDC is an *incomplete* theory, that it doesn't offer an explanation of our acquaintance with denoting concepts. Thus, of course, Russell will keep saying that we are acquainted with denoting concepts, because this is

exactly their role, to mediate in the cases where we lack acquaintance with certain objects. The problem is that we have here to consider clearly the line of demarcation between logic and epistemology. As Russell points out explicitly:

> I think this point important, since errors liable to arise from assimilating the logical to the epistemological order, and also, conversely, from assimilating the epistemological to the logical order [Russell (1989), p. 326].

Summing up, the problem is primarily not epistemological but logical, and concerns the impossibility to deal in a satisfactory way with denoting concepts. TDC is an incomplete theory in the sense that it fails to show us how to capture the meaning of denoting concepts. Thus we have on one hand the fact that denoting concepts are objects of acquaintance par excellence, whereas on the other hand it seems impossible to find a good logical theory to provide a coherent explanation of this epistemological fact. So, exactly because this epistemological fact cannot be logically modelled and explained, Russell had to renounce his TDC. But that doesn't mean that we have a direct conflict with PoA, but that the difficulty is logical and not epistemological. PoA plays an indirect role, in the sense that, being such a fundamental principle, it has to be fully respected and any theory that cannot entirely conform to it must be abandoned.

Now, in order to have an exhaustive analysis of the problem, two points need to be further addressed: the significant role of TDC and what Russell really meant by *meaning*. The first point will reveal the importance of denoting concepts in the economy of the *Principles*, whereas discussing the second point will clarify Russell's view about the relation between logic and epistemology.

Besides the commonly celebrated epistemological role of TDC in enabling us to deal with the infinite, we should notice with Hylton that denoting concepts have a more complex and important logical role, namely to offer an *account of generality*:

> Given Russell's purposes, then, it is crucial that he find a genuine account of generality — i.e. an account which does not simply treat general propositions as if they were singular propositions. This account is the theory of denoting. Before discussing this theory it is worth emphasizing that the issues here are crucial for Russell because they are directly connected with the central project of reducing mathematics to logic [Hylton (1990), p. 206].

Alasdair Urquhart also acknowledges this important role of denoting concepts, pointing out that in fact "most of the important definitions in the reduction of mathematics to logic are of denoting phrases" [Russell (1994), p. XXXIV]. Thus, due the centrality of TDC in the economy of the *Principles*, denoting

concepts need to be treated with the maximum possible attention. Denoting phrases, unlike all the other expressions, are said to have both meaning and denotation. But that brings us to discuss the second point, namely Russell's notion of 'meaning'.

> To have meaning, it seems to me, is a notion confusedly compounded of logical and psychological elements. *Words* all have meaning, in the simple sense that they are symbols which stand for something other than themselves. But a proposition unless it happens to be linguistic, does not contain words: it contains the entities indicated by words. Thus meaning, in the sense in which words have meaning, is irrelevant to logic. But such concepts as *a man* have meaning in another sense: they are, so to speak, symbolic in their own logical nature, because they have the property which I call *denoting*. That is to say, when a man occurs in a proposition (e.g. "I met a man in the street"), the proposition is not about the concept *a man*, but about something quite different, some actual biped denoted by the concept. Thus concepts of this kind have meaning in a non-psychological sense [Russell (1903), p. 47].

Epistemology plays for Russell an important role in the sense that offers the background for any logical account of propositional understanding. TDC is not a purely logical theory, containing some epistemological ingredients revealed by the role of *acquaintance* in the system, and also the demarcation line between logic and epistemology is not so strict and clearly presented. Recall that when Russell says that the "*logical* purpose which is served by the theory of denoting is to enable propositions of finite complexity to deal with infinite classes of terms", he is pointing out in fact to a quite explicit *epistemological* role, which is clearly presented by PoA. Thus the missing link between Russell's explicit logical account of denoting phrases and his implicit epistemology is exactly PoA. By employing PoA in "On Denoting", he makes explicit the implicit epistemology of the *Principles*. PoA forced him directly to adopt TDC and also indirectly to abandon it.

But did Russell really abandon TDC? I mean, of course that he renounced TDC as such and replaced it with the new theory (of definite descriptions), but is this new theory secured from all the threats discussed here? The reason for asking something like that is simply that in his new theory the notion of variable plays a crucial role and, as Moore noticed shortly after the publication of "On Denoting":

> You say '*all* the constituents of propositions we apprehend are entities with which we have immediate acquaintance'. Have we, then, immediate acquaintance with the variable? And what sort of entity is it? [Russell (1994), p. XXXV].

Russell's response to that is very suggestive for his awareness of the difficulties with regard to the introducing of variables in his new theory:

> I admit that the question you raise about the variable is puzzling, as are all questions about it. The view I usually incline to is that we have immediate acquaintance with the variable, but it is not an entity. Then at other times I think it is an entity, but an indeterminate one. In the former view, there is still a problem of meaning and denotation as regards the variable itself. I only profess to reduce the problem of denoting to the problem of the variable. This latter is horribly difficult, and there seem equally strong objections to all the views I have been able to think [Russell (1994), p. XXXV].

But this new problem, even important and interesting, could constitute the topic of a different paper, so our story will stop here, at least for the moment.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The *Principles* is not mainly about knowledge, but about logic, or, more accurately, about the reduction of mathematics to logic. TDC is introduced not only in accordance with PoA, but exactly because of consequences arising from it. We have direct (epistemological) contact with denoting concepts and that is a fact. The difficulty to find a suitable account for expressing logically the meaning of the denoting concept is a *logical* difficulty and not an *epistemological* one. It is like having some very basic epistemological fundamentals, and on this basis one is trying to construct a logical system, which in the end will logically contradict its premises. But we can be acquainted with denoting concepts and, exactly because of this fact, Russell cannot accept the logical consequence of its theory [TDC] that we cannot express this knowledge in a true logical way.

Yet, I think that the most general moral of the story is that in fact the project failed not because TDC *per se*, but because Russell identified[13] at the time of the *Principles* the logical structure of a proposition with its grammatical structure [see the *Preface* of the second edition of the *Principles*], a thing that will be rectified in "On Denoting". In fact, "On Denoting" marks explicitly the divorce between logic and language, in the sense, first of all, that logic and thinking does not necessarily follow the language as a transparent medium, and, secondly, that the language is more than a mere medium and is very important to deal carefully with this symbolic system. Thus, we have on one hand the importance of dissociation of language from logic[14], whereas, on the other hand, on a different level, is striking the importance of studying the language for logic[15].

APPENDIX: IS FREGE AFFECTED BY THE SAME PROBLEMS?

The response to this question seems to be 'No' because, *prima facie*, in fact Frege did not hold the PoA, since for him every meaningful linguistic

expression has both a sense and a denotation. But it is important to notice here that Frege is unaffected by Russell's argumentation against TDC not because of the lack of PoA in his system, but because of the difference of views concerning the constituents of the propositions expressed, respectively asserted. Noonan says for example that the "fatal flaw in Russell's theory of denoting concepts is precisely that feature of it which provides its sole rationale, namely, that it provides a class of exceptions to the general rule that whenever a proposition is about an entity it contains that entity". Clearly this doesn't work in Frege's case, where the object we are speaking about (the denotation) will be never a constituent of the meaning of the sentence and these things are sharply distinguished in his system.

Moreover, I would say that PoA isn't in fact incompatible with Frege's view. We should here distinguish again between logic and epistemology, and say that direct epistemological contact doesn't imply necessarily a direct logical/semantic connection. We can be acquainted with an object and still, when we are employing its name, the name will have a sense: the mode of presentation of the object itself. There is no conflict between these two different facts.

The important merit of the publication of Russell's complete works was the fact (which constitutes a stable point of agreement among the commentators) that in 'On Denoting' Russell is not attacking Frege's theory of sense and reference, as one may be inclined to hold by reading only this paper, but is critically assessing here his own theory of denoting concepts, which was fully articulated in the *Principles*. Moreover, the solution of the problem of denoting phrases ("that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning" [Russell (1994), p. 416]) is explicitly recalling Frege's formulation of the context principle.

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NOTES

[1] 'Principio del Conocimiento Directo', see note 2.
[2] By **PoA** I mean the principle expressed in "On Denoting" that "in every proposition that we can apprehend (i.e. not only in those whose truth or falsehood we can judge of, but in all that we can think about), all the constituents are really entities with which we have immediate acquaintance" [Russell (1994), p. 427].

[3] [Russell (1903), p. 42]: "The study of grammar, in my opinion, is capable of throwing far more light on philosophical questions that it is commonly supposed by philosophers".

[4] [Kremer (1994), p. 259]: "The difficulty is that the theory of denoting requires a notion of aboutness which does not reduce to *constituency*: propositions containing denoting concepts are *about* entities which are not their constituents".

[5] By GEA I mean what is commonly called among Russell's scholars the *Grey Elegy Argument* (contained in "On Denoting").

[6] In the previous sentence that 'Socrates is human', we will have that 'human' is a T2 term in the proposition *expressed*, but it is not a T2 term in proposition *asserted*; as T1, it is term in both.

[7] This point can be also found, though only partially and not explicitly presented in the form of a distinction, in [Noonan (1996), p. 75]: "what is special about denoting concepts is that they provide the only means by which we can speak about entities which are not constituents of the propositions we express. […] However, when a denoting concept occurs in a proposition where a thing can also occur […] then it does not *itself* become the subject matter of the proposition, but does somehow go proxy for something the proposition is about."

[8] "When we wish to speak about the *meaning* of a denoting phrase, as opposed to its *denotation*, the natural mode of doing so is by inverted commas" [Russell (1994), p. 421].

[9] "[…] the very possibility of one case of denoting requires another, and so on without end. At no stage do we have any reason to believe that denoting is indeed possible; the attempt to resolve our doubts in any one case only leads us to another case of the same sort, for which the same doubts arise" [Hylton (1990), p. 251].

[10] I will explicitly deal with the first point later, whereas the last point will be implicitly rejected by providing arguments in favour of the second point.

[11] However, by the end of his paper it seems that he will draw back this allegation, recognizing that in GEA we may only encounter the hidden premise way: "the only point, then, in the reconstruction of Russell's argument suggested which cannot be found explicitly or implicitly made in either 'On Fundamentals' or 'On Denoting' is the sixth, that all the possible ways in which denoting concepts might be made the subjects of propositions have been considered. *But, of course, this is just the sort of point that is likely to occur merely as a suppressed premiss*" [Noonan (1996), pp. 95-6]; my emphasis in the original text.

[12] "There is remarkably little in Russell's philosophy that remains immune from criticism or revision by Russell himself. One of the few constants in Russell's early views is his doctrine of acquaintance" [Clark (1981), p. 231].

[13] "Russell conceived of objects literally as constituents of propositions. But Russell did not at this time see the structure of propositions as different from the structure of the sentences that express them" [Potter (2000), p. 121].

[14] "In Chapter IV of the *Principles* it is said that 'every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning'; […] This way of understanding language turned out to be mistaken" [Russell (1903), p. X].

15 "Logical constants, therefore, if we are to be able to say anything definite about them, must be treated as part of the language, not as part of what language

speaks about. In this way, logic becomes much more linguistic than I believed it to be at the time when I wrote the *Principles*" [Russell (1903), p. XI].

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