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George IV´s Curiosity: a Challenge for the Russellian

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I pose a problem for Russell's analysis in "On Denoting" of the propositions expressed by attitude ascription sentences in which whether-clauses are embedded. My contention is that Russell's analysis faces a difficulty overlooked by him. My argument proceeds as follows. I note that Russell's proposed rendering does capture, by intuitive standards, what we normally mean by an utterance of a sentence differing from the one in Russell's examples in a slight but very significant way, namely by having the adjective 'only' inserted after the definite article. Since the propositions expressed by the sentence in Russell's example and by the variant I offer may differ in truth-value, it follows that the Russellian treatment of such clauses may be incorrect.

KEYWORDS
Attitude ascriptions. Russell. Semantics. Theory of descriptions. Whether-clauses.

RESUMO
Neste artigo, apresentamos um problema para a análise de Russell em "On Denoting" das proposições expressas em atribuições de crenças contendo orações substantivas iniciadas com *se.* Nossa tese é a de que a análise de Russell padece de uma dificuldade da qual ele não se dá conta. Nosso argumento avança como segue. Notamos que a proposta de Russell de fato capta, consoante intuições normais, o que normalmente pretendemos expressar com a emissão de uma oração diversa daquela no exemplo de Russell de uma maneira ligeira mas significativa, a saber por ter o adjetivo 'único' inserido depois do artigo definido. Visto que as proposições expressas pela oração no exemplo de Russell e variante que propomos podem diferir em valor de verdade, segue-se que o tratamento de Russell para tais orações pode ser incorreto.

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Atribuições de crenças. Russell. Semântica. Teoria das descrições. Orações-*se.*

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I

In "On Denoting" (1905) Bertrand Russell famously brings his theory of definite descriptions to bear on the solution of some logical puzzles. In this paper I am concerned to expose what I take to be serious difficulties in Russell´s use of his theory in connection with the problem posed by co-denoting expressions within the embedded ´whether´- clauses of attitude ascriptions. I suspect that my critique of Russell will have something of a strawsonian flavor, since, like Strawson, I am also intent on showing that Russell´s theory falls short of doing justice to some robust intuitions of ordinary speakers. But before I get to that, let us have a look at how Russell himself states the problem:

> If *a* is identical with *b*, whatever is true of the 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 of *Waverley*; and in fact Scott *was* the author of *Waverley.* Hence we may substitute *Scott* for *the author of Waverley*, and thereby prove that George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott. Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe. (Russell, 1905, p. 202)

Russell´s well-known solution to the puzzle comes about as a by-product of his claim that definite descriptions such as ´the author of *Waverley*' are not at all logically on a par with ordinary proper names such as ´Scott.´ Unlike proper names, definite descriptions cannot, on Russell´s view, be regarded as standing for

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constituents of propositions expressed by sentences containing them.[1]

According to Russell's theory, a definite description is not a simple symbol whose job is to refer to or stand for some entity. As far as simple sentences are concerned, Russell´s Theory of Descriptions may well have quite a lot to recommend it on the logical front. This is especially clear in connection with vacuous, i.e. non-denoting, descriptions, as exemplified by sentences like "The present King of France is bald."

The proposition expressed by a such sentence is notoriously hard to analyze on the assumption that ´the present King of France´ is a referential device. Of rather greater importance for my present purposes, however, is the fact that in "On Denoting" Russell also goes on to use the machinery of his Theory of Descriptions in the course of providing the logical analysis of identity statements in which the copula is flanked on one side by an ordinary proper name and by a definite description on the other side. Let one such sentence be

(1) Scott was the author of *Waverley*.

There is more than one way of expressing in plain English the logical analysis advocated by Russell for a sentence like (1). For convenience, I will use a rendering of (1) which occurs quite frequently in the literature – a rendering to which Russell would not object, as we shall see:

[1] For current purposes, I am ignoring Russell´s further suggestion, expressed elsewhere, that ordinary proper names are not strictly speaking names at all, from a logical point of view.

(1) ' One and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott.

Since on Russell´s Theory, definite descriptions, unlike ordinary proper names, are not really terms standing for anything – but are rather dissolved, as it were, on a proper logical analysis of propositions expressed by sentences containing them – it is only to be expected that Russell should avail himself of the same general strategy in connection with the substitutivity puzzle quoted at the beginning of this essay. For if, unlike ´Scott´, ´the author of *Waverley*' is not another name or term standing for Scott, it is simply illegitimate to expect that truth value should be preserved if we substitute 'Scott' for 'the author of *Waverley*' in

(2) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*

In a Russellian analysis of the above, 'the author of *Waverley*' is not regarded as a term at all. Hence, it is not a co-referential term that the proper name 'Scott' could be substituted for *salva veritate*. The whole substitutivity problem is sidestepped.

This might seem like a highly desirable feature of Russell´s Theory. But I find his proposed treatment of the proposition expressed by (2) quite unsatisfactory. According to Russell, what we "normally mean" (*op. cit.* p.205) by (2) may be expressed as follows:

(2)' George IV wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott. [2]

[2] It is at once evident that in analysing (2) as (2)', Russell has (1) be rendered as (1)' within the scope of his whether-clause.

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Now, it is of course true to say that Russell presents (2)' as the logical analysis of (2) whenever 'the author of *Waverley*' has a *secondary* occurrence. In modern terms, we would put the same point by saying that 'the author of *Waverley*' is taken to have narrow scope – to be within the scope of 'George IV wished to know whether…'

It is of course true to say that Russell does envisage another wide scope, or *de re*, analysis of (2), namely (2)'' "One and only one man wrote *Waverley*, and George IV wished to know whether Scott was that man". In his terms, 'the author of *Waverley*' is said to have a *primary* occurrence in (2)''

I mention this in passing, only to set it aside. For this paper is solely concerned with the sort of narrow scope analysis found in connection with attitude ascriptions interpreted *de dicto*, which is surely the interpretation Russell has in mind when treating of what we "normally mean" by (2) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*". Clearly what is at stake here is George IV's relation to a certain *dictum*, namely (1) "Scott was the author of *Waverley*". George IV wished to know if this particular *dictum* expressed a truth or a falsehood.

That having been said, I do not think that (2)' provides an acceptable logical analysis of (2). In the next section, I will set out to argue my case.

II

One could envisage the following sort of scenario concerning George IV´s curiosity about the authorship

of *Waverley.* His curiosity could have been prompted by some (possibly malicious) rumor. Let us suppose that some people in George IV´s entourage have advanced the bold claim that *Waverley* – a massive work – was not put together by Sir Walter Scott alone and that Scott actually worked alongside a number of other men, with each doing his share in the job of writing *Waverley*. If their conjecture is correct, Scott was not the *only* author of *Waverley*, even though he tried to pass off as the one person who did all the work.

Surely none of the many translators whose efforts were needed for the creation of the King James Version of the Bible can with any propriety be referred to as the only translator of the King James Bible. In the setting described above, Scott would similarly not be entitled to be referred to as the only author of *Waverley*, and, indeed, as *the* author of *Waverley.*

Now it is not hard to imagine that George IV would have felt intrigued and puzzled as soon as the hypothesis of multiple authorship of *Waverley* had been advanced. He would likely wonder if one of the most prominent writers of his age had been capable of deceit. We might express his curiosity as follows:

(3) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*

The Russellian rendering provided by "George IV wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott", as in (2)' above, seems to do a pretty nice job of expressing what we normally mean when we utter (3). While wishing to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*, the thought

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crossing George IV´s mind might well have been: "Is it true that only one man, the famed Scott, wrote *Waverley*?" If so, George IV really wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and (whether) that man was Scott. The Russellian rendering of (1) "Scott was the author of *Waverley*", namely (1)' "One and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott", gives us the content of the proposition that Russell could regard as the object of the prepositional attitude in which George IV figures as the agent of the attitude.

But we should now recall that Russell never intended for (2)' "George IV wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott" to give the underlying logical form of (3) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*" in the special scenario envisaged above – one in which the multiple authorship of *Waverley* presents itself as a distinct possibility. Instead, he claims that (2)' presents us with the true logical form of (2) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*". And this is something I wish to call into question.

It is clear from the way in which Russell sets up his example that George IV is not really in the least anxious to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley*. After all, he presents his rendering as an elucidation of what we "normally mean" by (2). As it turns out, when it comes to what we normally mean by (2), it is ordinarily the case – farfetched scenarios set aside – that it is *a given* that some particular man or other

wrote *Waverley*. The question in George IV´s mind pertains exclusively to the to identity of this particular man. One possibility is that Scott authored the work in question. George IV wonders if this is indeed the case, and quite simply wants to know if Scott was the author of *Waverley.* The single authorship of *Waverley* is, as perhaps Strawson would have maintained, *assumed* rather than *inquired into.* On simple intuitive grounds, I think that Russell is simply wrong to claim that (2)' expresses what we "normally mean" when we utter (2). There seems to be something decidedly odd in the suggestion that (2)' gives us the proper logical analysis of (2), although it would seem fine if it had been meant to capture what is expressed by an utterance of (3) in the somewhat far-fetched type of situation I described in the preceding.

In the following section I intend to have a look at the challenge which the foregoing considerations may pose for supporters of Russell´s Theory of Descriptions.

III

For the sake of convenience, let us put (2) and (3) side by side and try to cast some light on what sort of comparison one may make between them.

(2) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley.*

(3) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley.*

I have tried to argue that there is a very clear distinction, on an intuitive level, between (2) and (3) and that Russell´s logical analysis does a good job of handling

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(3) but a rather poor job of handling (2). Russell, it will be recalled, claims in "Descriptions", Chapter 16 of *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, that the definite article when used in singular noun phrases carries "an implication of uniqueness" (Russell, 1919, p. 74). This being the case, I cannot help suspecting that Russell´s theory would make no room for distinct logical analyses of (2) and (3). The adjective *only* would turn out to be a superfluous item in (3), whose only purpose would seem to be that of making the sentence more emphatic. Thus, it could well follow from Russell´s Theory of Descriptions that (2) and (3) are semantically identical in that both sentences encode the same proposition, on Russell´s proposed analyses. Yet, I, for one, have a pretty robust intuition that clearly distinct claims would be made by utterances of (2) and (3). In being presented with such sentences, we seem to understand different things. Sentences (2) and (3) not only appear to have distinct linguistic meanings but also to express non-identical propositions, by portraying non-identical states of affairs, namely the non-identical states of affairs that would be in place when George IV´s curiosity comes into being in scenarios of which I gave sharply contrasting characterizations.

I am not sure if Russellian philosophers have actually gone on to analyze the propositions expressed by sentences like (3). And this is not my main concern here. I do believe, however, that Russellians could and should propose (2)' as the correct analysis of (3), since it so naturally expresses what we mean by utterances of (3). But precisely the fact that (2)' seems like a perfectly plausible analysis of (3) creates problems for Russell´s claim that it provides the correct analysis of (2).

The reason why this is so is that it is not hard to imagine situations in which the propositions expressed by (2) and (3) above do not have the same truth values. George IV, let us suppose, has never countenanced the possibility that *Waverley* was written by several men, but simply wants to know if Scott was the one man who did write it. One of his contemporaries could say that George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley* and deny, without contradiction, that George IV ever wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley.* And he would be right. Clearly enough, (2) could express a true proposition in circumstances in which (3) would express a false proposition. Equally clearly, that could not be the case if (2) and (3) expressed propositions requiring identical analyses. On the intuitively plausible assumption that (2)' – Russell´s favored rendering of (2) – correctly paraphrases (3), it follows, *pace* Russell, that it does not correctly paraphrase (2), and this comes as bad news for the Russellian.

Now since the Russellian is presumably prevented from accepting this, he would appear to be forced to say that what may look like a *prima facie* semantic distinction is not really one. Speaking for the Russellian, I suppose that he might attempt to explain the apparent distinction in meaning displayed by sentences (2) and (3) by having recourse to some pragmatic maneuver. While (2) and (3) are semantically on a par – the Russellian might urge – there could be a difference between what utterances of such sentences would communicate at the level of conversational implicature. As is well known, the

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mechanisms by means of which the overall meaning of our utterances is contextually enriched and may go well beyond what is strictly and literally said by the sentences we utter were investigated in painstaking detail in the work of H. P. Grice.

Unfortunately for the Russellian, this general strategy is of doubtful applicability in the case at hand. After all, (2) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*" and (3) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*" may, as I already argued, differ in truth value by intuitive standards of striking clarity.

What does it mean to talk about authorship in connection with the names of particular people? One might say that words like 'author' and 'writer' are of exclusive applicability in those cases in which a book or article is due to the work of only one person. But, then, what are we to make of such statements as "Russell and Whitehead wrote the *Principia Mathematica*"? On the uniqueness assumption, it should strictly count as false. Yet, the above statement seems to be in good order and to express a truth. Incidentally, it amounts to a rare instance in which, even by the lights of staunch Russellians who are friends of Grice's 'Modified Occam's Razor', the natural language conjunction 'and' does not bear a close correspondence with the logical connective '&'. For it would be misleading to analyse it as "Russell wrote the *Principia Mathematica*" & "Whitehead wrote *Principia Mathematica*". Each of these statements, taken by itself, would indicate sole authorship. This being the case, it would seem that in "Russell and Whitehead wrote

Principia Mathematica", we come across a context in which, it would appear, "to write" carries no implication of uniqueness, but is rather more akin to something like "to take a part in the writing of". It would thus appear that recourse to the Gricean strategy could do nothing against the plausibility of multiple authorship.

As it turns out, in his 1990 book *Descriptions*, Stephen Neale is quite willing to follow, whenever possible, the Gricean strategy of disposing of *prima facie* semantic ambiguities by recourse to alternative pragmatic explanations. Yet, while maintaining that "Russell and Whitehead lived in Cambridge" is analyzable as the conjunction of "Russell lived in Cambridge" and "Whitehead lived in Cambridge", Neale does concede that a similar handling of "Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia Mathematica*" would be "quite unsuitable" [3]

Therefore, it would not do to say that (3) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*" is a nonsensical statement. As far as I can see, we find no reason in Russell's own writings to deny that (3) is legitimate and meaningful.

One way out for the Russellian is to admit that Russell was indeed wrong to insist on his *de dicto* analysis of (2) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*", while claiming that precisely the same *de dicto* analysis does justice to (3) "George IV wished to know whether Scott was the *only* author of *Waverley*". It could turn out that Russell made a minor blunder. Some improvement on his theory would be needed.

[3] The remark is in footnote 25, Chapter 3, p. 108.

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However, if the Russellian insists on the this sort of analysis as providing the key to what we "normally mean" by (2), he will be faced with the problem mentioned above, namely that (2)' "George IV wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and that man was Scott" does provide a proper logical rendering of (3) but not of (2). Since (2) and (3) may well differ in truth value, Russell's critics seem bound to conclude that the *de dicto* analysis proffered by Russell for (2)' is simply wrong.

The Russellian might conceivably try to solve the problem by resorting to some pragmatic strategy. This strikes me as an unprofitable undertaking. In any event, the burden of proof would seem to lie squarely on the side of the Russellian.

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