On Names, Descriptions and Existence: Frege and Russell

Sudeshna Mitra

Assistant Professor in Philosophy

Bethune College

Abstract

Since the twentieth century philosophers have realized that language is very much related to philosophy and plays a significant role in its progress. Regarding the use of language in the realm of philosophy there has been a longstanding bifurcation among philosophers. One group went for the formalisation of language such that it is free from the vagueness and inaccuracies that involve our common speech. The main exponent of this kind of modified language was Bertrand Russell.

This paper is related to the age-old problems of referring, denoting and naming that revolve round Russell's celebrated paper------"The Theory of Descriptions". The 'puzzles of reference' as they are popularly known were first stated by Russell in "On Denoting", (1905). One of Russell's renowned predecessors, Frege had also recognized the problems and had attempted to solve them.

Frege had made a famous and controversial distinction regarding sense and reference of proper names, while attempting to provide answer to the problem of identity. The special character of Russell's theory is best understood and approached when seen against the background of Frege's distinction. Though Russell leans on this distinction, his acceptance and use of it is not precisely the same as that in which Frege understood it. Frege concluded that this puzzle over identity arises out of confusion between the sense and reference of expressions. Russell thought that the difficulty over identity rested on another confusion ----- that between proper names and definite descriptions.

In this paper, with an impartial standpoint I have traced the distinctions between sense and reference of proper names and that between proper names and definite descriptions also discussing the issues of existence as they stood for Russell and Frege without going deeper into The Theory of Descriptions.

Key Words: Descriptions, Sense, Reference, Proper Names, Existence.

Dr. Sudeshna Mitra

Assistant Professor in Philosophy

Bethune College

In his work, *'Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy'*, Bertrand Russell defined a proper name in the following manner, "A name is a simple symbol, directly designating an individual, which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right independently of the meanings of all other words". [Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy. p.173]

Russell's theory of naming is divided into two based on his differentiation between two types of proper names - 'Logically proper names' and 'Ordinary proper names'. It is important for us to understand clearly the nature of proper names, as because, not only it plays a major role in grasping fully the meaning of Russell's famous "theory of descriptions" which deals with the problems arising in connection with naming and denoting, but also that several philosophers including Plato have discussed it in their philosophical investigations. The question that has puzzled them is this: do proper names like 'New Delhi' or 'Mahatma Gandhi' have sense associated with them similar to common names, adjectives or definite descriptions like "the blue book" or "the man with the glasses"?

One of Russell's great predecessors, Gottlob Frege also had made a famous and controversial distinction regarding sense and reference of Proper names while attempting to provide an answer to the problem of identity. The special character of Russell's theory is best understood and approached when seen against the background of Frege's distinction.We will see what exactly Russell meant by 'Ordinary proper names' and 'Logically proper names', at the same time discussing Frege's views on the topic. In this context, Russell puts forward a few arguments to distinguish between Names and Descriptions:

On Names, Descriptions.....

i) Russell's first argument is that names are simple, descriptions are not, therefore descriptions are not names. In support of his arguments Russell wrote,

"If you understand the English language, you would understand the phrase, ' The author of *Waverley'* if you had never heard it before, whereas you would not understand the meaning of 'Scott' if you had never heard it before because to know the meaning of a name is to know who it is applied to." [Russell. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." p. 244.]

In other words the meaning of 'the author of *Waverley*', which is a descriptive phrase, can be brought out by analyzing its parts. So, it is a complex expression. The word 'Scott' is used as an example of logically proper name here; if it is simple, its meaning cannot be worked out by knowing the meanings of its parts. In the above passage Russell says that being simple means having the naming function, i.e., to know the reference of the name. But it would be wiser to point out that Russell's simple/complex distinction does not turn into naming function /describing function distinction because he also held that ordinary proper names, instead of functioning as names function as descriptions.

This argument also does not claim that if an expression has naming functions then it is simple ---- for, pronouns like 'this' or complex demonstratives like 'that man' indeed have naming function and even descriptions occasionally function as names. Therefore, it cannot be held that complex expressions always have describing functions. So, this argument only establishes that names being simple are different from descriptions.

ii) Russell contends that if a true identity statement has names on both sides then that statement must be tautologous, whereas if one of the terms of an identity statement is a description and if that statement is true then it would give us some knowledge. Hence, names and descriptions have different meanings; therefore, they are different. But, this argument, though otherwise valid has an inherent problem ---- it is not true that names, which name the same, always mean the same and therefore are tautologous. ' A may believe that 'Tully' names Tully without believing that 'Tully', names Cicero, for he may not realize that Tully = Cicero.' [*Russell.* p.77.]

iii) Descriptions are not names because existence can only be predicated of descriptions; it is not a property of individuals. Statements like '---- exists or ---- does not exist' become meaningless if they are filled in by names. But that is not the case with descriptions.

"The fact that you can discuss the proposition 'God exists' is a proof that 'God' as used in that proposition, is a description and not a name. If   'God' were a name, no question as to existence could arise" [Russell. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." p. 252.]

Russell arrived at this conclusion in the following way: any meaningful sentence is meaningful if it is either true or false. So, if 'a exists' is taken to be meaningful (where a is a name) then it should be meaningful, even if it is false. But, that is not so, for in that case 'a' would not find a bearer. So 'a' exists is meaningless, be it true or false.

This argument also rests on a false premise ---- from the truth that any meaningful sentence has a meaningful negation, it cannot be inferred that any meaningful sentence is one, which would be meaningful even if it is false. For example, a meaningful sentence like 'some sentences are meaningful' would become meaningless if it were false.

iv) Names are scope -- insensitive, but descriptions are not, so the two should not be confused. But nothing much can be attained from this argument as it can only prove the scope sensitivity of some descriptions. Moreover, scope insensitivity is not an essential property of names. Some names could also be scope sensitive.

v) The most important point of distinction between names and descriptions is that there are no empty names but descriptions can be empty or to say more elaborately one can understand the meaning of a description without knowing if it has any bearer or even if it has one, who it belongs to. But we cannot understand a name without knowing whom it applies to. Non-denoting descriptions are still meaningful, as the expression, 'the king of France is bald' shows. It has a meaning though it is false. But names without reference are meaningless. So, not only that empty descriptions are different from names but also there is a 'contrast of semantic function between descriptions and names'. [*Russell.* p.102.]

Sometimes Russell tries to establish the meaningfulness of empty descriptions by its function, (this we have already discussed in the first argument). This is confusing because Russell himself holds that ordinary proper names can also be empty yet meaningful. Further there are also instances where descriptions without denotation are not meaningful.

In this connection Russell held that there must be a uniform account of either empty or other descriptions in accordance with their similarity in form; that is, expressions similar in form should be analyzed similarly. But this view is dangerous as it may result from this that there are no genuine names. If ordinary proper names are abbreviated descriptions then by parity of form all simple singular terms are so.

Thus we observe that none of the above arguments conclusively established the distinction between names and descriptions. However we must accept that names function differently from descriptions. There has been much controversy among philosophers regarding the denotation and connotation of proper names since long.

It is popularly held that proper names do not have sense or meaning; they simply stand for certain objects.

On Names, Descriptions.....

Speculations of this kind can even be found in Plato's *Theatetus*. This view was reciprocated by J.S. Mill, who held that proper names have denotation but no connotation. Mill gives the example of a "horse" which is a common noun as having both connotation and denotation. Its means those qualities *which* together make up the definition of the word "horse" and it refers to all horses. But a proper name like "Queen Elizabeth" only denotes its bearer and therefore has no meaning. Modern linguistic Philosophers like Russell and his famous pupil Wittgenstein also confirm to this no sense theory of proper names. In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus - Logico - Philosophicus*, it is said that a proper name is simply the object for which it stands.

Frege, on the other hand, argued that statements containing proper names are meaningful only because two names have different senses; the object presents itself with the help of its sense. The statements therefore are neither trivial nor arbitrary for they convey that the same object may have different senses and thus provide us with actual information. This theory that all proper names have senses was a departure from the previous no-sense theory that was originally presented by other philosophers.

There are some marked differences between these two theories, specified thus:

i) The classical theory holds that names do not have any sense but essentially have reference; whereas Frege's theory states that names must have reference.

ii) According to Fregean sense theory, Names refer only when some object is associated with its sense. According to philosophers like Plato and Wittgenstein, who support the no - sense theory, proper names are the connecting link between words and world.

iii) The later theory holds that proper names are only disguised definite descriptions, the meaning of a proper name and the meaning of a definite description are same, but the former theory maintains that Descriptions are not the definitional equivalents of names.

iv) The no-sense theorists hold that naming is prior to describing; Frege holds that describing is prior to naming because a name only describes the object it names.

Exponents of both classical no-sense theory and Fregean sense theory put forward arguments in their favour. The no-sense theory supports the view that Proper Names (Ordinary Proper Names), cannot be said to be equivalent to definite descriptions because naming is not any kind of describing. And, how to proceed about giving a definition of a proper name is also not very clear. If, in order to define a proper name we give a complete description of it, then what happens is this, that any statement true or false made about that name becomes analytic or self -contradictory. About descriptions we can say that it is 'true' or 'false' of its bearer, but this cannot be applied to proper names. The proper name of an object is only its name, nothing more or less.

The no-sense theory of proper names goes well with our common sense views, but when seriously examined, it faces certain grave difficulties. The foremost difficulty regarding identity statements was brought to light by Frege. We often come across identity statements like "a is identical with b" which contain proper names within them. Now, the question that comes to our mind is that whether these statements are meaningful or not? If proper names are nothing but denotations then we must conclude that these statements are trivial for they only convey that an object is identical with itself. Again if that is not the case then we have to arrive at the conclusion that these statements are arbitrary in the sense that any name can be assigned to any object. In order to solve this problem, Frege introduced the concept of the 'sense' of a proper name in addition to its 'reference'. It is this 'sense', which associates a name with its referent. Frege explains this concept with the help of his famous example of "the morning star" and "the evening star". To state briefly : the expressions "the morning star" and "Venus" refer to the same planet though they differ in sense and that is the reason why " Venus is the morning star" adds to our knowledge while "Venus is Venus" does not. Again a person might know that "Venus is the morning star" without knowing that Venus is also the evening star though their referent is same.

Another problem, which the no-sense theory faces, is that, it is unable to explain the occurrence of proper names in existential statements. 'Proper Names' in an existential statement cannot be said to denote, because existential statements are not ordinary subject predicate sort of statements. 'Existence' is not a predicate, but a second order concept. So, an affirmative existential statement cannot refer to an object and state that it exists. The problem then is that, proper names occurring in existential statements (if they cannot refer) must be having some sort of descriptive content which means they have sense associated with them, thus turning the theory towards Frege's sense theory.

Yet another problem that surfaces in front of classical theorists is this - If a proper name only denotes, what is the proof of the existence of its denotation? If we go along with Wittgenstein to accept his theory that the meaning of proper name is literally its denotation, then it seems we have also to accept that the existence of these denoted objects are necessary. For, there may be changes in the world in the order of destruction of some objects, but still, words and their meanings are not perishable. So, it seems imperative to accept the fact that the existence of the objects named by proper names is necessary. As Plato remarked in *Theatetus* (201 D - 202 A) "we cannot say of an element that it exists or does not exist". [Quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Vol.VI. p.488.]

In her book, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, G. E. Anscombe proposes a solution to this problem with the help of a linguistic path. Wittgenstein himself had tried a metaphysical method out of this problem of the

On Names, Descriptions.....

existence of the referent. In Tractatus, Wittgenstein comments, "objects form the substance of the world" [*Tractatus - Logico-Philosophicus*. 2.021], this means that the existence of a substance is over and above assertion or denial. Anscombe holds that there is a difference between ordinary proper names and genuine proper names. Names, which have denotation, can only be called genuine proper names. So, in this manner we can go round about the problem and say that whether an expression is a proper name or not depends on the fact that its referent exists or has existed or will exist. This does not compel us to agree to any class of objects, which necessarily exist, but on the other hand leads us into accepting as proper name only those objects whose denotations have existed.

Influenced by Wittgenstein's view and following it, Russell declared that what are known as proper names in common language cannot be called genuine proper names because whether or not their bearers exist, is a contingent fact and also does not follow from the status of the expression in language. But shouldn't this conclusion be undesirable for no-sense theorists who try to accept the common sense view that there is no sense attached to ordinary proper names?

Russell's declaration however leads them to believe that ordinary proper names never gain the status of genuine or logical proper names. They have to accept the intolerable conclusion that ordinary proper names are in fact disguised descriptions.

Though Anscombe's method is an attempt to avoid this implausible solution, there have been objections raised against it also. Anscombe's view, in short is that, it is essential condition for a proper name to have a bearer. The first objection against this is that, an expression, which is a part of a particular syntax, gets excluded due to the contingent fact of denotation. Secondly, there are some names like "Cerberus" or "Zeus" which are obviously proper names, do not count as logically proper names because their bearer do not exit. The last objection is that Anscombe's view is an arbitrary view which is forced upon us because originally it was an attempt to the explanation of Wittgenstein's theory, but Wittgenstein himself later rejected his former view of proper names and put forth the new theory that meaning and denotation of name should not be confused. He gives the following example to assert his point:

"When Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that meaning dies". [*Philosophical Investigations*. Para. 40.]

Thus, we see that the classical no-sense theory, which at first seemed to be agreeable to our common sense cannot explain the occurrence of proper names in identity or existential statements. Neither can it satisfactorily explain the nature of existence of referents of proper names. Frege's sense theory, though it leads to the uncomfortable consequence of accepting ordinary proper names as truncated definite descriptions, can however account for the puzzles over identity and existential statements and therefore is more acceptable to us.

We will now compare and contrast Russell's and Frege's views on the relation between proper names and definite descriptions. Russell thought that both the propositions 'a exists' and 'a does not exist' are meaningless where 'a' is a proper name. This conclusion was implied by his theory of naming which suggests that the meaning of a proper name is its denotation. Thus, if 'a does not exist' is true, then the sentence is meaningless because it contains a meaningless subject term. In this way Russell reached a paradoxical conclusion that this type of assertion can only be true if it is meaningless.

Actually, it is fallacious to conclude a sentence as meaningless because it contains a meaningless term. Moreover, it is absurd to assume a term to be meaningless because it does not have a denotation. In Russell's reasoning, existentials like (x) (x = a) and ~ (x) (x = a) are also not shown to be meaningless. In *Principia Mathematica's* own language, all negative existentials of this kind are false for it does not contain non- denoting (vacuous) proper names. Therefore Russell's argument to establish that 'a does not exist' is meaningless, if true, is not tenable. But this does not reject Russell's theory of naming. The question remains however, that, are there any logically proper names in ordinary language? Russell's theory is that, all ordinary proper names if analysed correctly are found to be disguised definite descriptions and therefore are not logically proper names though they may appear to be so.

"In saying of 'Romulus' that if it were really a name the question of existence "could not arise", Russell clearly intended the implication that since "the question of existence" can arise, 'Romulus' is not really (logically) a name. But of course, 'Romulus' is a paradigm case of a name from the point of view of its surface grammar". [*Names and Descriptions*. p.4.]

Russell held that names are "disguised" or "truncated" descriptions. For Russell 'a does not exist' is either false or meaningless if 'a' is a logically proper name. So, according to him true singular negative existentials are possible. Again, taking the example 'God does not exist' - if this is a disguised description, we must first determine the description, as a replacement of which, the name is being used.

Though Frege never said anything explicit about negative existentials involving proper names, we can build up his opinion from a careful understanding of his other theories. In short, the fundamentals of Frege's theory were as follows:

i) A complete name, if one of its constituent names does not have a denotation, also does not have a referent.

ii) Denotations of complex names are their truth-values.

On Names, Descriptions.....

Frege cites the following example in order to make himself clear.

"The sentence 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' obviously has sense. But since it is doubtful whether the name 'Odysseus', occurring therein, has reference, it is also doubtful whether the whole sentence has one." [*Names and Descriptions*. p.6.]

It seems that these principles imply that all declarative sentences having non-denoting expressions such as 'Pegasus does not exist' are truth-valueless. But this point cannot be raised against Frege because Frege also puts forward the theory of customary sense and customary referent. Following this theory, it can be said that names in oblique contexts have as their referents what is actually sense in ordinary context. Sentences like 'Pegasus does not exist' are therefore not non-denoting. They have denotation in oblique context.

As opposed to Russell, names are not short forms of description for Frege. Though according to Frege names sometimes denote their customary sense (as in the case of negative existentials) and also that some definite descriptions and proper names have the same sense, but it would be a mistake to assume that Frege held that senses of every proper names are the same as that of some or other definite descriptions. Frege only holds the sense theory without accepting the description theory. Contemporary American philosophers like Saul Kripke however hold that sense theory implies the description theory.

There are also some points of agreement between Frege and Russell. Both of them hold that the logical behaviour of proper name is identical to that of definite descriptions. Frege coined a special term to represent both proper names and definite descriptions - "*eigennamme*". But there is a difference in the approach between Frege and Russell. According to Frege all singular terms must have denotation whereas Russell says that there may be vacuous descriptions, though he does not make room for empty names. So, there is no requirement for Frege to distinguish between Ordinary proper names (which may not have denotation) and logically proper names (which always have denotation). As because Frege holds that all descriptions have denotation, they become free to be substituted for proper names and there remains no place for scope ambiguities in extensional contexts.

On the other hand, as because, Russell allows for vacuous descriptions, they cannot be freely substituted for proper names and also it induces ambiguities of scope for descriptions in *Principia*. Russell therefore has to distinguish between logically proper names from ordinary proper names, which behave in the same way as descriptions. We must remember these points of difference between Frege's and Russell's opinion while we refer to their common theory that ordinary proper names are similar to descriptions and they do have meaning.

Works Cited:

Black, M. and Geach, P. (Eds.). (1952). *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Cartwright, R. (1987). "On the Origins of Russell's Theory of Descriptions." *Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Edwards, P. (Ed.). (1967) *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* Vol. III,VI & VII. NewYork : Collier Macmillan.

Kaplan, D. (1972). "What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions?" *Bertrand Russell: A Collection of Critical Essays*. D.F.Pears (Ed.). NewYork: Doubleday & Company.227-241.

Linsky, L. (1967). *Referring.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Linsky, L. (1977). *Names and Descriptions*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Russell, B. (1971). *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Russell, B. (1985). *The Principles of Mathematics*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Russell, B. (1994). "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." *Logic & Knowledge*. Ed. R.C.Marsh. London: Routledge.175-281.

Sainsbury,R.M. (1979). *Russell*. T. Honderich. (Ed.) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*. D.F.Pears & F.McGuiness (Trans.). NewYork: Humanities Press.

Wittgenstein,L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. G.E.M.Anscombe (Trans.). Oxford : Basil Blackwell.

On Names, Descriptions.....