

DO DESCRIPTIONS HAVE MEANING ? (*)

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I

An important component of Russell's theory of descriptions is the thesis that no description has any meaning. He proposes an argument for this thesis in the following paragraph from *My Philosophical Development* (1):

The central point of the theory of descriptions is that a phrase may contribute to the meaning of a sentence without having any meaning at all in isolation. Of this, in the case of descriptions, there is precise proof: If 'the author of *Waverley*' meant anything other than 'Scott', 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be false, which it is not. If 'the author of *Waverley*' meant 'Scott', 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be a tautology, which it is not. Therefore, 'the author of *Waverley*' means neither 'Scott' nor anything else — i.e. 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing, Q.E.D.

The sentence «'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott'» occurs in the argument. Karel Lambert and Bas van Fraassen have proposed two interpretations of this sentence. They claim that regardless of which one is chosen, it is impossible for all of the argument's premises to be true. Hence, they conclude, the argument does not prove that no description has any meaning.

Lambert and van Fraassen are correct in claiming that Russell's argument does not prove its conclusion. However, they do not establish this. My purpose in this paper, then, is two-fold.

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(1) Bertrand RUSSELL, *My Philosophical Development* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 85.

First I will attempt to show that Lambert and van Fraassen's criticism of Russell's argument does not succeed. Then, I will establish why the argument does not prove its conclusion. We will find that it does not under both of the interpretations of «'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott'». So where Lambert and van Fraassen failed is that for each of the interpretations they suggested they did not see the respect in which Russell's argument was unacceptable.

II

To facilitate our discussion of the argument, let's represent it in the following form:

- (a) If 'the author of *Waverley*' means anything other than 'Scott', then 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is false.
 - (b) 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is not false.
 - (c) If 'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott', then 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is a tautology.
 - (d) 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is not a tautology.
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- (e) It is false that 'the author of *Waverley*' means anything other than 'Scott', and it is false that 'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott', i.e. 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing.

Consider what Lambert and van Fraassen have to say about this argument ⁽²⁾:

- (L) The...argument is valid but unsound because it rests on an ambiguity. For the first premise to be true 't₁ means t₂' *must* amount to 't₁ and t₂ have the same referent'. But then the second premise is not true since if t₁ and t₂ merely happen to refer to the same thing,

⁽²⁾ Karel LAMBERT and Bas C. VAN FRAASSEN, *Derivation and Counterexample* (Encino, California: Dickensen Publishing Co., 1972), p. 157. My italics.

then ' $t_1 = t_2$ ' is not logically true. To make the second premise true, ' t_1 means t_2 ' needs to have the force of ' t_1 and t_2 cannot have different referents'; but then, the first premise is not true.

According to them, the problem with Russell's argument has to do with what they speak of as «the first and second premises». Of the premises in the above argument, the two interpretations they suggest apply only to members of (a) and (c). Hence, when they speak of the first and second premises, they are talking about these two premises.

Lambert and van Fraassen's thesis, then, is that Russell's argument does not prove that its conclusion is true because it is not possible for both (a) and (c) to be true under the same interpretation. According to them, under one interpretation of ' t_1 means t_2 ' (a) is true but (c) cannot be. Under the other (c) is true but (a) cannot be. I will attempt to show that both of these claims are false. I will do this by showing that under each interpretation there is a possible case where (a) and (c) are both true.

III

«'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott'» is the phrase in Russell's argument that their interpretations of ' t_1 means t_2 ' apply to. The first interpretation they suggest is:

t_1 and t_2 have the same referent.

So under this interpretation, (a)'s antecedent would read:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' do not have the same referent.

and (c)'s would read:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same referent.

Lambert and van Fraassen claim that while under this interpretation (a) is true it is impossible for (c) to be. For according to them near the end of (L), (c) «needs» the second interpretation in order for it to be true. If they are correct, then there should not be a possible case where under this interpretation (c) is true along with (a).

There is, however. It is one where 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' do not have the same referent. In this possible case both (a)'s antecedent and consequent would be true. We can see that the consequent would be true by noting that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is an identity statement⁽⁸⁾. So in any possible case where 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' do not have the same referent, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be false. In this type of possible case, then, (a) would be true. And so would (c). For in this possible case (c)'s antecedent would be false. Lambert and van Fraassen are incorrect, then, when they claim that (c) is true only if its antecedent is interpreted as «'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' cannot have different referents». Consequently, they have not shown that under the first interpretation Russell's argument does not prove its conclusion.

(a) also comes out true in the possible case where 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same referent. However in this case (c) would be false. So there is a possible case where (a) is true and (c) is false. Nevertheless this does not establish the point Lambert and van Fraassen intended: That under the first interpretation there is no possible case where both (a) and (c) come out true. It is necessary that they establish this particular point, rather than simply that there is some possible case where both (a) and (c) are not true. For, they want to show that under the first interpretation there is no possible case where all of the argument's premises are true. We will find that under the first interpretation it is impossible for all of the argument's premises to be true. However, we have seen that this cannot be shown by attempting to prove that it is impossible for both (a) and (c) to be true.

⁽⁸⁾ RUSSELL, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

The second interpretation of ' t_1 means t_2 ' is:

t_1 and t_2 cannot have different referents.

Under this interpretation (a)'s antecedent would read:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott'
can have different referents

while (c)'s would read:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott'
cannot have different referents.

Again, consider the possible case where 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have different referents. As with the first interpretation, under the second one (c)'s antecedent would be false in this possible case. Thus, (c) would be true. Also, both (a)'s antecedent and consequent would be true. Thus, (a) would also be true. Therefore, Lambert and van Fraassen are incorrect when what they claim near the beginning of (L) implies that in order for (a) to be true, its antecedent «must» be interpreted as «'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' do not have the same referent». Consequently they have not shown that under the second interpretation Russell's argument does not prove its conclusion.

IV

While Lambert and van Fraassen failed to show that Russell's argument does not prove that its conclusion is true, they were correct in thinking that it does not. Furthermore, it can be shown that it does not under each of their interpretations.

Consider the first interpretation under which (c)'s antecedent reads:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same referent.

We have seen that it is possible for (a) and (c) to be true under this interpretation. However, if we disregard (a) and consider premise (b) and (d) along with (c), we can see that there is no possible case where all of these three premises are true. That is, if any two of the premises are true, the other is false.

For instance, suppose that (b) and (c) are true. If (b) is true, then 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is true. Since 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is an identity statement, if the statement is true it follows that 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same referent. In which (c)'s antecedent would be true. Under the first interpretation if (c) is true, then 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' having the same referent is sufficient for 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' to be a tautology. Therefore if (b) and (c) are true, then 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be a tautology. Thus (d) would be false.

We have shown that if (b) and (c) are true, (d) is false. Therefore it follows that if (d) and (c) are true then (b) is false, and if (b) and (d) are true then (c) is false.

For example, if (d) along with (c) is true, then 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' do not have the same referent. In which case 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be false. Consequently, (b) would be false. Therefore if either (b) or (d) is true along with (c), then the other is false.

Now, let's assume that both (b) and (d) are true. If (b) is true then, as we already noted, the antecedent of (c) would be true. Since (d) is the negation of (c)'s consequent, if (d) is true, (c)'s consequent is false. So if (b) and (d) are true, (c) is false.

We have seen, then that of the three premises (b), (c), and (d) if any two are true, it follows that the third one is false. Hence, under the interpretation of ' t_1 means t_2 ' as ' t_1 and t_2 have the same referent' it is impossible for all of the premises of Russell's argument to be true. Therefore, under this interpretation the argument does not prove that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing.

Now let's consider the argument under Lambert and van Fraassen's second interpretation. As with the first one, under this interpretation the argument does not establish the thesis Russell intended. The reason why has to do with the first pre-

mise. As we noted, under the second interpretation (a)'s antecedent reads:

'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' can have different referents.

If we consider the paragraph by Russell quoted at the beginning of this paper, we can see that he intended for his argument to prove not only that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing but that all other descriptions mean nothing. In order for his argument to prove this thesis about every description, it must not be possible for premise (a) to be false. For if it is, then it is possible that some description means something. In which case, Russell would not have proven that every description means nothing. It is with regard to this particular point that Russell's argument is unsuccessful. For under the second interpretation it is possible for (a) to be false.

What shows this is that from the fact that 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' *can* have different referents it does not follow that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is false. That is, if (a)'s antecedent is true it does not follow that its consequent is true. Rather, this follows if 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' *do* have different referents. In order for 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' to be true, all that is required is that 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same referent. 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' can have the same referent and it be possible for them to have different referents⁽⁴⁾. So 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' can be true and it be possible for 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' to have different referents. That is, (a)'s consequent can be false and the antecedent true. Consequently, under the second interpretation it is possible for (a) to be false⁽⁵⁾.

(4) This is different from saying: It is possible for 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' both to have the same referent and to have different referents.

(5) Our claim about (a) under the second interpretation is different from Lambert and van Fraassen's. Their's is that it is not possible for (a) to be true. Our's is that it is possible for (a) to be false. It does not follow from our claim that it is not possible for (a) to be true.

Lambert and van Fraassen, then, did provide two interpretations under which Russell's argument is unacceptable. What they did not establish is the respect in which the argument is unacceptable under each of their interpretations. Under the first interpretation the argument is unacceptable because it is impossible for all of the premises to be true, in particular (b), (c), and (d). Under the second, the argument is unacceptable because it is possible for premise (a) to be false.

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