

RUSSELL ON THE MEANING OF DESCRIPTIONS

W. STEPHEN CRODDY

1 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 was 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.

In this paper* I would like to discuss whether this argument succeeds in proving that the description 'the author of *Waverley*' does not have any meaning thereby proving that no description has any meaning. To facilitate my discussion, I will represent Russell's argument 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.

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