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.

(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.

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

I will attempt to show that, contrary to what Russell thought, this argument does not prove the conclusion that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing. This will be done by showing that the argument does not satisfy a requirement which any argument must satisfy in order to prove that its conclusion is true.

In the argument, the verb 'mean' and its cognates can be given either of two interpretations. The first interpretation is expressed in " 'bachelor' means 'unmarried adult male' " and " 'the father of Tricia Nixon Cox' does not mean 'the husband of Pat Nixon' ". With this interpretation of 'mean', we are concerned with the *sense* of a word or phrase, not with its denotation. With the second interpretation, 'mean' is interpreted in the sense of 'denote' or 'designate'. This interpretation is expressed in the statements " 'the father of Tricia Nixon Cox' means the same thing that 'the husband of Pat Nixon' means" and " 'the father of Tricia Nixon Cox' does not mean the same thing that 'the husband of Eleanor McGovern' means". In sections 2 and 3, I will consider the adequacy of Russell's argument under both of these interpretations. I will attempt to show that regardless of which interpretation is used the argument does not succeed. In section 2 the interpretation of 'mean' as having to do with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' will be used. To be in accord with this interpretation, in section 2 I will take a tautology to be any statement for which knowledge of the statement's sense is sufficient to determine that it is true. I will use the interpretation of 'mean' as having to do with the denotation of 'the author of *Waverley*' in section 3. Here I will consider the interpretation of 'tautology' implied by premiss (c). According to the interpretation of 'mean' as 'denote', (c) implies that 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' having the same denotation is sufficient for 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' to be a tautology.

As with any other argument, in order for Russell's argument to prove that its conclusion is true it is necessary that all of the premisses be true. This in turn implies that it must be possible for all of the premisses to be true. So an argument has not proven that its conclusion is true if the argument has either of the following two characteristics: 1) one or more of its premisses is false, or 2) the truth of one or more of its premisses implies that another premiss is false. In the following two sections I will attempt to show that regardless of which interpretation of 'mean' we choose Russell's argument has one of these two characteristics. In section 2, I will argue that if we take 'mean' as having to do with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' then not all of the premisses are true. In section 3, I will argue that if we take 'mean' as having to do with the denotation of 'the author of *Waverley*', then it is impossible for all of the premisses to be true. Here I will attempt to show that if two of the premisses are true, it follows that a third one is false.

Other than the two I have discussed, no other interpretation could plausibly be assigned to the occurrences of 'mean' in Russell's argument. Therefore, we are justified in assuming that for his argument Russell intended one of the interpretations of 'mean' I have discussed. However, to

determine the success of his argument, we do not need to establish which interpretation he intended. For if my arguments in the following two sections are successful, then regardless of which interpretation is chosen I will have shown that Russell's argument does not prove that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing.

2   Under the interpretation of 'mean' as having to do with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' neither premiss (a) nor premiss (c) is true.[2] In attempting to show that this is so, in this section I will assume that some descriptions have a denotation. Since we are using the first interpretation of 'mean', this assumption is consistent with Russell's thesis that no description has a meaning. For according to the first interpretation, the thesis reads that no description has a sense. It does not read that no description has a denotation. In the following section where I will take Russell's argument to be concerned with the denotation of 'the author of *Waverley*' I will not assume that some descriptions have a denotation.

Let us first consider premiss (a). Beginning with (a)'s consequent, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is an identity statement.[3] Similar to any other identity statement, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is false provided that either 1) a common denotation of 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' does not exist, or 2) 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' do not have a common denotation. The antecedent of (a) does not imply that the denotation of 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' does not exist. Hence, (a) is true only if its antecedent implies that 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' do not have a common denotation. Contrary to (a), however, a difference in the sense of 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' does not imply a difference in their denotation. Two terms can fail to have the same sense and yet have the same denotation. For instance, 'Milhous' and 'the husband of Pat Nixon' do not have the same sense (if they have any sense at all). Nevertheless, they have the same denotation, viz. Richard Nixon. Hence, the identity statement 'Milhous is the husband of Pat Nixon' is true. So, it is possible for 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' not to have the same sense and yet both terms have the same denotation. In such a case 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' would be true. So, 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' not having the same sense does not imply that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is false. Therefore, under the interpretation of 'mean' as 'sense', (a) is false. (c) is also false, but for a different reason. As we noted above, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is an identity statement. Hence, similar to any other identity statement, the common denotation of 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' must exist in order for the statement to be true. Under the interpretation of 'mean' as 'sense', 'Scott' and 'the author of Waverley' having the same

---

2. Under this interpretation of 'mean' the antecedent of premiss (a) would read "the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' is different from the sense of 'Scott'". The antecedent of (c) would read "the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' is the same as the sense of 'Scott'".

3. Russell, p. 83.

sense does not imply that their common denotation exists. Therefore, even if they have the same sense, it does not follow that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is true. So, the truth of 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is contingent. What it is contingent upon is the existence of the denotation of both terms. And it is contingent upon the existence of this denotation regardless of whether 'Scott' and 'the author of *Waverley*' have the same sense. Therefore, sameness in the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott does not imply that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is not contingent. On the other hand, according to the interpretation of 'mean' as 'sense', the truth of a tautology is not contingent. Therefore, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is not a tautology. And, as we have seen, this is so even if 'the author of *Waverley*' means 'Scott', i.e., 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' have the same sense. Therefore, 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' having the same sense does not imply that 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is a tautology. Hence, (c) is false.

We can conclude, then, that under the interpretation of 'mean' as having to do with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' two of the premises of Russell's argument are false. Therefore, under this interpretation, his argument does not prove that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing.

3¹ In reply to the preceding criticism of Russell's argument it might be suggested that I have misinterpreted Russell's sense of 'mean'. For it might be argued, by 'mean' Russell intended 'denote' or 'designate'.[4] Such a suggestion could be prompted by the fact that interpreting 'mean' as 'denote' results in (a) being true. For if 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' do not have the same denotation, then as with any identity statement 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is false.

So, the interpretation of 'mean' as 'denote' saves (a). However, it does so at the expense of the argument's other three premises. For, any two of these premises being true implies that the third one is false. In other words, under the interpretation of 'mean' as 'denote', it is impossible for all of the premises to be true. This can be seen as follows.

Let us begin by assuming 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*' denotes what 'Scott' denotes. In which case the antecedent of (c) would be true. Under the interpretation of 'mean' as 'denote' if (c) is true, then 'the author of *Waverley*' denoting what 'Scott' denotes 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.

On the other hand, if (d) along with (c) is true, then 'the author of *Waverley*' does not denote what 'Scott' denotes. In which case 'Scott is the

---

4. Under this interpretation of 'mean' the antecedent of (a) would read " 'the author of *Waverley*' denotes anything other than what 'Scott' denotes". The antecedent of (c) would read " 'the author of *Waverley*' denotes what 'Scott' denotes".

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 us 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 the consequent of (c), 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 premisses (b), (c), and (d) if any two are true, it follows that the third one is false. Hence, under the interpretation of 'mean' as 'denote' it is impossible for all of the premisses of Russell's argument to be true. Therefore, under this interpretation, the argument does not prove that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing.

In summary, we have considered an argument by Russell for the conclusion that the description 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing. Russell proposed the argument for this conclusion in order to establish the thesis of his theory of descriptions that no description has any meaning. First, we considered the argument as being concerned with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*'. We found that under this interpretation two of the argument's premisses were false. Then, we considered the argument as being concerned with the denotation of 'the author of *Waverley*'. We found that under this interpretation it was impossible for all of the premisses to be true. Consequently, regardless of whether the argument is taken to be concerned with the sense of 'the author of *Waverley*' or its denotation, we have shown that contrary to Russell the argument does not prove that 'the author of *Waverley*' means nothing. We can conclude, therefore, that in the earlier quoted paragraph Russell does not prove that no description has any meaning.

West Chester State College
West Chester, Pennsylvania