

Russell, Meinong, and Suarez On Denoting

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The metaphysical question concerning the nature of beings of reason is connected to crucial issues in epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind. Many of these problems are created or resolved depending on how one answers the metaphysical questions: What are beings of reasons? What sort of being do they have? In what follows, I will investigate how Suárez's and Meinong's solutions to the metaphysical problem of beings of reason affect one major problem in the philosophy of language.

There are words that have no referent. These words do not denote anything, but they still have meaning. More puzzling, there are words that, while they do not denote anything, may actually describe a factual situation. Russell in *On Denoting* presents a theory that, he claims, will resolve difficulties that arise concerning denoting phrases. I am here especially interested in the problems raised by denoting phrases that in actuality do not denote anything. Russell describes them as follows: "One of the first difficulties that confronts us, when we adopt the view that denoting phrases *express* a meaning and *denote* a denotation, concerns the cases in which the denotation appears to be absent."¹ For instance, consider the phrase, "The present king of France."² In "On Denoting" Russell presents a criticism of Meinong's views on the treatment of these sorts of denoting phrases. In this paper, I will first consider Russell's position. Second,

¹ Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *The Philosophy of Language*, edited by A.P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 205.

I will consider how Suárez would treat the problem of non-denoting phrases. Finally, I will address Russell's criticism of Meinong and show how Meinong could respond.

Russell claims that there are two general positions that can be taken with respect to the problem of non-denoting phrases. The first is to provide a denotation in cases in which it is absent. The second alternative is to abandon the view that denoting is what is really going on in the use of these sorts of apparent denoting phrases.³ Russell goes on to argue for a theory that advocates the latter position. Moreover, he regards the positions of Frege and Meinong as advocating the former strategy.⁴

Russell's theory basically reduces all sentences which contain denoting phrases into logically equivalent sentences where such phrases do not occur. As a consequence, Russell claims that he is able to express the same thought and yet escape what he claims to be otherwise inevitable problems, such as violating the law of contradiction. The violation of the law of contradiction occurs, Russell claims, if one takes "the present king of France" in the phrase "the present king of France is non-existent" as standing for an object, since one is really saying that there is a king of France and there is no king of France. This is similar to Meinong's claim that "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects."⁵

² Russell "On Denoting" 203.

³ Russell, "On Denoting" 206.

⁴ As I will show below, Suárez advocates both positions.

⁵ Alexius Meinong, "The Theory Of Objects," (hereafter "TO") trans. by Isaac Levi, D.B. Terrell, and Roderick M. Chisholm, Realism and the Background of Phenomenology, ed. by Roderick M. Chisholm (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960) 83.

Russell avoids the problem caused by denoting phrases that do not denote by giving "a reduction of all propositions in which denoting phrases occur to forms in which no such phrases occur."⁶ For instance, according to Russell, the denoting phrase "the king of France is bald" implies the conjunction "there is one and only one king of France and whoever is a king of France is bald." Since the first part of this conjunction is false, the whole thing is false. What is important, according to Russell, is not that it is false, but *why* it is false. It is false, he claims, because "the present king of France" does not denote anything that exists. Thus, we can generalize Russell's theory by saying that sentences containing denoting phrases or words, no matter in what context they are used, should be replaced by existential sentences. By doing this, we would accomplish Russell's objective of screening out all phrases that do not denote. This, Russell claims, accomplishes his objective of abandoning the view that denoting is what is really going on in using these sorts of apparent denoting phrases.⁷

Suárez addresses the problem in his discussion of pure and non-pure negations.⁸ Suárez claims that the principle of excluded middle does not apply to any proposition in which the subject does not denote anything. If I say (1) "a chimera is white" and (2) "a chimera is non-white," it is not the case that one must be true and the other false. Instead, it is possible that they both be false. Suárez, in one respect, handles non-denoting phrases in the same manner as Russell does. Suárez claims that any

⁶ Russell, "On Denoting" 205.

⁷ This is very similar to Brentano's view. Brentano would say that the correct way of saying, "there are no roses" is to say "there is nothing that exists for which the word 'rose' is a name" cf. *supra*, 178-181.

⁸ Cf. *supra*, 146-150.

proposition about a non-existent object that is not an existential proposition, such as “the chimera is white,” is pregnant with another positive proposition⁹ which it implies, namely, an existential proposition asserting the existence of the non-existent being in question. Thus the proposition “the chimera is white” implies “there is a chimera,” which is false, since “chimera” does not denote anything. Suárez says:

...if this is false, “A chimera is not-seeing (*chymaera est non vedens*),” it is so not simply because sight is denied, but also because some entity or being is affirmed. Thus, in order that contradictorily opposed predicates never have anything between them, even when they are expressed by way of affirmation, it is necessary that they be taken with respect to a proper subject, which is some existing thing.¹⁰

Suárez, however, unlike Russell, allows for another interpretation. Suárez claims that it can be the case that a proposition with a non-existing subject be true. There are two possibilities. The first occurs when one *assumes* the subject. The second occurs “by denying what is *assumed* [my emphasis]. For of these two propositions [‘A chimera is seeing’ and ‘A chimera is not-seeing’] the one which has a negative predicate is true, even if the subject does not exist.”¹¹

Suárez gives one more reason for a distinct interpretation. When something is affirmed of a non-existent object in such a way that the proposition is detached from time, then in those cases the proposition may be true. What causes the exception is the fact that the proposition is detached from time so that the existence or non-existence of

⁹ This is why Suárez claims that negations of this sort are not pure. Cf. *supra*, 148.

¹⁰ Francisco On Beings of Reason (from hereafter BR) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995) 107.

¹¹ Suárez, BR 107.

the subject is irrelevant. In these cases it cannot be the case that the existence of the subject is implied. So, for instance, “that a chimera is a non-being” is true. Or “that a round square is round” is also true. In these cases, we would not say: “ ‘A chimera is a non-being’ implies ‘there is a chimera,’ which is false.” It is important to distinguish, however, this interpretation from the previous one. In the previous interpretation, I claimed that Suárez adopted Russell’s first option, namely, to provide a denotation. In this interpretation, Suárez does not provide a denotation but instead, like Russell, denies that denoting is occurring. Suárez says:

...the copula can be said to be independent of time. For in that way in which the subject is conceived as a fictitious being, the predicate is intrinsic to the nature of the subject, and thus that proposition can be not only true, but also necessary¹²

These last two interpretations of Suárez do not contradict Russell’s interpretation or Suárez’s first interpretation. In other words, they are compatible in so far as they also claim that “there is no denoting of an existent object taking place.”

I will discuss Meinong’s treatment of non-denoting phrases as I simultaneously answer Russell’s criticism of Meinong. Russell’s criticism of Meinong claims that Meinong accepts all grammatically correct sentences as denoting some object. His criticism goes as follows:

The evidence for the above theory [Russell’s theory as described above] is derived from the difficulties which seem unavoidable if we regard denoting phrases as standing for genuine constituents of the propositions in whose verbal expressions they occur. Of the possible theories which admit such constituents the simplest is that of Meinong. *This theory regards*

¹² Suárez, BR 108.

*any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an object [my emphasis]. Thus 'the present king of France', 'the round square', etc., are supposed to be genuine objects. It is admitted that such objects do not subsist, but nevertheless they are supposed to be objects. This is in itself a difficult view; but the chief objection is that such objects, admittedly, are apt to infringe the law of contradiction. It is contended, for example, that the existent present King of France exists, and also does not exist; that the round square is round, and also not round [my emphasis].*¹³

The criticism is so far off base that it does not even seem to require a rebuttal. The propositions emphasized are claims that Russell attributes to Meinong. The claim that for Meinong any grammatically correct denoting phrase stands for an object is correct. However, Russell seems to think that from this it follows that the objects in question exist. If Russell had understood Meinong's distinctions between (1) existence, (2) subsistence, and (3) quasi-being, then he would not have conflated a pure object, such as a round square, with an existent object. I want to argue that Meinong, like Suárez, would allow for a less restricted interpretation of denoting phrases. On the one hand, he would say, in accord with Russell, that the proposition "A chimera is non-white" is false because there is no such thing as a chimera. It is true that Russell, not being fully cognizant of Meinong's theory of Objects and his notion of pure objects, may have a problem seeing how Meinong can maintain this claim and at the same time maintain that "chimera" denotes an Object as such.

On the other hand, like Suárez, Meinong also maintains that the proposition "the round square is round and square" is necessarily true. Meinong would claim that the proposition subsists, even though the subject of the proposition does not exist.

¹³ Russell, "On Denoting" 205.

Moreover, his argument is the same as Suárez's, namely, that the essence of objects can be considered independent of existence (detached from time). These are clearly cases in which a proposition with a non-existent subject is true. Meinong's theory of Objects never leads him to adopt Russell's first option of providing a denotation in cases in which it is absent.

In conclusion, I want to point out what I believe to be the cause of the apparent disagreement between Russell on the one hand and Suárez and Meinong on the other. Russell claims that there are two possible mutually exclusive options: (1) to provide a denotation in cases in which it is absent; and (2) to abandon the view that denoting is occurring in cases of apparent denoting phrases that do not denote.¹⁴ The problem is the ambiguity of the meaning of "denoting." If "denoting" is understood as denoting something in existence (and thus in time according to Suárez), then both Meinong and Suárez would be in agreement with Russell concerning the status of all propositions concerning non-existent beings.¹⁵ However, both Suárez and Meinong believe that there can be true propositions concerning subjects that do not exist. With respect to such propositions neither Meinong nor Suárez opts for Russell's first option, namely, to provide a denotation in cases in which it is absent. In such cases Meinong and Suárez deny that denoting is occurring. This is precisely why neither Meinong nor Suárez is guilty of asserting a contradiction. Instead "there are no chimeras" is true precisely because there are no chimeras.

¹⁴ Russell, "On Denoting" 206.

¹⁵ There is the Suárezian exception I mentioned above concerning assumed objects. Cf. *supra*, 291-292.

It should be apparent that there are interrelations and interdependencies between the metaphysical problem of beings of reason and non-existent objects and the problem of non-denoting phrases. This means that to maintain a coherent and consistent over-all philosophy, the solution of one problem might well preclude certain positions and solutions with respect to other problems. Moreover, it should also be apparent that the metaphysical problem of beings of reason is not some isolated and unimportant difficulty unworthy of being investigated.