

## 24.400: Proseminar in Philosophy I

Fall 2013

**“On Denoting”**

Ostertag, *Definite Descriptions: A Reader* (MIT, 1998) has many of the classics.

Quantifier domain restriction

Stanley and Szabó, “On Quantifier Domain Restriction”, *Mind and Language* 2000. See also the commentaries by Bach and Neale and Stanley and Szabó’s reply in the same issue.

Presupposition

Von Stechow, “Would you Believe It? The King of France is Back”, in Reimer and Bezuidenhout, *Descriptions and Beyond* (OUP, 2004). (You can find it online.) A useful review of that volume is <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24841-descriptions-and-beyond/>. See also Yablo, “Non-Catastrophic Presupposition Failure”, in Byrne and Thomson, *Content & Modality* (Oxford 2006), together with Stalnaker’s reply.

The *Principles of Mathematics* theory of “denoting concepts”

A *term* is any entity whatsoever. *Things* are “the terms indicated by proper names” and *concepts* are the terms “indicated by all other words” (44).

The *terms of* a proposition are those terms that the proposition is *about* and that *occur in* (are constituents of) a proposition. Things occur in propositions only as terms of them, concepts can sometimes occur in propositions as terms of them, and sometimes not.

*Example.* Socrates and humanity *occur in* the proposition that Socrates is human, and in the proposition that humanity belongs to Socrates, and Socrates is a *term of* both, but humanity is only a *term of* the latter—the proposition that Socrates is human is not *about* humanity (45). (In Frege’s terminology, Russell is in effect claiming that a concept is sometimes an object.)

Among the constituents of propositions are *denoting concepts*.

A concept *denotes* when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept. If I say “I met a man,” the proposition is not about [the denoting concept] *a man*: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank account or a public-house and a drunken wife. Again the

proposition “any finite number is odd or even” is plainly true; yet the concept “any finite number” is neither odd nor even. (53)

And similarly with definite descriptions: the proposition that I met the present Pope is not about the denoting concept *the present Pope*, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept.

This “peculiar way” is the denoting relation. In the case of definite descriptions:

The denoting concept *the present Pope* denotes the present Pope.

And:

If Francis is the present Pope, then *the present Pope* denotes Francis.

In the case of, say, the denoting concept *some man*, “what is denoted is essentially not each separate man, but a kind of combination of all men” (62). “Peculiar” doesn’t quite do it justice.

### The Gray’s Elegy Argument

The dominant contemporary interpretation seems to be that the argument’s principal target is the theory of denoting concepts, not Frege’s theory.

See:

John Searle, “Russell’s Objections to Frege’s Theory of Sense and Reference”, *Analysis* 1957-8, and in Klemke, *Essays on Frege*.

Simon Blackburn and Alan Code, “The Power of Russell’s Criticism of Frege: ‘On Denoting’ pp. 48-50”, *Analysis* 1978.

Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 249-52.

Harold Noonan, “The ‘Gray’s Elegy’ Argument—and Others”, in Monk and Palmer, *Bertrand Russell and the Origin of Analytical Philosophy*.

Michael Kremer, “The Argument of ‘On Denoting’”, *Philosophical Review* 1994.

Related helpful material:

Richard Cartwright, “On the Origin of Russell’s Theory of Descriptions”, in *Philosophical Essays*.

James Levine, “Acquaintance, Denoting Concepts and Sense”, *Philosophical Review* 1998.

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