Russell and Strawson on Significant Sentences

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In his article "On Referring" P. F. Strawson argues that Bertrand Russell mistakenly assumes that significant sentences must be about something (Strawson, "On Referring" 323).[1] Strawson believes Russell ignores the distinction between the use of a sentence and the sentence itself, causing Russell to develop an elaborate and ultimately unnecessary theory. In this paper, I will outline Russell's theory, giving reasons that Russell could have had for his assumption. Then I will put forth Strawson's criticism and his own theory. I will show that neither Russell's nor Strawson's theory can adequately handle all problem cases but that a combination of their views offers the first step toward a viable solution. In particular, I will argue that elements of both Strawson's distinction between the use of a sentence and the sentence itself and Russell's method of logical analysis are necessary for a robust theory of how sentences function.

To see the impetus for Russell's theory, consider the following two sentences:

S1. The current wife of Prince William of Wales is patient.

S2. The current wife of George W. Bush is patient.

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[1] Hereafter this paper will be cited by the author's last name followed by the number of the page on which the cited material occurs.

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Both of these sentences are significant in a way that poorly formed formulas like "box table go" are not. They also both seem more significant than sentences like "My red dream fights peacefully." S2 indeed seems quite easy to understand: I am predicating a certain property about the First Lady, and this predication is true or false. However, S1 is more problematic. Given that it is significant and thus likely to express a proposition, what is S1's truth value? If we gathered all of the patient individuals and all of the rash individuals into separate rooms, Prince William's wife would be in neither room—she doesn't exist. How, then, could a sentence like S1, that seems to be no different from S2, have a truth value, if there are no objects to which any parts of the sentence refer?

Here Russell's assumption that significant sentences must be about something forces him into something of a dilemma: he can hold either that S1 is not a significant sentence or he can hold that S1 is about something, but not both. Clearly it is significant, so he must hold that it is about something. However, since there is no current wife of Prince William, we either have a sentence that is about a non-existing object that still (somehow) has properties, or we have to devise a way in which the sentence can be about something other than such fictional entities. As Russell notes, Meinong holds the former view; there are non-subsisting but existing round squares, wives of current bachelors, etc. (Russell, "On Denoting" 14).[2] However, this view seems to violate the law of non-contradiction and thus to be incoherent. It would be more pleasing to have a theory that avoids such odd metaphysical entities, and it would be nice to have a theory that does not come so close to violating the law of non-contradiction on questions of existence (the difference between "existing" and "subsisting" seems quite small).

Russell, then, must find a solution that does not posit odd entities but still makes sentences like S1 about something. To do so, he distinguishes between the grammatical subject and the logical subject of a sentence (Russell 242–43). The former is simply what the sentence seems on the surface to be about; for S1, the grammatical subject is "the current wife of Prince William." However, Russell holds that something far more

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[2] This article will be cited by its title followed by the page number.

interesting is happening with the logical subject of such sentences. Russell holds that "denoting phrases" like "a dog," "the dog," and "all dogs" function not through simply referring but rather by turning the sentences in which they occur into functions of different sorts (Russell 236–37). Thus, S1 does not really say anything about Prince William's wife. Rather, in Russell's terminology, it states "The sentence 'One and only one thing has the property of being currently married to William and that thing has patience' is always true."[3] Rendered more in keeping with modern quantificational logic, we would analyze S1 as "There exists one and only one thing such that it stands in the relation of marriage to Prince William and that thing has patience." Clearly, the offending denoting phrase (in this case "The current wife of Prince William") has dropped out of our analyzed sentence, supposedly taking the problem it causes with it. It also is readily apparent that our new analyzed sentence can indeed be about something; in fact, "some thing" is precisely what it is about. Russell then has a solution to such sentences that avoids Meinongian extremes while allowing him to keep the assumptions that all significant sentences are about something and that sentences like S1 are significant. We are really talking about some thing in sentences like S1, though we are certainly incorrectly ascribing some of its properties.

Strawson, however, argues that Russell's assumption has forced him into this position and that such a position is unnecessary if one reasonably abandons the assumption. Strawson argues for this by showing the distinction between the uses of sentences or expressions and the meaning of these sentences and expressions (Strawson 327). Perhaps this distinction can be seen best by considering how we would feel about S1 uttered now, while Prince William is a bachelor, and uttered soon after Prince William gets married, if ever a girl be so lucky. It seems that in the latter instance the problems vanish; this use of the sentence is clearly about Prince William's obviously existing wife and is significant. There is, then, something about the use of a sentence that imbues it with properties that the sentence itself, stripped of all use and context, does not have. By recognizing this fact, we can allow sentences like S1 to be significant without having to find logical

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[3] The analysis is different for each of the different types of denoting phrases such as "a dog" and "the dog." For brevity, I will only give the analysis for sentences with denoting phrases containing the definite article "the."

subjects for them (Strawson 328). Instead, we can say that, because they can be used in our linguistic community, they are significant, though this in no way means that they must be about something.

Strawson then develops a more general theory that accounts for these problem sentences. He distinguishes, as mentioned above, between a sentence and a use of a sentence. He also distinguishes between these two things and an utterance of a sentence. The uses of a sentence are something like what the speaker can accomplish with that sentence. The utterance of a sentence is something like the instantiation of a sentence under a certain use at a particular time and place by a speaker. For example, I can use the sentence "I like pizza" to give my wife instructions on my preference for tonight's dinner or to express my general gustatory preferences to a stranger. For Strawson, meaning occurs in sentences themselves. That is, sentences give "general directions" for their usage according to the rules and customs of a linguistic community (Strawson 327). Following the previous example, the general directions given by the sentence "I like pizza" are probably something like "use this sentence to inform someone about your preference for a certain kind of food," thus making it possible for us to use this sentence in both particular situations (my wife's question about what I want for dinner, pizza or salmon) or more generally (the stranger's query). Truth occurs at the level of utterance and usage; only after a sentence has been uttered under a particular usage can it have a truth value. Hence, according to this more general theory, sentences like S1 can never by themselves have a truth value (Strawson 329). But the truth value (or lack thereof) of such sentences was one motivating factor leading Russell to look for the logical subject. With Strawson's new theory in hand, we can dismiss Russell's problem sentence and properly distinguish between the meaning and reference of sentences and expressions.

Russell, though, can immediately reply that Strawson simply points out a distinction that Russell was implicitly (and reasonably) assuming. The first reason for thinking that Russell assumes this distinction is that he describes his example sentences, sentences like S1, as "puzzles" (Russell 240). Clearly, such sentences are only puzzles when they are used in a very specific context, namely the context in which the object supposedly referred to by the denoting phrase does not exist. Russell would have no

problem with an Englishman in 1745 uttering statements about the present King of France, nor would he have problems with a contemporary Englishman making similar statements while acting in a play. The second reason to assume Russell intended to consider only declarative uses of such sentences is that it is almost always the case that when someone utters or writes a sentence, they intend to assert a proposition. Granted, in philosophical examples the author may not intend for others to think that he or she is actually asserting the sentence, but the author still intends that the reader consider the sentence as a contemporary utterance unless otherwise specified. Consequently, it is very plausible to believe that Russell intended to consider only uses of sentences, making Strawson's distinctions irrelevant or implicitly operative in Russell's work.

This reply, though, is somewhat unsatisfactory. If Russell's theory already has accounted for the use of sentences (despite perhaps his sloppy use of philosophical language), then why the elaborate hunt for the logical subject? Remember, the assumption that significant sentences need to be about something led us to the view that they are really about their logical subjects. Do we still need to hunt for logical subjects of sentences when only uses of sentences are under consideration? Is there still a place for Russellian analysis if we accept the distinction? More to the point, can Russell's analysis account for something in the use of sentences like S1 that Strawson's cannot? I believe that it can. Additionally, a theory with Strawson's distinction can avoid problems that Russell ignores. The Strawsonian part of the theory will allow us to dismiss as problems bare sentences like S1. The Russellian part of the theory will allow us to explain what problematic uses of sentences like S1 are about.

It is easy to see that Strawson's distinction removes S1 as a problem sentence. If the assumption that all significant sentences are about something is removed, the premise that S1 is significant no longer entails that it be about something, allowing us to stop looking for what it is about. The fact that there is more left to be done after Strawson's distinctions are drawn is harder to see. Consider, though, Strawson's own memorable example of his handkerchief. He states, "If I talk about my handkerchief, I can, perhaps, produce the object I am referring to out of my pocket. I can't produce the meaning of the expression 'my handkerchief,' out of my

pocket" (Strawson 328). Imagine, though, Strawson telling his wife on a particular occasion that his handkerchief is clean. Imagine also that at the time of this utterance Strawson in fact has no handkerchief. What will Strawson's wife think about Strawson's most recent usage of the meaningful sentence "My handkerchief is clean"? It seems that she will, with a puzzled look on her face, ask him if he is mistakenly talking about something else, perhaps his red necktie. If he insists that, no, his red handkerchief is clean, she will most likely either wonder if he has lost his ability to speak the English language or if his mental machinery is no longer functioning. Without there being some object that he is trying to talk about, his use of the sentence "My red handkerchief is clean" becomes exceptionally bizarre.

Indeed, this use of the sentence may even run the risk of becoming nonsensical or insignificant according to Strawson's view. If sentences are meaningful because they give general directions for their use according to the rules of the linguistic community, sentences like the one above seem clearly in violation of all such rules. Indeed, this use of the sentence threatens to become just as incomprehensible, on Strawson's theory, as the use of the sentence "My red book fights peacefully." Although the latter has at present no possible usage in our linguistic community, it still seems to be meaningful. Moreover, any usage of it seems the same as a usage of the handkerchief sentence at a time in which there is no handkerchief. Intuitively, though, it seems that there is a difference between these sentences, a difference for which Strawson's theory cannot account. We simply do not and should not use expressions to assert something about objects when we know or believe that such objects do not exist. If such assertions become nonsensical because they are not about anything, then Strawson's argument is self-refuting because he can no longer explain significant uses of sentences. That is, if his theory is true, then a usage such as the one above violates all general directions laid down by the sentence and my linguistic community. How, though, could I ever use a sentence that did this if it is precisely those rules which give meaning to my sentence? Strawson's theory cannot explain why all uses of sentences must be about something.

Unfortunately for Strawson, we have good reasons for believing that all uses of significant sentences must be about something, even ones like S1

or Strawson's statement about his handkerchief. His theory, then, needs to be modified. I believe that a Russellian modification, one in which uses of sentences can be analyzed in a way similar to how Russell analyzes sentences independent of their use, can solve these problems. To show this, we can look at the independent reasons we have for believing that significant uses must be about something. One of these reasons is that scientific discourse and the advancement of science seem to depend on this fact. Consider for example the numerous references in historical scientific literature to "the ether" and "phlogiston."[4] The first of these was believed to fill the immensity of space in order to explain the propagation of light waves and other interstellar events. The latter was understood as a part of every combustible substance, the part given off in the combustion process. Phlogiston, then, explained the fact that the combusted object (usually) lost mass while the atmosphere gained mass. On Russell's view, claims about the ether and about phlogiston are analyzable into claims about other objects, perhaps the real but as yet undiscovered causes of certain phenomena. This view seems to explain the process of scientific discovery. After a scientific theory is put forth, experiments are designed to test the theory. On Strawson's view, though, any use of such a statement must go against the basic rule that we only talk in those ways when such objects exist. This gives us pause when thinking that such uses are actually about something since it is hard to see how we could be talking about anything if we are violating all of the rules laid down in the sentence by the linguistic community. If the statements about the ether or phlogiston are not really about some real thing in the world, then experiments could not have been designed to test those theories, something that clearly happened. Indeed, how does one go about testing something that does not exist or something to which no one actually referred?

Additionally, it is rarely the case that all of the phenomena explained by notions such as the ether and phlogiston are explained falsely; there are usually many things learned about nature from false theories. On Russell's view, this process makes sense. Although there must be at least some properties falsely ascribed in sentences containing such notions, not all of the

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[4] Strictly speaking, "phlogiston" is not a denoting phrase of the type Russell mentions early in his article (Russell 235). However, Russell did believe that the vast majority of names were actually shortened forms of denoting phrases, and thus the comments made above are relevant to the discussion of denoting phrases and the sentences in which they occur.

properties need be falsely ascribed. If a scientist made a claim about the ether that was actually about the real cause of interstellar phenomena, it becomes much more plausible to think that the newer explanation of the phenomena will still incorporate true aspects that the sentences with the denoting phrase "the ether" could explain while eliminating the falsely ascribed properties of the ether. The existence of science and scientific discovery thus weighs strongly in favor of supposing that uses of sentences like S1 must mistakenly describe some real thing. This result, though, itself weighs in favor of a Russellian modification of Strawson's views.

Another reason for supposing that significant sentences must be about something is the fact that normal discourse seems to require the supposition that individuals, when they are asserting, assert truthfully. Obviously, the questions of whether or not significant sentences must have truth values and whether or not they must be about something are distinct. However, they seem to be intimately related. If a sentence is true, in what sense can it be so if there is not some part of reality, some object, to which the sentence in some way relates? It is hard to see how the sentence "My handkerchief is clean," asserted by Strawson to his wife, can be true if he owns no handkerchief. Normal discourse functions on the implicit assumption that individuals assert correctly. If, when a woman shouted "The President has been assassinated," I had to stop and wonder whether or not she intended to assert, whether or not she had asserted truly, and whether or not her assertion was about George W. Bush, the use of language would become exceptionally laborious and perhaps even impossible. The reason that it may be impossible is that if we cannot assume that people are telling the truth, how could we ever determine the answer to questions about whether a speaker intended to assert or intended to talk about a particular entity? It seems then that we have at least a practical reason, if not a fully theoretical one, for believing that uses of sentences must be about something, as we must assume that individuals are speaking the truth in their declarative sentences. Consequently, Russell's position, one that explains what sentences are about even in breakdown situations like those exemplified by S1, seems more plausible than Strawson's, which does not.

We have shown, then, that neither Russell's nor Strawson's theory is entirely adequate. Russell, by either mistakenly assuming that significant

sentences themselves must be about something and by failing to demonstrate how his analyses apply to the use of sentences, has created problems where in fact there are none. Strawson, by failing to explain the relationship between the general directions given by a sentence and uses in which those directions are violated, has made understanding the significance of uses of sentences like S1 quite difficult. However, by incorporating aspects of each theory into a newer one, these problems may be solved. A theory that allows for both Strawson's distinction between the use of a sentence and the sentence itself and Russell's logical analysis will be able to solve these problems. The former part of the theory will reject as problems bare sentences like S1. The latter part of the theory will enable us to understand what is going on in uses of sentences like S1 at times in which the grammatical subject does not exist. At least in this case, it seems that compromise does in fact solve the problem.[5]

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