UNIT 4: RUSSELL: DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Notion of denoting

4.4 Types of denoting phrases

4.5 Uniqueness of 'The'

4.6 Russell's theory of definite descriptions (1905)

- 4.6.1 Drawbacks in Meinong's theory
- 4.6.2 Proper names and descriptions
- 4.6.3 Drawbacks in Frege's theory
- 4.6.4 Theory of descriptions

4.7 Let us sum up

4.8 Further Readings

4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.10 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of Definite Descriptions.
- describe the necessity of designing the theory.
- discuss the comparison between Russell's theory with the theories of Meinong and Frege.
- analyse the necessity of distinguishing grammatical form of a proposition from that of the logical form of a proposition.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces to you Bertrand Russell's famous concept of definite descriptions. In his celebrated essay *On Denoting* which was published for the first time in the journal *Mind* in 1905, Russell formulated his theory of definite descriptions. In 1956, the essay was reprinted in

Logic and Knowledge edited by Robert Charles Marsh. Moreover, Russell propounded the theory in his book *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism (*1918) and also in another book *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919). Theory of definite descriptions is a technique whereby certain symbols, because they are defective, are replaced by other symbols or group of symbols. The replaced symbols help to resolve certain contradictions associated with language.

4.3 NOTION OF DENOTING

Ordinarily the word *denoting* may be used to point or describe something, or it may also mean the words employed as symbols for concepts. But Russell says that his usage of the word denoting is different in meaning in that denoting involves a logical relation. Speaking about the logical relation, Russell says in his *Principles of Mathematics*, "…the fact that description is possible – that we are able, by the employment of concepts, to designate a thing which is not a concept—is due to a logical relation between some concepts and some terms, in virtue of which such concepts inherently and logically *denote* such terms" (p. 53). Russell further says: "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" (p. 53). To cite an example given by Russell is—when a person says 'I met a man', the proposition is not about the concept called *a man,* because *a man* is a concept and one who has met a man has not met any concept called *a man*. The person has met an actual man who has a bank-account or a public-house. Hence, *a man* is a denoting concept here.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1. State whether the following statements are True or False:a)

Denoting is a psychological relation. (True/ False)b)

In his celebrated essay *On Denoting* which was published for

the first time in the journal *Mind* in 1905, Russell formulated the theory of descriptions. (True/False)

Q 2. What is denoting?

.....

.....

.....

.....



ACTIVITY 4.1

How is logical relation of denoting to be distinguished from psychological relation of denoting?.....

.....

.....

.....

4.4 TYPES OF DENOTING PHRASES

By a denoting phrase Russell means a phrase such as any one of the following: a man, some man, any man, every man, all men, the present King of England, The present King of France, the centre of mass of the solar system at the first instant of the twentieth century, the revolution of the earth round the sun, the revolution of the sun round the earth. Thus, for Russell, a phrase is said to denote solely in virtue of its *form*. In other words, Russell's theory of definite descriptions is about the *logical form* of expressions involving denoting phrases.

Russell distinguishes three cases:

1. Denoting phrases which do not denote anything, for example, 'the present king of France'.

2. Phrases which denote one definite object, for example 'the present king of England' (Edward VII at the time Russell was writing).
3. Phrases which denote ambiguously, for example 'a man'.

Definite descriptions involve the first two groups of denoting phrases, and indefinite descriptions involve the third group. This means that a definite description is a phrase like 'the author of *Principia Mathematica'*, i.e., it has the form 'the so-and-so'.

4.5 UNIQUENESS OF 'THE'

- Russell considers the subject of denoting to be very important not only in logic and mathematics, but also in theory of knowledge. For example, that the centre of mass of the solar system at a definite point is known to us, but we have no immediate acquaintance with this point, which is only known to us by description. In *Logic and Knowledge* Russell says, "All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking *about* many things with which we have no acquaintance" (p. 42).

- Russell takes variable as fundamental. He declares that 'C(x)' is used to mean a propositional function in which x is a constituent, where x, the variable, is essentially and wholly undetermined. With the help of this logical tool, Russell proceeds to interpret phrases containing 'everything', 'nothing' and 'something' which are the most primitive of denoting phrases. He interprets these denoting phrases in the following way:

C (everything) means 'C(x) is always true'.

C(nothing) means ' "C(x) is false" is always true'.

C(something) means 'It is false that "C(x) is false" is always true'.

- Russell considers 'everything', 'nothing' and 'something' to be incomplete symbols. By incomplete symbol Russell means a symbol which has no meaning in isolation but which obtains meaning in a context with other symbols in a proposition. Russell cites one example: if the proposition 'I met a man' is true, it means that I met some definite man,

not an indefinite man. It is analyzed as '"I met *x*, and *x* is human" is not always false.' This analysis leaves 'a man' by itself without any meaning, but it gives a meaning to every proposition in whose verbal expression 'a man' occurs.

- Russell then goes on to analyze phrases containing 'the'. For example, 'the father of Charles II was executed'. This asserts that there was an *x* who was the father of Charles II and was executed. But Russell says that when the word 'the' is used strictly, it involves uniqueness. This means that when we say '*x* was the father of Charles II' we not only assert that *x* had a certain relation to Charles II, but also that nothing else had this relation. Now, '*x* is the father of Charles II' becomes: '*x* begat Charles II; and "if *y* begat Charles II, *y* is identical with *x*" is always true of *y*.' This shows one very important point of analysis, i.e., the reference of uniqueness expressed by denoting phrase 'the.'



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3. State whether the following statement is True or False.a)

There are two kinds of denoting phrases. (True/ False) b)

Definite descriptions have got the following form—'the so-and-so'. (True/False)

Q 4. In what sense 'the' is said to have uniqueness?.....

.....

.....

.....

Q 5.What are the types of denoting phrases?.....

.....

.....

.....

ACTIVITY 4.2

Why is acquaintance said to be important in order for our thinking to start with?.....

.....

.....

.....

4.6 RUSSELL'S THEORY OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTONS (1905)

Russell's version of denoting as found in *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) is Meinongian. Russell modified his theory in the essay 'On Denoting' (1905) and says that his earlier theory of denoting fails to show the feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Now what is the drawback of Meinong's formulation of the theory?

4.6.1 Drawbacks in Meinong's theory

In *On Denoting*, Russell points out a serious difficulty of Meinong's analysis of denoting phrases. This is the difficulty of regarding denoting phrases as standing for genuine constituents of the propositions in whose verbal expressions they occur. Meinong considered any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an *object*. For Meinong, 'the present king of France', 'the round square' etc. are supposed to be genuine objects. Russell objects to such thesis of Meinong by saying that it violates a robust sense of reality. Meinong thinks that though there is no such object called round square, round square has some sort of being. This being, however, for Meinong, is not even subsistence. According to Russell, Meinong's instinct for considering *some* sort of existence is mistaken because of the following reason: if Meinongian thesis is accepted, then the

analysis of the proposition 'the round square does not exist' will become problematic. This proposition infringes the law of contradiction. Russell says that if round square has a kind of being, then by the word 'the round square' we have to assume that there is an object called round square, and in the same sentence we are going to deny that it does not exist. To affirm the existence of the 'round square' and in the same breath to deny it is a self-contradiction.

Pointing to the deficiencies in Meinong's analysis, Russell states that it is because of the lack of proper logical analysis, we are led to the conclusion that there are unreal objects. In Russellian analysis there is a difference between grammatical form of proposition and the logical form of proposition. In other words, the grammatical form of a proposition may not reveal its actual logical form. Russell gives the following example:

I met Jones.

I met a man.

Russell holds that there is a *logical* difference between the forms of these two propositions. The first proposition names an actual person, i.e. Jones. But the second proposition involves a propositional function, i.e. "The function 'I met *x*, and *x* is human' is sometimes true." Thus according to Russell, an ordinary sentence may assert something, but actually it does not denote anything. It is by means of propositional function Russell shows the logical difference between the forms of these propositions. The following is the meaning of a propositional function: a propositional function is defined as any expression containing an undetermined constituent, or several undetermined constituents, and becoming a proposition as soon as the undetermined constituents are determined. For example, '*x* is a dog' is a propositional function, since no truth value is assigned to this. We do not know what '*x*' means unless some value is put here.

4.6.2 Proper names and descriptions

Russell by adopting the tool of definite descriptions as a method of analysis wanted to resolve the difficulty cited above. The theory of descriptions draws a clear distinction between proper names and descriptions. A proper name is simple symbol, since it designates an individual directly, and it has meaning in isolation. A description, on the contrary, does not designate an individual directly. That is why Russell calls it an 'incomplete symbol'. An incomplete symbol has no meaning in isolation but which obtains a meaning in a context with other symbols. For Russell 'Scott' is a proper name, because 'Scott' is simple symbol. On the other hand, 'Scott is the author of Waverley' is an incomplete symbol. The description 'author of Waverley' does not therefore mean 'Scott'. He further says that 'Scott is Scott' and 'Scott is the author of Waverley' are different propositions and that this is so because the proper name 'Scott' and the description 'the author of Waverley' play logically different roles. Moreover, he says that if 'Scott' is identified with 'the author of Waverley', then the resulting proposition would be 'Scott is Scott', which is a tautology. King George the fourth wanted to know whether Scott was the author of Waverley. George the fourth definitely did not want to know whether Scott was Scott.

4.6.3 Drawbacks in Frege's theory

Frege attempted to resolve the above difficulty by making a distinction between sense (meaning) and reference (denotation). According to him, when we say that Scott was the author of Waverley, 'Scott' and 'the author of Waverley' have different senses (meanings) but the same reference (denotation) namely Scott. But this theory has no satisfactory means of dealing with cases where a referential expression does not have any denotation whatsoever. For example, if we talk of Mr. Smith's

only son where Mr. Smith has either more than one son or that he has no son at all, what does the phrase 'Mr. Smith's only son' denote? Frege would say that here the phrase 'Mr. Smith's only son' denotes the class of Mr. Smith's sons which in the case where he has no son, will be the null class. But here arises one difficulty, i.e., if we take expressions like 'the present king of France' as denoting the null class, the proposition 'The present king of France is bald' and 'the present king of France is not bald' both turn out to be true, since null class is included in all classes. Thus Frege's way of analysis leads one to innumerable difficulties. Russell sought to remove these difficulties by his theory of definite descriptions.

4.6.4 Theory of descriptions

Russell formulated his theory of descriptions to solve certain philosophical problems. The famous illustration that Russell gave of a sentence in which a definite description is present which denotes nothing is: 'the present king of France is bald'. The descriptive phrase or the definite description found in the sentence is the following: 'the present king of France'. We know that at present there is no monarchy in France and therefore this phrase denotes nothing. Russell points out that in such sentences definite descriptions cannot actually function by denoting. According to Russell, the proposition 'the present king of France is bald' can be analyzed as the conjunction of three propositions. These three propositions are:

1. There exists at least one person who reigns in France at present.
2. There exists at most one person who reigns in France at present.
3. Whoever reigns in France at present is bald.

When the original sentence, i.e. 'the present king of France is bald'

is translated into these three propositions then the constituent 'the present king of France' is found to be gone. We can see that the sentence is replaced by a propositional function which is not satisfied by any value and is therefore always false (the propositional function is 'x reigns at present in France.' Here no replacement of the variable x by any value will result in a true proposition). Russell showed that definite phrases like 'the author of *Waverley*' appeared as names in sentences, but these phrases disappear after analysis. He called these phrases 'incomplete symbols' which did not have meaning in isolation and became meaningful when used in a sentence.

This theory enables Russell to account for true negative existential judgments. A famous negative existential judgment is the following: 'the golden mountain does not exist'. This negative existential judgment, according to Russell cannot be understood as a statement about something which does not exist.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6. State true or false

a) Meinong says that every denoting phrase stands for an object. (True/False)

b) According to Russell, grammatical form of a proposition is different from its logical form.(True/False)

c) For Russell, a proper name is a complex symbol. (True/False)

d) According to Frege, sense and reference are same. (True/False)

Q 7. What is the difference between proper name and descriptions?

.....

.....

.....



ACTIVITY 4.3

Is it necessary to consider the incomplete symbols to be complex?

.....

.....

.....



4.7 LET US SUM UP

- Theory of descriptions is a technique whereby certain symbols, because they are defective, are replaced by other symbols or group of symbols. The replaced symbols help to resolve certain contradictions associated with language. Russell further says: "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" (p. 53).
- Russell distinguishes three cases of denoting phrases: a) Denoting phrases which do not denote anything, b) Phrases which denote one definite object, c) Phrases which denote ambiguously, for example 'a man'. Definite descriptions involve the first two groups of denoting phrases, and indefinite descriptions involve the third group. A definite description is a phrase like 'the author of *Principia Mathematica'*, i.e., it has the form 'the so-and-so'.
- Russell says that when the word 'the' is used strictly, it involves uniqueness. This means that when we say '*x* was the father of Charles II' we not only assert that *x* had a certain relation to Charles II, but also that nothing else had this relation.
- Meinong considered any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an *object*. For Meinong, therefore, 'the present king of France', 'the round square' etc. are supposed to be genuine

objects. Russell objects to such thesis of Meinong by saying that it violates a robust sense of reality.

- Pointing to the deficiencies in Meinong's analysis, Russell states that it is because of the lack of proper logical analysis, we are led to the conclusion that there are unreal objects.
- Propositions containing descriptions typically appear to be of the standard subject-predicate form. But in Russellian analysis these propositions turn out to be different in form. In other words, the grammatical form of a proposition may not reveal its actual logical form.
- The theory of descriptions draws a clear distinction between proper names and descriptions. A proper name is simple symbol, since it designates an individual directly, and it has meaning in isolation. A description, on the contrary, does not designate an individual directly. That is why Russell calls it an 'incomplete symbol'. An incomplete symbol has no meaning in isolation but which obtains a meaning in a context with other symbols. For Russell 'Scott' is a proper name, because 'Scott' is simple symbol. On the other hand, 'Scott is the author of Waverley' is an incomplete symbol.
- Frege attempted to resolve the above difficulty by making a distinction between sense(meaning) and reference(denotation). According to him, when we say that Scott was the author of Waverley, 'Scott' and 'the author of Waverley' have different senses (meanings) but the same reference (denotation) namely Scott. But this theory has no satisfactory means of dealing with cases where a referential expression does not have any denotation whatsoever.
- According to Russell, the proposition 'the present king of France is bald' can be analyzed as the conjunction of three propositions. These three propositions are: