

# The mysterious ‘Gray’s elegy’ argument

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Russell’s principle argument against Frege’s view that definite descriptions have a meaning which is distinct from their denotation is contained in the very confusing passage in which Russell discusses the description, ‘the first line of Gray’s elegy.’ Below are excerpted what I take to be the key points in that argument:<sup>1</sup>

“The relation of the meaning to the denotation involves certain rather curious difficulties, which seem in themselves sufficient to prove that the theory which leads to such difficulties must be wrong.

...

[1] We say, to begin with, that when C occurs it is the *denotation* that we are speaking about; but when “C” occurs, it is the *meaning*. . . . But the difficulty which confronts us is that we cannot succeed in both preserving the connexion of meaning and denotation and preventing them from being one and the same . . .

[2] The one phrase C was to have both meaning and denotation. But if we speak of “the meaning of C,” that gives us the meaning (if any) of the denotation. “The meaning of the first line of Gray’s Elegy ” is the same as “The meaning of ‘The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,’” and is not the same as “The meaning of ‘the first line of Gray’s Elegy.’” . . . Similarly “the denotation of C” does not mean the denotation we want, but means something which, if it denotes at all, denotes what is denoted by the denotation we want. . . .

[3] [Now instead] suppose . . . that C is the meaning of the complex. Nevertheless, whenever C occurs without inverted commas, what is said is not true of the meaning, but only of the denotation, as when we say: The centre of mass of the Solar System is a point. Thus to speak of C itself, i.e., to make a proposition about the meaning, our subject must not be C, but something which denotes C. Thus “C,” which is what we use when we want to speak of the meaning, must be not the meaning, but something which denotes the meaning. And C must not be a constituent of this complex (as it is of “the meaning of C”) ; for if C occurs in the complex, it will be its denotation, not its meaning, that will occur, and there is no backward road from denotations to meanings, because every object can be denoted by an infinite number of different denoting phrases.

[4] Thus it would seem that “C” and C are different entities, such that “C” denotes C ; but this cannot be an explanation, because the relation of “C” to C remains wholly mysterious ; and where are we to find the denoting complex “C” which is to denote C? . . . This is an inextricable tangle, and seems to prove that the whole distinction of meaning and denotation has been wrongly conceived.”

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<sup>1</sup>This passage has been the subject of much discussion; in what follows the interpretation I’ll be giving of it drawn largely from Nathan Salmon’s article “On designating”, which is in *Mind* 114:456.

Here Russell is arguing that the attempt to formulate a theory of Frege's sort — which takes definite descriptions to be terms which have a meaning which is distinct from their denotation, or reference — leads to certain problems. In particular, he is arguing that it is impossible to formulate a claim which we can understand which is about the meaning of a description. This would be bad for Frege's theory, for it would mean that there is a sense in which we cannot even understand what Frege's theory of descriptions is supposed to be.

Russell's terminology in this passage is confusing. In §[1]-[2], he uses

C

as a name for the definite description (phrase)

the first line of Gray's elegy

Keeping in mind that Frege's theory is one which distinguishes the meaning of C from its denotation, he then asks how we are to talk about the meaning of C. He first suggests that we use the phrase

the meaning of C

i.e.,

the meaning of the first line of Gray's elegy

but, as he notes, this is not about the meaning of the definite description 'the first line of Gray's elegy', but rather about the meaning of what that description denotes — namely, the first line of Gray's elegy. So this will not do.

In the first part of [3], he suggests that we introduce

C

not as a name for the definite description in question, but rather as a logically proper name for the meaning of that definite description. By 'logically proper name', Russell means a name whose denotation is the same as its content; a 'pure tag' for the thing it stands for. Can't we then just use such a name to formulate claims about the meaning of the description? No. On this interpretation, the following two expressions have the same meaning:

C

the first line of Gray's elegy

It follows that just as

The first line of Gray's elegy is the meaning of 'the first line of Gray's elegy'

is false, so is

$C$  is the meaning of ‘the first line of Gray’s elegy’

Both are about the denotation of the description, not about its meaning. So the attempt in [2] to formulate claims about the meaning of a description by introducing a name for that meaning fails; our attempt to talk about the meaning collapses into talk about the denotation.

Towards the end of [3] and in [4], he continues to use

$C$

as a name for the meaning of the definite description, and is wondering how we can formulate a claim about this meaning. We have already seen that we cannot use

$C$

itself in formulating such a claim, since this collapses into a claim about the denotation rather than the meaning of the description. So what we want is some expression which denotes  $C$ , but has some meaning other than  $C$ . (This is what Russell means when he says ‘Thus to speak of  $C$  itself, i.e., to make a proposition about the meaning, our subject must not be  $C$ , but something which denotes  $C$ .’) Here Russell uses quotation marks to form an expression which denotes the meaning of the expression quoted. It is important to see that this is different than our usual use of quotation marks; normally we use them to form a name of expression quoted, rather than a term which denotes the meaning of the expression quoted. So he introduces

‘ $C$ ’

as a term which denotes the meaning  $C$ , but has some meaning other than  $C$ . (I.e., it is not a logically proper name of  $C$ .)

In the second half of [3] and in [4], Russell turns to the question: what is the meaning of ‘ $C$ ’, given that it is not  $C$  itself? One option is that we should use our proper name  $C$  to formulate a description, as in

the meaning of  $C$

But, as above, since  $C$  has the same meaning as the description in question, this is equivalent to

the meaning of the first line of Gray’s elegy

which denotes the meaning of the reference of the description, rather than the meaning of the description. So, as Russell asks, ‘where are we to find the denoting complex “ $C$ ” which is to denote  $C$ ?’

You might think that Russell has overlooked a fairly obvious option here. If all we want is some expression which denotes the meaning of the description, why not try something like

the meaning which denotes C

or, equivalently,

the meaning which denotes the meaning of ‘the first line of Gray’s elegy’

(Here I’m using quotes in the normal way.) But the problem with this is that there is not *one* such meaning; for any denotation, there are many meanings which denote it. Of the many meanings which denote C, this description simply fails to single one out. This is why Russell says ‘there is no backward road from denotations to meanings, because every object can be denoted by an infinite number of different denoting phrases.’

But you still might have thought that Russell is overlooking a simple reply here. How about

the meaning of ‘the first line of Gray’s elegy’

Doesn’t this, after all, denote the meaning of the definite description? And isn’t this all that we were looking for?

Two worries about this line of reply for Frege:

1. It makes our grasp of meanings only ‘by description’, which seems odd.
2. It seems circular, if combined with an account of understanding which says that what it is to understand a linguistic expression is to know its meaning. The present account suggests that our only access to meanings is via an antecedent understanding of the expressions whose meanings they are.