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# CONTENT

## DESCRIPTIONS: THEIR CONTENT, USES, AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

### INTRODUCTION

Michael Liston ..... 5

### REFERENTIAL DESCRIPTIONS AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

Michael Devitt ..... 7

### REFERENTIALLY USED DESCRIPTIONS: A REPLY TO DEVITT

Kent Bach ..... 33

### REFERENTIAL DESCRIPTIONS: A NOTE ON BACH

Michael Devitt ..... 49

### THE MAIN BONE OF CONTENTION

Kent Bach ..... 55

### ABOUT ABOUTNESS

Nathan Salmon ..... 59

### HEAVY HANDS, MAGIC, AND SCENE-READING TRAPS

Stephen Neale ..... 77

### DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS AND QUANTIFIER SCOPE: SOME MATES CASES RECONSIDERED

Michael Glanzberg ..... 133

### THE 1910 *PRINCIPIA*'S THEORY OF FUNCTIONS AND CLASSES AND THE THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

William Demopoulos ..... 159

FREGE AND RUSSELL: DOES SCIENCE TALK SENSE? Mark Wilson .....	179
THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: RUSSELL ON NAMES Michael Liston .....	191

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# INTRODUCTION

This issue was originally conceived in 2005, the one hundredth anniversary of Russell's essay, "On Denoting".<sup>1</sup> The essay presented Russell's theory of descriptions and is properly considered a milestone for future developments in analytic philosophy, especially in investigations of language, logic, semantics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Despite the elegance, simplicity, and power of Russell's theory, much of the history of analytic philosophy in the past century has been influenced by discussions about its historical development, its correctness, its proper scope, its range of applications, and its extendibility. As will be clear from the ensuing essays, these debates have proliferated rather than subsided, and philosophy has substantially benefitted.<sup>2</sup> Given the mission of this journal and the centrality, both historical and current, of the theory of descriptions to analytic philosophy, a special issue devoted to them seemed appropriate and valuable to propose to the editorial board. I am happy they agreed. While the original idea has taken some time and effort to execute, it is my hope that readers will find it worthwhile. Given the considerable heft of the issue, a long introductory essay that would do justice to the papers the authors have contributed is impossible and, in any case, seems unnecessary, since the authors have provided abstracts of their papers. So I shall let the essays speak for themselves, and the reader will perhaps be thankful if I confine my remarks to very brief descriptions of the papers that will give an idea of their sweep (though not their intricate details) and to the acknowledgement of some debts.

The papers (and replies) by Michael Devitt and Kent Bach continue an ongoing debate about whether Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions indicates a semantic ambiguity or is largely a pragmatic distinction. Devitt argues in favor of the semantic ambiguity thesis and seeks to undermine pragmatic accounts that attempt to explain referential uses as generalized conversational implicatures. Bach argues that definite descriptions do not have referential meanings and that referential uses involve pragmatic regularities of a different sort than those involving generalized implicatures. Nathan Salmon develops and examines different notions of Russellian *aboutness*, argues (*pace* David Kaplan) that one can entertain a thought that is (indirectly) about an object without knowing the object either by acquaintance or by description, and considers possible Russellian substitutes for *de re* propositional attitudes. Stephen Neale describes and cautions against a kind of error

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<sup>1</sup> Russell 1905, pp. 479-493. Though the lectures had been circulating for several years, 2005 was also the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke S. (1980), *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press), which challenged Russell's analysis of proper names as disguised definite descriptions, yet retained a new vision of Russellian direct reference for names.

<sup>2</sup> Two very fine collections, whose release coincided with the centenary, similarly confirm just how lively the discussion and how substantial the benefit continues to be: Anne Bezuidenhout & Marga Reimer (eds.), *Descriptions and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004); and "100 Years of 'On Denoting'", the special issue of *Mind* (2005) edited by Stephen Neale (*Mind* 114.456, October 2005).

that those who overestimate the powers of semantic composition and underestimate the resources for pragmatic responses are likely to make – that of illicitly using a condition that obtains in a stipulated scene to provide truth conditions for a proposition expressed by a sentence associated with the scene. Michael Glanzberg considers examples that are taken to support treating definite descriptions as quantifiers that enter into distinctive scope relations with other quantifiers and argues that contemporary linguistic approaches leave open the possibility that descriptions in themselves may not exhibit distinctive scope ambiguities. William Demopoulos develops a reconstruction of Russell’s theory of functions and classes in the 1910 *Principia* that is based on epistemological applications of the theory of descriptions and has advantages – it motivates Russell’s ramified type theory and his axiom of reducibility – over the no-class theory of classes. Mark Wilson argues that early Frege was aware that the liberal definitional practices of science provide fruitful conceptual settings that can conflict with pre-analytic propositional content, that later Frege lost sight of this, and that Russell, though less aware of the problem, has resources (supplied by his theory of descriptions) to deal with it. Michael Liston makes a case for the claim that Russell appreciated the distinctive logical behavior of ordinary names and attempted to secure a semantically privileged status for them: only special kinds of descriptions can go proxy for ordinary names “used as names”.

Finally, the primary and most obvious debt I wish to acknowledge is that owed to each of the contributors, not only for the very fine articles they submitted, but also for their cooperation and patience throughout the process. I also wish to express my deeply felt thanks to Carla Bagnoli, the journal’s editor, for her initial support of the proposal and her continuing encouragement during its execution, to Elvio Baccharini and Iris Vidmar for their much appreciated assistance in bringing the project to completion, and to Nate Sharadin for his help with proof-reading and formatting.

Michael Liston  
Guest editor

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Russell B. (1905), “On Denoting”, *Mind*, 14.56, pp. 479-493

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