

ABOUT ABOUTNESS*

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ABSTRACT

A Russellian notion of what it is for a proposition to be “directly about” something in particular is defined. Various strong and weak, and mediate and immediate, Russellian notions of general (direct or indirect) aboutness are then defined in terms of Russellian direct aboutness. In particular, a proposition is *about* something iff the proposition is either directly, or strongly indirectly, about that thing. A competing Russellian account, due to Kaplan, is criticized through a distinction between knowledge by description and denoting by description. The epistemological significance of Russellian aboutness is assessed. A Russellian substitute for *de re* propositional attitude is considered.

Key words: Russellian propositions, direct and indirect aboutness, knowledge by acquaintance and by description, denoting, *de re* propositional attitudes, Kaplan

1.

According to Russell, the propositions that Walter Scott is Scottish and that the sole author of *Waverley* is Scottish are both about Scott, although in different ways.¹ The former is about Scott by virtue of including Scott himself, rather than a representation, as a constituent. (I assume here that ‘Walter Scott’ is, contrary to his later views, what Russell calls a ‘genuine name in the strict, logical sense.’) The latter, according to Russell’s theory of descriptions, is just the proposition that

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¹ I write ‘the sole author of *Waverley*’ instead of simply ‘the author of *Waverley*’ to indicate the intended meaning. In “On Denoting” (Russell 1905; Russell 2005), Russell explicitly indicates that his understanding of the definite article deviates from a standard usage. He concedes that “we do, it is true, speak of ‘the son of So-and-so’ even when So-and-so has several sons, but it would be more correct to say ‘a son of So-and-so.’ Thus for our purposes we take *the* as involving uniqueness” (Russell 1905, p. 481). Many readers have disregarded Russell’s explicit stipulation. He might have emphasized the stipulation by writing ‘the only such-and-such’ in place of ‘the such-and-such’ throughout.

something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish. It includes neither Scott nor a representative as a constituent.

Where p is a proposition and x is either an individual or another proposition, a Russellian notion of direct aboutness is definable as follows:

p is directly about $x =_{df}$ x is a proper constituent of p .

(Stricter notions of direct aboutness are available to Russell.) It is assumed that the relevant notion of constituent-hood—for present purposes a primitive—is such that if x is a constituent of p , then *ipso facto* x is also a constituent (albeit not *ipso facto* an immediate constituent) of any proposition having p as a proper constituent. Since the proposition that Scott is Scottish is immediately directly about Scott, the complex propositions that it is not the case that Scott is Scottish, and that either snow is white or Scott is Scottish, are also directly about Scott, although only mediately, since both are immediately directly about the proposition that Scott is Scottish.

Russell's *principle of acquaintance* is his thesis that the apprehension of a proposition requires acquaintance with the proposition and each of its constituents. It follows from the principle that apprehension requires acquaintance with each of the things the proposition is directly about.

It is less clear what it is for a proposition to be about something merely *indirectly*. In 1903 Russell explored a notion of indirect aboutness at some length in his posthumously published "On Meaning and Denotation." He there wrote:

we may know a proposition about a man, without knowing that it is about him, and without even having ever heard of him (Russell 1903, p. 317)

... when we say "the present Prime Minister of England favours retaliation", we make a statement *about* the present Prime Minister of England, who is Mr. Arthur Balfour; and thus, whether we know it or not, we make a statement *about* Mr. Balfour. The terms [individuals] a proposition is *about* are different, therefore, from the constituents of the proposition, and the notion of *about* is different from that of constituent. (Russell 1903, p. 328)

Russell was working here within a Millian framework, which takes proper names to be directly designative and which assigns a concept to a definite description as its semantic content ("meaning"), leaving it to the concept to fix a designatum for the description. By the time he wrote "On Denoting," Russell had a different theory of definite descriptions, according to which the description 'the sole author of *Waverley*' does not designate (refer to, stand for) anything, and indeed does not have any meaning.² Neverthe-

² Russell says, "Denoting phrases have no meaning in isolation." More fully, he says, "This is the principle of the

less, in Russell's 1905 terminology, a description 'the only $x: \phi_x$ ' (see note 1 above) is said (misleadingly) to *denote* the individual that uniquely satisfies its open sentence (or common noun phrase) ϕ_x , if there is such an individual, and to denote nothing otherwise. So-called denotation by a definite description is a pseudo-semantic relation. It is a kind of simulation of genuine designation between a genuine name and its bearer.

Whereas the description 'the sole author of *Waverley*' represents ("denotes") Scott, according to Russell, the sentence 'The sole author of *Waverley* is Scottish' expresses (or designates) a proposition that allegedly (unlike the sentence) does not include any single component, element, or feature that represents Scott. How, then, is the proposition genuinely about Scott?

Russell's pseudo-semantic notion of denotation holds the key to a corresponding notion of indirect aboutness between propositions and individuals. He says, "What we know about [things not directly perceived] is obtained through denoting. All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking *about* many things with which we have no acquaintance" (Russell 1905, p. 480). Extrapolating from the 1905 theory of descriptions, the following definition captures a significant Russellian notion of aboutness:

$$p \text{ is immediately weakly indirectly about } x =_{df} (\exists F)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ p \models \wedge (\exists z)(y)(Fy \equiv y = z) \wedge],$$

where \models is logical entailment between propositions. The predicate variable ' F ' is to be interpreted intensionally, i.e., as ranging over "intensions"—properties or concepts or, as Russell would have it, propositional functions—not over classes or sets or Fregean "concepts," i.e., functions to truth-values. \wedge is a mark of indirect quotation. (For Russell, indirect-quotation marks are superfluous, since sentences are interpreted as designating propositions.) In short, a proposition p is *immediately weakly indirectly about* x when x is uniquely F , and furthermore, p entails that something or other is uniquely F , for some property F .

The proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish is immediately weakly indirectly about Walter Scott, despite the fact that no proper component represents him. I interpret Russell's "On Denoting" as urging some such notion of aboutness as this. Indeed, it may be said that the possibility of this sort of *aboutness without one-on-one representation* is precisely the central point of "On Denoting."

theory of denoting I wish to advocate: that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning" (Russell 1905, p. 480). He means that determiner ("denoting") phrases have no semantic content ("meaning") at all, although the sentences in which they occur have a content, expressing a proposition determined partly by the determiner phrase, partly by the rest of the sentence.

What makes the notion of immediate weak indirect aboutness *weak* is that not only the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish, but also anything logically equivalent to it, is immediately weakly indirectly about Walter Scott. Thus the conjunctive proposition that all authors of *Waverley* are the same and at least one author of *Waverley* is Scottish, despite evidently having a form significantly different from the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish, is just as much immediately weakly indirectly about Scott. Whereas the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish is immediately weakly indirectly about Scott, its denial is not. Neither is the proposition that either snow is white or else something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish. This is not objectionable, since these propositions, although indirectly about Scott if the corresponding singular propositions are directly about him, are not *immediately* indirectly about him. They are only mediately indirectly about him.

A potentially undesirable feature of the notion of immediate weak indirect aboutness is that an inconsistent proposition is immediately indirectly about each and every thing. Thus the conjunctive proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish and *Waverley* was co-authored is as much immediately weakly indirectly about Shakespeare as Scott. Fortunately, a variety of more restrictive notions are also available to Russell. In light of the weakness of our present notion it is good to continue our quest.

One natural stronger notion of immediate indirect aboutness is the following binary relation between propositions p and individuals x :

$$p \text{ is immediately very strongly indirectly about } x =_{df} (\exists F)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ (\exists G)(p = \wedge (\exists z)[(y)(Fy \equiv y = z) \ \& \ Gz] \wedge)] .$$

Whereas the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish bears this relation to Scott, the equivalent conjunctive proposition that all authors of *Waverley* are the same while at least one author of *Waverley* is Scottish evidently does not. Such is the price of this stronger notion of immediate indirect aboutness that does not hold between inconsistencies and every individual whatsoever. A more problematic feature—and the reason this type of immediate indirect aboutness is *very* strong—is that the proposition that the sole king of England in 1830 spoke to the sole author of *Waverley* bears our new relation to one of George IV and Scott but not to the other. Similarly for the converse proposition that the sole author of *Waverley* spoke to the sole king of England in 1830.

I submit something between our two notions of immediate indirect aboutness:

$$p \text{ is immediately strongly indirectly about } x =_{df} (\exists F_1)(\exists F_2) \dots (\exists F_n)(\exists i, 0 < i \leq n) [(y)(F_i y \equiv x = y) \ \& \ (\exists G^n)(p = \wedge (\exists z_1)[(y)(F_1 y \equiv y = z_1) \ \& \ (\exists z_2)[(y)(F_2 y \equiv y = z_2) \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ (\exists z_n)[(y)(F_n y \equiv y = z_n) \ \& \ G^n(z_1, z_2, \dots, z_n)]] \dots] \wedge)] .$$

According to Russell's theory of descriptions, the propositions that the sole king of England in 1830 spoke to the sole author of *Waverley* and that the sole author of *Waverley* spoke to the sole king of England in 1830 are both immediately strongly indirectly about both George IV and Scott. The proposition that all authors of *Waverley* are the same while at least one author of *Waverley* is Scottish is not immediately strongly indirectly about Scott (or anyone else). Inconsistencies are not immediately strongly indirectly about everything.³

2.

The negative proposition that no unique author of *Waverley* is Scottish, although it is not immediately strongly indirectly about Scott, is arguably directly about the positive proposition that some unique author of *Waverley* is Scottish, denying of it that it obtains. The latter, positive proposition *is* immediately strongly indirectly about Scott. Similarly, the disjunctive proposition that either snow is white or some unique author of *Waverley* is Scottish, although not immediately strongly indirectly about Scott, is directly about a proposition that is immediately strongly indirectly about him. The disjunctive proposition is thus mediately strongly indirectly about Scott. This suggests a general notion of strong indirect aboutness, whether mediate or immediate:

p is either immediately strongly indirectly about *x* or directly about a proposition immediately strongly indirectly about *x*.

Russell presumably intends some version or variant of this notion, whereupon a proposition *p* is about *x* when *p* has as a constituent one (or both) of two things: *x* itself—direct aboutness—or, alternatively, a proposition concerning some property *F* uniquely of *x*, that something or other is both uniquely *F* and ...⁴

The formulation displayed above likely does not capture the most useful notion of indirect aboutness. To see why, consider first the proposition—call it '*P*'—that George IV believes that Scott is Scottish. (Never mind Russell's contention that George IV is unable to apprehend, let alone believe, any proposition directly about Scott. *P*'s truth-value is not at issue.) *P* is directly about George IV, and also directly about the singular proposition that Scott is Scottish. The latter, in turn, is directly about Scott. On the definition proposed at the beginning of this essay, *P* is therefore also directly about Scott. Indeed, *P*, in some sense, attributes a particular relation to George IV and Scott: the relation,

³ Russell might have had in mind something more restrictive than immediate weak indirect aboutness but less restrictive than immediate strong indirect aboutness. I do not know whether he says anything that settles the matter. The main points I shall make are largely unaffected if a less restrictive notion of immediate indirect aboutness is employed in lieu of the conservative notion defined in the text.

⁴ Any proposition having an inconsistent component, e.g., $\sim(p \ \& \ \sim p)$, is indirectly weakly about each and every thing. See the previous note.

x believes y to be Scottish. This is in contrast with the proposition—call it ‘ Q ’—that George IV believes that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish. Q is directly about George IV and the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish. Q is thus about a proposition that is immediately strongly indirectly about Scott. But Q is not itself directly about Scott.

Is Q then indirectly about Scott? We do not inquire here about the proposition that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish, which assuredly is indirectly about Scott, but about the significantly more complex proposition Q . Is Q about Scott? It may be impossible to know how Russell would have answered this question, but it is very plausible that Q is not about Scott at all, either directly or indirectly. Whereas P attributes the particular relation, x believes y to be Scottish, to George IV and Scott, Q does not do this. Instead Q attributes a different relation, that of *believing*, to George IV and a particular proposition, which, as it happens, is indirectly about Scott. While the latter proposition—that something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish—is intuitively indirectly about Scott (since, in light of *Waverley*’s authorship, it is Scott and his nationality that make it true), the proposition that George IV believes it does not *get at* Scott in the same way—indeed it does not seem to get at Scott in any way worthy of the epithet ‘about’. If one asserts P , one asserts a relation between George IV and Scott and, intuitively, what one says is very much about both of them. This asserted relationship between King George and Scott—that the former believes the latter to be Scottish—if it obtains, is what makes one’s assertion true. By contrast, if one asserts Q , intuitively one thereby says merely that King George believes something, something that is true if and only if the property of uniquely having authored *Waverley* and the property of being Scottish are co-instantiated. Q concerns not George IV and his cognitive relations to Scott, but George IV and his cognitive relation to specific concepts (or propositional functions): *having authored Waverley*, *being Scottish*, and a variety of logical concepts. It is King George’s cognitive relation toward those concepts that makes Q true, if it is, or false, if it is. Scott himself is all but irrelevant to the issue of Q ’s truth-value.

The point emerges more clearly from the perspective that Russell shared with Frege in 1903. According to Frege, the occurrences of ‘the sole author of *Waverley*’ and ‘is Scottish’ in the sentence ‘George IV believes that the sole author of *Waverley* is Scottish’ have their indirect designata (*ungerade Bedeutungen*), there designating the phrases’ customary English senses rather than their customary designata. The sentence thus asserts a cognitive relation not between George IV, Scott, and the class of Scotsmen (or the latter’s characteristic function), but between George IV and the customary senses of ‘the sole author of *Waverley*’ and ‘is Scottish’. To be sure, if Q is true, then King George bears *some* relation to Scott and the class of Scotsmen—for example, the relation, x believes some proposition or other whose components determine y and z . But the fact that if Q is true then King George bears this relation to Scott and the class of Scotsmen obtains only in virtue of the historical fact that Scott uniquely authored *Waverley*. Had

someone else done so, *Q* might still be true, in which case King George would bear this relation to *Waverley's* author instead of to Scott. *Q's* truth conditions constitutively concern George's cognitive relations toward certain senses, not his relations to Scott and the class of Scott's countrymen. (To forestall irrelevant considerations concerning the metaphysical essentiality of the sole authorship of a work of fiction, the example may be changed to 'George IV believes that the man standing before him is Scottish'.)

In 1903 Russell self-professedly held a view very similar to Frege's. It might be presumed, therefore, that he would have agreed at that time that *Q* is not about Scott even indirectly, but about King George and a certain proposition (which proposition irrelevantly happens to be indirectly about Scott) and its constituents. Russell presumably agreed with Frege that King George's cognitive relations to Scott himself have no bearing on the truth-value of *Q*; what matters are King George's cognitive relations to a variety of concepts, including that of *the sole author of Waverley*. As Russell himself observed, according to this philosophical point of view, there is "no backward road" from Scott to his representation as *the sole author of Waverley*.

Although Russell would come to have a different theory of descriptions by 1905, this significant shift in theoretical viewpoint provides little reason to suppose that he should also have changed his mind concerning the question of what things *P* and *Q* are respectively about. On the contrary, his 1905 theory of aboutness is aimed at preserving as much as possible about aboutness from the Fregean perspective while rejecting the Fregean theory of descriptions. Russell might well have believed even in 1905 that while *P* is about Scott, *Q* is about a proposition (which, in turn, is indirectly about Scott) and its various components, including the propositional function, *uniquely having authored Waverley*, but not about Scott.

This creates a difficulty for constructing a general notion of mediate strong indirect aboutness. How can we say that the proposition that if snow is white then something is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish is strongly indirectly about Scott, whereas *Q* is not? I submit the following:

p is strongly indirectly about *x* =_{df} *p* is either immediately strongly indirectly about *x* or has a proposition *q* immediately strongly indirectly about *x* as a truth-functional proper constituent.⁵

The relevant notion of truth-functional proper constituent is to be understood so that *q* is, but *p* is not, such a constituent of the complex proposition: *either George IV believes p or else q*. The truth-value of the whole proposition is a function of the truth-values of *George IV believes p* and *q*, but not of the truth-value of *p*. The proposition that ei-

⁵ An analogous notion of weak indirect aboutness results by replacing immediate strong indirect aboutness with immediate weak indirect aboutness. The relevant notion of truth-value here is not semantic (the truth-value of a sentence), but metaphysical (the truth-value of a proposition).

ther snow is white or else nothing is both uniquely author of *Waverley* and Scottish is strongly indirectly about Scott. By contrast, Q is not strongly indirectly about Scott. In fact, Q is not about Scott at all. It is about George IV and the proposition that the sole author of *Waverley* is Scottish.

I fear that the notion of strong indirect aboutness defined above might still fail to capture the intended notion. Even so, I am optimistic that, if not the notion defined here, then some variant of it, may be properly introduced to distinguish Russell's intended notion of mediate strong indirect aboutness from its immediate cousin.

Given an appropriate general notion of strong indirect aboutness, we may finally introduce a general notion of aboutness as follows:

p is about $x =_{df}$ p is either directly or strongly indirectly about x .⁶

One has a thought/belief/knowledge about x by thinking/believing/knowing a proposition about x . In particular, then, one can have a thought about x even though no proper component of one's thought (of the proposition thought) represents x . So it is, in this very roundabout way, I believe, that according to Russell our thinking – our beliefs, our knowledge, our cognition – engages with the external world beyond the severely restricted confines of our *acquaintance*.

3.

David Kaplan disagrees. He argues that Russell had in mind a much stricter notion of aboutness, one that employs knowledge by description. I quote at length:

Russell's very notion of knowledge by description seems to require an unmentioned complication in his analysis. Knowledge by description requires knowledge that there is exactly one thing satisfying the description. But a description may be used in expressing attitudes other than knowledge, for example, when George IV asked, 'Is the author of *Waverley* present in this room?' Now this is a *query about* Scott in just the way that George IV *knowing* that the author of *Waverley* was present in the room would be *knowledge about* Scott. Russell says that through denoting we succeed in *thinking* about many things, not just *knowing* about many things. So I read Russell as claiming that *knowledge by description* is what enables all forms of *thinking about*. Keep in mind that knowledge of a thing by acquaintance and knowledge of a thing by description are Russell's two ways for thought to connect with things. There are, for Russell, no relevant further ways for thought to connect with things. For example, merely *suspecting* that there is exactly one so-and-so

⁶ An analogous notion of *weak aboutness* results by replacing strong indirect aboutness with weak indirect aboutness. (Cf. the previous note.) Q is not even weakly about Scott. Unlike P, Q is not about Scott at all.

does not enable you to think *about* that thing (even assuming your suspicion is correct). Thought connects directly with things through acquaintance and indirectly through knowledge by description (knowing that there is exactly [one] thing of a certain kind). Mere suspicion won't hook you up. Once we *know* that there is exactly one so-and-so, we can freely use the description 'the so-and-so' to express propositions that are *about* (in Russell's italicized way) the denotation of the descriptive phrase. [I think] this is a correct reading of Russell ...

... Russell speaks of 'all thinking' and our succeeding in 'thinking about many things.' He doesn't limit himself to *knowing* about many things. So if in my thinking, I am wont to *query* whether the author of *Waverley* is present at the banquet, the standard Russellian elimination does not correctly capture what Russell tells us about my epistemic state. My query involves two propositions, one queried, which Russell does correctly capture, and another known, which is lost in translation. Note that in 'George IV wished to know whether the author of *Waverley* was present at the banquet' neither choice of scope captures the fact that the query is *about* Scott, and that it involves a bit of knowledge by description. Secondary scope misses the knowledge, and even the mere fact that there *is* exactly one author of *Waverley*, and primary scope makes the query 'by acquaintance.'

... The fact that Russell's analysis does *not* imply that George IV knew that there was exactly one author of *Waverley* is a criticism of the analysis, and shows that the mere elimination of the description from the sentential complement to the propositional-attitude verb (when the attitude does not imply *knowledge*) does not correctly capture the epistemic situation *as Russell took it to be*.

... In summary, for Russell, all *thinking about* requires *knowledge*, knowledge by description. If the use of a definite description is to indicate that we know that there is such an individual ..., then the mere phrase would signal the presence of this form of *knowledge*, even though the *primary* explicit propositional attitude might be *wishes, wonders whether, doubts*, etc. In general and in giving examples, Russell neglects to mention this (Kaplan 2005, pp. 983-985).

Kaplan evidently argues that according to Russell's epistemology (from "On Denoting" on), the sentence

(1) George IV wondered whether the sole author of *Waverley* was present,

on its intended reading, is correctly analyzed neither by means of the standard Russellian primary-occurrence analysis,

(1₁) $(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y) \ \& \ \text{George IV wondered-whether } (x \text{ was present})]$,

which "makes the query 'by acquaintance'", nor by means of the standard secondary-occurrence analysis,

(1₂) George IV *wondered-whether* [$(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)] \ \& \ x \text{ was present}$],

which “misses” King George’s knowledge of Scott. Instead, the definite description occurring in (1) allegedly signals knowledge by description, yielding the following analysis:

(1_K) George IV *knew-that* [$(\exists x)(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)$] & George IV *wondered-whether* [$(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)] \ \& \ x \text{ was present}$].

The first conjunct attributes the indicated knowledge by description; the second is just (1₂).

This objection to the standard Russellian secondary-occurrence analysis of (1) is not to be confused with Peter Geach’s claim that the correct analysis of (1), on its intended reading, is given neither by (1₂) nor by (1_K) but is rather the following:

(1_G) George IV assumed that exactly one person authored *Waverley*, and George IV wondered whether he (that same author) was present.

Geach’s interpretation, naturally understood, evidently corresponds more closely to the primary-occurrence reading of (1). Like (1₁), (1_G) apparently “makes the query ‘by acquaintance,’” and thus is not the intended reading.⁷ Kaplan’s objection to Russell is also not to be confused with the common but misplaced objection—which Kaplan rightly rejects—that (1₂) is true only if King George wondered whether exactly one person authored *Waverley*. The secondary-occurrence analysis does not have this consequence.⁸ The objection, rather, is that (1₂) fails, where (1_K) succeeds, to capture that the query reported in (1) is *about* Scott, given that Scott is uniquely author of *Waverley*. Kaplan is not arguing that the proposition expressed by (1) is indirectly about Scott. (It is not about Scott in the sense defined above.) He is arguing that, on Russell’s view, (1) attributes to King George a query that (1) entails is about Scott, whereas (1₂), unlike (1_K), merely attributes to King George the query while leaving open the issue of whether the attributed query is about anyone.

⁷ See Geach’s brilliant piece (Geach 1967, p. 631; 1972, p. 151). For present purposes (not Geach’s), Geach’s proposed analysis of (1) might be formalized as follows:

George IV *assumed-that* [$(\exists x)(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)$] & $(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)] \ \& \ \text{George IV } \textit{wondered-whether}$ (x was present)].

The second conjunct is (1₁). A more accurate analysis would invoke Kaplan’s demonstrative-like ‘*dthat*’ operator, representing ‘he (that same author)’ as ‘*dthat*[the sole x : x authored *Waverley*]’.

Question: Did Geach mean his second conjunct to be (1₂) instead of (1₁)? (If so, then (1_G) is likely a misformulation.)

⁸ Compare Saul Kripke (Kripke 2005, the complete paragraph at p. 1023) with Kaplan (Kaplan 2005, p. 985, top paragraph). The misplaced objection is explicit in Leonard Linsky, *Referring* (New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, 1973), at pp. 71-72. Geach has been unfairly depicted as making this same objection. On the contrary, Geach in “Intentional Identity” is the first to acknowledge that (1₂) does not have the consequence that George IV wondered whether exactly one person authored *Waverley*. (There are echoes of Geach in Kaplan’s discussion. Kripke mentions Geach but does not cite “Intentional Identity.”)

Several things should be noted in response. First and foremost, just as the original sentence (1) does not have the consequence that King George wondered whether exactly one person authored *Waverley*, it also does not have the consequence that the king *knew* that exactly one person authored *Waverley*. The sentence is completely neutral concerning whether King George knew, believed, disbelieved, doubted, or wondered whether exactly one person authored *Waverley*. Russell was well aware of this.⁹ The fact is confirmed through consideration of the following discourse-fragment:

George erroneously believes that there is a largest prime number. He believes, in fact, that the largest prime is greater than a google.

The second sentence of this mini-discourse cannot be correctly analyzed as

George *knows-that* $[(\exists x)(y)(y \text{ is a prime number greater than any other } \equiv x = y)]$
& George *believes-that* $[(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ is a prime number greater than any other } \equiv x = y)]$ & x is greater than a google] .

The left conjunct here is mathematically inconsistent, whereas the discourse is entirely consistent with all the facts of mathematics. The second sentence of the discourse-fragment is more accurately captured by the right conjunct alone, precisely as Russell would propose.

One needs to distinguish what a sentence literally expresses from extraneous but related facts. As a matter of historical fact, King George knew (and assumed) that exactly one person authored *Waverley*—indeed he strongly suspected it was Scott—but (1) says nothing of that. Kaplan’s proposed analysis (1_K) is a proper Russellian analysis of the secondary-occurrence reading of the following more complex sentence:

- (2) George IV, knowing the sole author of *Waverley* by that very description, wondered whether the sole author of *Waverley* was present.

This sentence is essentially richer in content than (1); it captures a further historical fact. This observation does nothing to discredit (1_2) as an analysis of (1), on its intended reading. On the contrary it discredits (1_K), which is equivalent to (2) on its intended reading. Russell was fully aware of all this.

⁹ Perhaps the sentence is not neutral concerning whether King George *assumed* that exactly one person authored *Waverley*. See note 7 above. If the Frege-Strawson theory of definite descriptions is correct, (1), on its intended reading, arguably has the consequence that George IV presupposed that exactly one person authored *Waverley*. This lends considerable support to an analysis of (1), on its intended reading, with elements of both (1_G) and (1_K): George IV *presupposed-that* $[(\exists x)(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)]$ & George IV *wondered-whether* $[(\exists x)[(y)(y \text{ authored } Waverley \equiv x = y)]$ & x was present] .

Kaplan remarks about (1_K), as his proposal for Russell’s intended analysis of (1), that “the Russellian variation on the presuppositional analysis is to move it from the semantic to the epistemic” (Kaplan 2005, p. 984).

In interpreting Russell it is crucial that a sharp distinction be drawn between *knowledge by description* and *denotation by description*. The former is, and the latter is not, a properly epistemic notion. The latter is a semantic notion, or rather it is pseudo-semantic. Denotation by description is pseudo-designation. A definite description, although meaningless according to Russell's theory, *denotes*, according to Russell's misleading terminology, the object that uniquely answers to it if anything does. A speaker can easily denote something by description without knowing the denotation by description, simply through an appropriate use of a proper description that the speaker does not know to be proper. Russellian aboutness is not tied to knowledge. Rather, it is the propositional analog for Russell of denotation. A proposition that includes no component that represents Scott can nevertheless be about Scott, indirectly, precisely when the proposition is expressible by a sentence that invokes a description that denotes him, e.g., 'The sole author of *Waverley* is Scottish.' The proposition in question is also expressible, in fact more perspicuously, by sentences that invoke overtly quantificational locutions in lieu of a definite description.

Kaplan argues that (1_K) succeeds, while (1₂) fails, to capture the fact about the query reported in (1) that it is *about* Scott, given that Scott is the sole author of *Waverley*. I find no supporting evidence for Kaplan's interpretation in the passages Kaplan cites, or elsewhere in Russell's writings. (I should confess, however, that I am unable to read as fast as Russell wrote.) As already noted, (1) does not entail that George IV knew that exactly one person authored *Waverley*. Does (1) entail, or otherwise capture, that the reported query is about Scott, given that Scott is the sole author of *Waverley*, despite not capturing that King George knew the sole author of *Waverley* by that very description? I contend that it does, on Russell's understanding of what it is for a proposition to be *about* an individual. The proposition that something was both uniquely author of *Waverley* and present has the right form to make it immediately indirectly about the author of *Waverley*. Since Scott uniquely authored *Waverley*, (1) attributes to King George a query that (whether he knows it or not) is immediately indirectly about Scott—according to the definition of immediate indirect aboutness proposed above. So does (1₂).

Kaplan observes that King George's query "is a *query about* Scott in just the way that George IV *knowing* that the author of *Waverley* was present in the room would be *knowledge about* Scott." This observation is correct. But the way that King George knowing that the sole author of *Waverley* was present is knowledge about Scott is not that *King George knows* that exactly one person authored *Waverley*, and that person was Scott; it is simply that Scott uniquely authored *Waverley*. Kaplan provides no convincing evidence that, as he puts it,

knowledge of a thing by acquaintance and knowledge of a thing by description are Russell's two ways for thought to connect with things. There are, for Russell, no relevant further ways for thought to connect with things. For example, merely *suspecting* that there is exactly one so-and-so does not enable you to think

about that thing (even assuming your suspicion is correct). Thought connects directly with things through acquaintance and indirectly through knowledge by description (knowing that there is exactly [one] thing of a certain kind). Mere suspicion won't hook you up. (Kaplan 2005, pp. 983-984)

On the contrary, mere suspicion *will* hook you up, in the sense that your suspicion is for Russell about something. But even suspicion is not required. Mere thinking is sufficient, provided one's thought has the form *something is both uniquely such-and-such and thus-and-so* (or at least entails that there is exactly one such-and-such), or even has a proposition of this sort as a truth-functional proper constituent (as with the thought that either snow is white or no unique author of *Waverley* is Scottish). One can think about Scott or Mr. Balfour without realizing that one is thinking about him, indeed without realizing that one's thought is even about anyone at all.

4.

Although Russellian aboutness is not a specifically epistemic notion, it is epistemologically significant. Without some relation of *indirect aboutness*, Russell's theory of descriptions in combination with his principle of acquaintance forces a radical disconnect between thought and the world, leading to a kind of skepticism that Russell is seeking to avoid in "On Denoting" and more explicitly in "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description." Indirect aboutness, promiscuous though it may be, is epistemologically important because it is through it, according to Russell, that we reach beyond our cognitive limitations to the things we know merely by description. Indirect aboutness for Russell is our portal to the world; it is the mind's access to the reality that lies beyond us.

Let q_x be a proposition directly about x . We may say that a proposition p *generalizes* q_x with respect to x when

$$(\exists F)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ p = \wedge (\exists z)[(y)(Fy \equiv y = z) \ \& \ q_z]^\wedge],$$

where for any individual z , q_z is the same proposition as q_x except for having occurrences of z wherever q_x has occurrences of x . A proposition that is strongly indirectly about x *generalizes*—and thereby mimics—a singular proposition directly about x (or is trivially equivalent to such a proposition). The generalizing proposition is true iff the singular proposition is, both in virtue of how x stands (although this relationship between a generalizing proposition and the singular proposition it generalizes typically obtains only contingently).

According to Russell, we *simulate* thinking directly about x by generalizing, and thereby thinking indirectly about x . We complete the illusion by using denoting definite descriptions—grammatically on a par with genuine (logically proper) names—then

abbreviating those denoting descriptions by means of pseudo-names (which we call simply “names”), syntactically indistinguishable from genuine names. Where we cannot name (refer, designate), there we *denote* (in Russell’s sense *circa* 1905 and after). The result is an elaborate linguistic hoax. Although it is in some sense an illusion of our own device, we ourselves are taken in by it. Through denoting we have erected a façade, which the philosopher alone can uncover and expose. Our thought is “about” things in the world all right, but it is largely merely indirectly about them while we elaborately fake thinking directly about them.

This is Russell’s theory of denoting: Denotation by description is the linguistic illusion of designation; as a consequence, nearly all the things our thoughts are about are thought about only indirectly, not even by one-on-one representation.

5.

Although Kaplan’s stricter notion of Russellian indirect aboutness, by means of knowledge by description, plays no role in Russell’s (nor in the correct) analysis of (1), it might have a central role in filling a significant lacuna in Russell’s philosophy of language concerning idioms of *de re* propositional attitude, typically of the form:

α Vs of [about] β that [whether] ϕ (it/he/she),

where *V* is a verb of propositional attitude (e.g., ‘believes’) and the pronoun ‘it’ (‘he’ or ‘she’) is anaphoric upon the singular term β .

It is now widely recognized that Quine’s distinction between the *notional* and *relational* readings of a sentence in which an existential phrase or indefinite description occurs after an attitude verb, as with

(3) Ralph believes that someone is a spy,

is but a special case of the more general medieval distinction of *de dicto* and *de re*, as well as Russell’s even more general distinction of scope:

(3₁) (\exists one x)(Ralph believes-that [x is a spy])

(3₂) Ralph believes-that [(\exists one x)(x is a spy)].

Quine explains, “The difference is vast; indeed, if Ralph is like most of us, (3₂) is true and (3₁) false” (p. 184). Most of us believe there are spies, but few suspect anyone in particular. Quine goes on to argue that (3₁) is semantically incoherent, hence meaningless. Russell knew better. Quine should have. His own explanation of the vast difference between (3₁) and (3₂) demonstrates that both are coherent and meaningful.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Salmon 1995; reprinted in Salmon 2007a.

For Russell, the difference is vaster than that. The truth of (3_1) requires for Russell that Ralph be acquainted with the person under suspicion. As Russell matured, Ralph's acquaintances dwindled. Eventually Russell came to hold that Ralph was acquainted with no one but himself. The truth of (3_1) then required Ralph to believe that he himself was a spy. Primary-occurrence (or *de re* or "relational") locutions had broken away almost entirely from their intuitive meaning, the meaning on which Ralph could easily come to suspect someone—someone *else*—of being a spy. (Still later, Russell came to hold that Ralph was not even someone with whom Ralph could be acquainted.)

Is there a way for Russell to capture the intuitive idea of there being someone Ralph believes to be a spy without reverting to his less mature (but far more sensible) theory of everyday acquaintance? Russell's theory of descriptions is capable of accommodating looser, user-friendlier notions of acquaintance—perhaps a notion according to which some, if not indeed all, readers of this essay are acquainted with its author—in addition to Russell's notion of strict acquaintance. I am sanguine about the versatility of Russell's theory and its potential for dealing with this problem.

One place to begin—although it is only a starting place—is by generalizing, as defined above:

$$(\exists F)[(y)(Fy \equiv \beta = y) \ \& \ \alpha \text{ Vs-that } ((\exists x)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ \phi(x)])].$$

This yields a *latitudinarian*, or promiscuous, notion. One possible instance is the property (or propositional function), *being a spy shorter than any other*, where β designates the shortest spy and ϕ is 'is a spy'. The difference between this notion and the intuitive idea of the *de re* is vast. We all believe that the shortest spy is a spy, but intuitively, few if any among us believe of the shortest spy that he or she is a spy.

A more discriminating notion invokes Russell's knowledge by acquaintance:

$$(3_R) (\exists F)(\text{Ralph knows-that } [(\exists x)(y)(Fy \equiv x = y)] \ \& \ \text{Ralph believes-that } [(\exists x)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ x \text{ is a spy}]]).$$

This attributes to Ralph (in a sense) a pair of *de dicto* propositional attitudes: a piece of knowledge and a belief. It should not be thought of as analysis of (3), let alone as a reduction of *de re* belief to *de dicto*. Taken as an analysis, it would fail to capture the validity of the inference from (3), on its *de re* reading, together with 'Kevin believes everything Ralph believes', to 'Kevin believes someone is a spy', on its *de re* reading. Rather, (3_R) is to be thought of as a weaker *replacement* for the *de re* reading of (3), the latter being correctly given by the primary-occurrence analysis, (3_1) . In English, (3_R) is best represented not as 'There is someone whom Ralph believes is a spy' but perhaps as:

Ralph knows someone by a description under which Ralph believes that the person in question is a spy.

In the general case, we have the following Russellian notion

α knows β by a description under which α Vs that ϕ (the individual in question),

which might be invoked in lieu of the stricter notion of *primary occurrence*. Its analysis is:

$(\exists F)[(y)(Fy \equiv \beta = y) \ \& \ \alpha \text{ knows-that } [(\exists x)(y)(Fy \equiv x = y)] \ \& \ \alpha \text{ Vs-that } ((\exists x)[(y)(Fy \equiv x = y) \ \& \ \phi(x)])]$.

Kaplan's proposed analysis (1_K) yields an instance of this—where the value of '*F*' is the property of having authored *Waverley*, and where α is 'George IV', β is 'Walter Scott', *Vs-that* is 'wonders whether', and ϕ is 'is present'. In English, King George knew Scott by a description (*to wit*, 'the sole author of *Waverley*') under which George wondered whether the individual in question was present. It may be intuitive that in wondering whether the sole author of *Waverley* was present, George IV wondered about Scott, *de re*, whether he was present.

The principal shortcoming of this Russellian substitute for the *de re* is that it is still latitudinarian. Ralph's belief that some spy or other is uniquely shorter than any other is not merely a hunch but presumably knowledge, based on the knowledge that there are spies and known statistical generalizations concerning the unlikelihood of two individuals sharing exactly the same height (and the extreme unlikelihood of the two shortest spies being genetically identical twins). Hence Ralph knows the shortest spy by a description under which Ralph believes that the individual in question is a spy. Yet intuitively—let alone by Russell's more exacting standards—Ralph does not believe about the shortest spy, *de re*, that he or she is a spy.

If Russell is to reconstruct the intuitive notion of *de re* propositional attitude in terms he accepts, he will need to invoke some notion stricter than knowledge by description yet looser than acquaintance. Perhaps he can borrow one or more notions from the reduction of *de re* to *de dicto* attempted in Kaplan's classic essay, "Quantifying In."¹¹ Kaplan's notion of a description being a *name of* its denotation is especially promising in this connection.¹² Except for the fact that the notion will need to be explained consistently with Russell's contention that the description does not designate its denotation, or anything else, since it is altogether meaningless.

¹¹ Kaplan 1969.

¹² Kaplan 1969, pp. 225-229. By contrast, Kaplan's notion of the description in question being vivid seems to me especially unpromising. To say that a designator is vivid is to say, among other things, that the designatum (if any) is ipso facto highly significant or relevant. I believe Kaplan's vividness condition is neither necessary nor sufficient for the intuitive notion. Cf. Salmon 2007b; reprinted in Salmon 2007a. Robin Jeshion has argued, in effect, for exactly the opposite view that being a name of is irrelevant whereas vividness is just the ticket. See (Jeshion 2002). Jeshion denies that it is a sufficient condition for a belief to be *de re* that its formulation should invoke a rich and detailed description, unless its designatum is ipso facto significant.

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