Interpreting Russell’s Gray’s *Elegy* Argument

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**ABSTRACT:** "On Denoting" is central to the analytic tradition, yet one of its key arguments (the Gray’s Elegy Argument) lacks a canonical reading. Some interpret the passage as rejecting denoting concepts as inconsistent, or the theory that posits them as incoherent. Such readings are too strong, and at odds with the passage. We interpret the argument as a set of considerations that leave the old view as a logically viable (though uneconomical and cumbersome) competitor to Russell’s new semantic theory.

RÉSUMÉ : «De la Dénotation» est l’un des articles les plus importants de la tradition analytique, pourtant il n’existe pas d’interprétation canonique pour l’un de ses argument-clés (l’argument de l’Élégie de Gray). Certains croient que le passage en question démontre que les concepts dénotants en eux-mêmes sont contradictoires; d’autres que la théorie qui les sous-tend est incohérente. Les deux interprétations sont trop fortes et sont contredites par le texte du passage. Nous l’interprétons plutôt comme un ensemble de considérations qui conservent à l’ancienne théorie, bien qu’elle soit encombrante et prolixe, la possibilité de concurrencer la nouvelle présentation sémantique de Russell.

Russell’s Gray’s *Elegy* Argument in “On Denoting” is located in the middle of the paper, beginning with the paragraph which states, “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.” (Russell (1905), 48) The argument continues for the next eight paragraphs. Interpretations of the argument abound in the
recent literature, comprising a small cottage industry during the 1990s and early 2000s. Interpreters generally accept that the argument is a rejection of Russell’s earlier theory of denoting concepts from his *Principles of Mathematics* (hereafter *Principles*). This interpretation goes as far back as Geach (1959), but Hylton (1990), Kremer (1994), Noonan (1996), and Demopoulos (1999) provide more recent instances of the interpretation that the main target of the Gray’s Elegy Argument is Russell’s earlier theory of denoting. Not all interpreters agree. Blackburn and Code (1978) and, more recently, Makin (2000) have argued that the Gray’s Elegy Argument targets both the Russellian theory of denoting concepts and the Fregean theory of sense, because of certain shared features between the views. Since all agree that at least one of Russell’s targets was his theory of denoting concepts, this paper can be happily agnostic with regards to this debate.

The purpose of this paper is not merely exegetical. A proper understanding of Russell’s developing theories of denotation are of more than historical interest, mostly because of the central role his later theory of descriptions plays in the development of contemporary philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophical logic. Nevertheless, we begin with an exegesis of Russell’s pre-“On Denoting” theory of denotation, placing Russell’s semantics into its proper historical context. In §1, we will recount Russell’s metaphysical views leading up to the 1903 publication of *Principles*, with special focus on his account of propositions in *Principles*. Following in §2, we give a brief account of Russell’s introduction of denoting concepts in *Principles*, highlighting the importance of mathematical knowledge in Russell’s emerging realism. In §3 we will look at Demopoulos’ interpretation of the passage in his “On the theory of meaning of ‘On denoting’” (1999). Demopoulos argues that overall considerations of theory selection led to Russell’s rejection of denoting concepts on largely ontological and epistemological grounds. Russell never explicitly rejects denoting concepts, nor does he argue that such entities cannot exist; however, the theory of denoting concepts was trumped by the theory of descriptions, which, as a matter of ontological simplification, did not need to make recourse to denoting concepts. In §4, we will examine Noonan’s interpretation of the Gray’s Elegy Argument in his “The ‘Gray’s Elegy’ Argument—And Others” (1996). We will argue that Noonan too quickly rejects what he terms the “simple reading” or “simple view” of the Gray’s Elegy Argument, and that such a reading is indeed plausible, provided one properly understands Russell’s metaphysics, and one also understands what Russell intended the conclusion of such an argument to be. We will also show that interpreting the Gray’s Elegy Argument as an argument against the existence of denoting concepts is plainly false.

We conclude in §5 with a holistic reading of the argument, one that puts it in its proper context as the decisive dialectical move within “On Denoting”, marking a drastic change in Russell’s semantics more so than his ontology or epistemology.
1. Russell’s Earlier View

To understand Russell’s argument against the theory of denoting concepts in the Gray’s Elegy Argument, we must understand the metaphysical, epistemological and semantic views that informed that theory. As early as *Principles*, Russell was concerned with accounting for our ability to speak (and think) about entities beyond our immediate epistemological grasp. Take, as an example, our knowledge of “infinite totalities”, the referent of a denoting phrase such as “Any number” in “Any number has a successor.” Even if we assume that there can be propositions of infinite complexity,¹ we must accept that it would be impossible for a finite mind to grasp them:

… I see no possible way of deciding whether propositions of infinite complexity are possible or not; but this at least is clear, that all the propositions known to us (and, it would seem, all propositions that we can know) are of finite complexity. *(Principles, §141)*

But this would make much of mathematics unknowable. The theory of denoting concepts is an attempt to overcome this epistemological limitation—to explain our ability to assert propositions about infinite classes with finite means.²

For Russell, any theory of how we denote must be “realist”. It must view propositions as mind-independent entities (*Principles, xviii*) that we come to understand, constituted by mutually independent objects and their relations.³ Take the proposition expressed by the sentence

(†) “Russell cites Moore.”

On Russell’s understanding of propositions, we have three constituents of the proposition:

<♀ CITES ♂>.

The constituents of the proposition are the flesh-and-blood Russell (♀), the flesh-and-blood Moore (♂), and the dyadic relation CITES. All of these constituents exist independently of one another. Further, if the entity constituted by them is a meaningful proposition, then it is meaningful in virtue of the atomistic meanings of each constituent, and each constituent has a constant semantic value in every proposition of which it is a part. One can begin to see why this *Principles* account of propositions has been dubbed “Platonic Atomism” by Peter Hylton.⁴ Platonic Atomism holds that we have direct cognitive access to universals and (at least some) relations, and that the most basic level of semantic analysis is individual terms. Minds are acquainted with these independent simples that can aggregate to create propositions with which we are also acquainted. Some of these complexes are propositions that we can
understand, composed of terms, i.e., non-linguistic entities that can be the subject (and in some cases the predicate) of a proposition.

For Russell, “term” is the widest category in logic and ontology. Anything can be a term, including abstract entities like numbers, non-existent entities like Zeus or the chimera, and regular existent objects—anything that can be what a proposition (either truly or falsely) is about. The word “term” stretches over all entities that have being, and does not discriminate between existent and subsistent entities. Among terms we can make a twofold division between “things”, which are terms that can arise in propositions only as subject, and “concepts”, which are terms that can arise as either subject or predicate. (Principles, §§47-48) To understand a proposition is to grasp what the proposition is about, and therefore its meaning. If I understand a simple proposition, such as the one expressed by (†), then I know what (†) means, assuming (with Russell) that we are acquainted with the terms Russell and Moore and the relation CITES. (Notice that the previous sentence did not make a use/mention error by not putting inverted commas around the names of the two Cambridge philosophers, since terms are not to be construed linguistically. Any proposition in which these terms arise is a proposition in which Russell and Moore play a role.)

We should stop to note an underlying assumption to Russell’s semantic program in Principles. Russell assumes a transparency of natural language sentences to propositions in his pre-“On Denoting” work. This transparency allows us to speak freely of “the meaning of a proposition” as if it were like the sentence that expresses it. However, one should be careful here, as Russell himself is. There are a great many aspects of sentential meaning, e.g., connotation, which find no analogue in propositions. Russell argues that such aspects of meaning are psychologistic. When Russell speaks about the meaning of a proposition (in the logical sense), he is imagining the linguistic token as being purged of psychological content. Nonetheless, the transparency of language plays a crucial role in the semantic analysis of Principles.

2. The Introduction of Denoting Concepts

Not all propositions are constituted by objects with which we have proper epistemological acquaintance. Even if we reject the epistemological standard of Russellian acquaintance, we must still accept that there are certain entities that we cannot grasp immediately. Take the sentence,

(ψ) “All even natural numbers are equal to or greater than 2.”

If (ψ) is taken as a simple proposition like (†) then for it to express a meaningful proposition, we must know each of the constituents. Let us assume that we have direct cognitive access to the relation EQUAL TO OR GREATER THAN and the number 2. Given this much, it still seems impossible that finite beings like us should be able to have acquaintance with the infinite totality that
is picked out by the determiner phrase, “All even natural numbers”. One could only maintain this simple view of propositions by saying that if (ψ) is to be grasped, then one grasps it thusly:

\[ \{2, 4, 6, \ldots \} \text{ EQUAL TO OR GREATER THAN } 2. \]

But this would be a rejection of a large part of our mathematical knowledge—a pill far too bitter for Russell to swallow. Russell’s original desideratum was to show how mathematical knowledge is true, not just true of an empirical world conditioned by the mind, as it was for Kant and other idealists. Satisfying such a desideratum is put in doubt given Russell’s account of propositional understanding in Principles. How can this problem be solved?

If propositions cannot be both directly graspable by finite minds whilst being about infinite totalities, then perhaps what is required is a concept that itself is immediately knowable by the mind, but which denotes objects not immediately known/knowable:

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. If I say “I met a man”, the proposition is not about a man: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public-house and a drunken wife. (Principles, §56)

Within the system of Platonic Atomism, this passage allows us to give a rough definition of denoting concepts: (a) they are objects of acquaintance, since they fulfill the role of subject in graspable propositions; (b) although they show up in subject position, they are not what the proposition is about—they are “symbolic in their nature”; (c) they are independent of the mind; and (d) given that (a) and (b) are true, they provide us with the capability to assert (in speech or thought) propositions which are beyond acquaintance.

But, as exceptions to the rule that propositions are about their terms, we run into the problem of speaking about denoting concepts rather than their denotata. Since they are objects of acquaintance, they ought to be able to be employed as terms in propositions that assert something of them:

… it is possible to consider and make propositions about the (denoting) concepts themselves, but these are not the natural propositions to make in employing the concepts. “Any number is odd or even” is a perfectly natural proposition, whereas “Any number is a variable conjunction” is a proposition only to be made in a logical discussion. In such cases, we say that the concept in question denotes. (Principles, §65)

But this hardly suffices as a solution to the problem. Russell has only relegated talk of the meaning rather than the denotation of a denoting concept as
“unnatural”, and flagged the use of denoting concepts by using the convention of italicising. He has, as of 1903, not resolved whatsoever the tension created by denoting concepts.

3. Demopoulos’ “Simple” Account of the Argument

In “On the theory of meaning of ‘On denoting’” (1999), William Demopoulos interprets Russell as maintaining a dualistic conception of propositions. Russell implicitly holds that the act of uttering declarative sentences of the form of (†) or (ψ) expresses *and* asserts a proposition. For simple propositions like (†), there is no difference between “proposition expressed” and “proposition asserted”.

Demopoulos calls this the “Fundamental Principle”. Nonetheless, the proposition expressed is logically joined by means of a denoting concept to the proposition asserted, and this proposition can be composed of entities that exceed our acquaintance. The epistemological problem has been solved. By expressing and grasping propositions which are constituted wholly by objects of acquaintance, we can nonetheless assert truths about, and have knowledge of, propositions that contain entities that transcend acquaintance.

But according to Demopoulos, the marriage of the Fundamental Principle and denoting concepts is not an easy one:

In the context of the Fundamental Principle, denoting concepts introduce an odd asymmetry: when the theory of meaning is applied reflexively to denoting concepts themselves, we find that even though a denoting concept is an object of acquaintance *par excellence*, it cannot be the acquaintance with the denoting concept which explains our understanding of a proposition which purports to be about the denoting concept itself; rather, for any sentence which purports to make an assertion concerning a denoting concept, the proposition the sentence expresses, and whose constituents we grasp, must contain something other than the denoting concept – something that denotes the denoting concept… Denoting concepts are therefore an exception to the very theory of meaning which introduces them.

(Demopoulos 1999, 445)

Russell has reason, therefore, to be wary of denoting concepts. As aids to his epistemology, they solve the problem of propositional understanding outlined above. However, the semantic theory which accounts for the meaning of denoting concepts has nothing at all to say about non-denotative occurrences of them—a semantic blind-spot no less embarrassing than the epistemological quietude that denoting concepts were employed to solve in the first place.
One possible way of defending the theory of denoting concepts would be to adopt Russell’s use of italics in *Principles* to show that the denoting concept is being used as a term, and not being used denotatively. As we said earlier, however, this is no solution in itself. We offer here a plausible elaboration. To use a denoting concept as a proper term, we simply need to find a denoting concept that denotes a denoting concept in a proposition expressed. We represent this in our notation by the use of italics (or some other notational variant, such as inverted commas) so that

(1) “Every natural number is odd or even”,

is representative of “natural” propositions expressed, where the phrase, “Every natural number”, is a denoting concept arising in the proposition denotatively, and

(2) “Every natural number is a concept that denotes”,

represents a term occurrence of a denoting concept.

Proposition (1) is entirely unproblematic. It expresses a graspable proposition that also asserts a proposition about the infinite totality of the natural numbers. Proposition (2) is problematic because of the symbolic nature of denoting concepts; the italics only let us know that a denoting concept is required (one level up, as it were) in order to comprehend the proposition, since any proposition that is understood and includes a denoting concept will always be about what the denoting concept denotes. This search for the denoting concept to denote a denoting concept would go on ad infinitum. This in itself is not problematic, just hierarchical. What is problematic is finding the denoting concept that fits the bill at each level. If we assume that there is such a denoting concept, we break the rule that there are infinitely many non-privileged denoting concepts for any object. (To misappropriate Fregean terminology, we break with the established semantic view that there are no privileged senses.) Using Russell’s locution, Demopoulos calls this the “no backward road” component of the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument. Meanings can determine denotations, but a denotation cannot determine a unique and privileged meaning.

Alternatively, we could simply speak about the meaning of the denoting phrase, but then the inherent and logical connection between meaning and denotation seems to become arbitrary. This proposal assumes that linguistic entities express the propositions they do by convention. We merely make the further assumption that we refer to a denoting concept’s meaning by use of a linguistic utterance, and that the denotation relation is explained by the more primitive reference relation. The problem with this proposal is that the necessary connection between denoting concept and denotation evaporates. We get an explanation of how denoting concepts can be spoken of, but at a very high cost, since
the primitive denotation relation was supposed to help us analyse the reference relation, not vice versa. Such a solution makes the relation between meaning and denotation “merely linguistic through the phrase”.

This reconstruction of the Gray’s Elegy Argument passage is not a straightforward refutation of the theory of denoting concepts, but several reasons why one would not want to maintain the theory if an alternative were available. All that has been shown is that the theory of denoting concepts fails to return a semantic value for a class of propositions containing denoting concepts that arise non-denotatively. The semantic theory that supports the theory of denoting concepts is therefore incomplete. The mistake of many readers (as we shall see) is to start their reading of the Gray’s Elegy Argument with the assumption that Russell is showing that the theory of denoting concepts is incoherent (Kremer (1994) is an example, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to look at his view in detail here), or that denoting concepts themselves cannot exist (in the case of Noonan (1996), to be surveyed in the next section). Demopoulos gives us the proper sort of interpretation by showing that overall considerations of simplicity and explanatory power allow us to reject the theory of denoting concepts without attributing to Russell these more radical positions.

4. Noonan’s Interpretation of the Argument

In his “The ‘Gray’s Elegy’ Argument—And Others” (1996), Noonan argues that there is a straightforward reading of the Gray’s Elegy Argument, but this argument has remained opaque to scholars. Existing interpretations suffer from two problems: they are at odds with both the passage itself, and with Russell’s unpublished writings of 1903-1905—the period in which Russell abandoned the theory of denoting concepts in favour of the theory of descriptions.

Noonan finds fault with two ways of reading the argument. The first he calls the “simple reading”, and it bears a remarkable resemblance to Demopoulos’ account just surveyed. We will deal with his criticisms of this interpretation later. The second family of interpretations Noonan criticises comes from Hylton and Wahl. We will deal here only with Hylton’s version of the argument. Hylton (1990) argues that there are two senses of aboutness in Russell’s early philosophy. A proposition can be about an entity when it actually contains the entity, or when it contains a denoting concept that goes and gets the entity for us. Hylton shows that if we suppose Russell to imply a simple substitutional theory, one that realises the intersubstitutivity of the subject in sentences of the form

“[The description of an entity] is an entity”,

with the subject of both tautological sentences and the subject of sentences of the form

“The meaning of [the description of an entity] is an entity”,

we will see that there is no logical difference between denoting phrases and their
denotation. With this theory of “Truth-Value Dependence,” the dualism between
denoting concept and denotation collapses. But this dualism was supposed to be
the crowning achievement of the theory of denoting concepts. When confronted
with a subclass of objects that cannot be (for whatever reason) a constituent of a
graspable Russellian proposition, we put for them a proxy. As Hylton shows,
there is no logical difference, however, between proxy and original. The attrac-
tive dualism of denoting concepts and their denotata collapses.

The only problem with Hylton’s view is this: there is absolutely no textual
reason to suppose that Russell implies something like truth-value dependence.
He leaves the notion of aboutness undefined in Principles. As Hylton himself
notes, “(t)he truth or falsehood of one proposition depending upon that of
another is clearly quite alien to Platonic Atomism.” (Hylton 1990, 209) For this
reason, we believe that Noonan sufficiently removes such candidates from
consideration as proper interpretations of the Gray’s Elegy passages. They just
don’t mesh with the relevant texts, including “On Denoting”.

Noonan shows us that Russell does briefly flirt with the notion of including
something like a truth-value dependence theory of meaning in “On Fundamen-
tals”. Russell tells us that it seems to be a fact that

\[
\text{(w)hen a complex occurs as being (as opposed to meaning), every other complex}
\text{having the same denotation, or the denotation itself, may be substituted without}
\text{altering the truth or non-truth of the complex in which the said complex occurs.}
\text{(369)}
\]

Here we have textual evidence of what Noonan calls a “truth value link”.
But Russell soon after rejects this “fact” in “On Fundamentals”, so no inter-
preter could use such a notion to support a textually accurate interpretation
of the Gray’s Elegy Argument. The Russell of Principles need only draw
the distinction between speaking about denoting concepts (which is, strictly
speaking, impossible, lest they and their denotation collapses) and men-
tioning denoting concepts. This possibility is never, to our knowledge, rejected
by Russell.

The “simple reading”, according to Noonan, also suffers from a lack of con-
nection with Russell’s work 1903-1905, but in a much different way. The inter-
pretation runs as follows: (1) by the very definition of denoting concepts,
they are to be objects of acquaintance which stand for (or denote) other objects;
(2) Russell has a logical thesis which accompanies the epistemological theory
of acquaintance, which attributes a proper name to any object of acquaintance;
(3) every denoting concept should have a proper name if the theory of denoting
is to remain consistent with Russell’s epistemological theory; (4) anything
with a proper name is referred to by that proper name; (5) however, the proper
names of denoting concepts do not refer to the denoting concepts themselves,
but their denotata. (C) Thus, we have a contradiction. Denoting concepts cannot
be (a) objects of acquaintance, capable of being given proper names and (b) objects that, by their symbolic nature, always denote something.

Noonan thinks this interpretation is sufficient for the rejection of denoting concepts, but its simplicity ignores the fervour with which such a great mind dealt with these problems. As Noonan (1996) argues (81-82), there must be good reason why Russell—a man who craved simplicity—never explicates such a simple view. While this simple argument refutes the theory of denoting concepts, it is not consistent with, nor a plausible interpretation of, the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument.

Noonan offers no explanation of why Russell did not employ this argument, but one possible reason is illuminating of Russell’s developing thought and deserves our attention: the kind of argument expressed by the “simple view” against denoting concepts is a *prima facie* argument against acquaintance. The argument merely shows a discord between denoting concepts and Russell’s epistemology. A defender of denoting concepts could attempt to show that acquaintance is the source of the problem. We can see only two ways out for Russell: (1) denoting concepts suffer from other problems, e.g., the coarse-grain, overgenerous Meinongian ontological commitments they seem to entail in *Principles*, so we have independent reasons to reject them instead of a clear and useful epistemological thesis. Or, (2) problems of acquaintance can’t contradict the theory of denoting concepts, because concerns about acquaintance guided the development of denoting concepts in the first place. One could respond to (1) by simply accepting some sort of Meinongian ontology, and one could simply bite the bullet in the face of (2) and accept the theory of denoting concepts rather than acquaintance. Responding in such a way to (1) means the theory of denoting concepts is not an economical theory, but so much for economy. The response to (2) leaves the theory unmotivated, but none the worse off otherwise.

The existence of such dialectical options helps one make sense of Russell’s hedged remarks that introduce the argument in “On Denoting”. We repeat the passage already quoted in the introduction of the present paper for emphasis: “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.” Nowhere here does Russell make the claim that denoting concepts cannot exist, or that there is an inconsistency or incoherence in the theory of denoting concepts. Thus, it is the conclusion of the simple view that does not match with “On Denoting”, not the simple view’s reconstruction of Russell’s reasoning.

Unfortunately, under Noonan’s interpretation of the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument, Russell does conclude that denoting concepts cannot exist. Here is his representation of the argument:

1. If denoting concepts exist, we must be able to speak about them.
2. Denoting concepts can only be spoken of by use of denoting phrases; they cannot be referred to by a name.
(3) Denoting phrases which contain mention of other denoting phrases may provide a way of speaking of denoting concepts, but given the ontological status of denoting concepts (qua concepts), this cannot be the only possibility if such concepts exist.

(4) A denoting concept cannot be spoken of by using the phrase which expresses it unembedded in a use of a larger denoting phrase.

(5) A denoting concept cannot be spoken of by using the phrase which expresses it embedded in a use of a larger denoting phrase.

(6) There are no other possibilities.

(C) Therefore, denoting concepts cannot exist. 11

Noonan thinks this interpretation of the argument is (a) textually accurate, (b) true to the spirit of Russell’s intellectual efforts from 1903–1905, and (c) sufficient to refute the theory of denoting concepts. But is this the case? We agree that Noonan’s interpretation satisfies conditions (b) and (c), but we disagree that this interpretation satisfies (a)—it is simply not accurate to the text. Nowhere in the Gray’s Elegy Argument does Russell assert that denoting concepts cannot exist. Nor is such a finding necessary for the rejection of the theory of denoting concepts. It is enough, within the dialectic of “On Denoting”, to say that the older theory is unmotivated, and that it posits entities that serve no explanatory purpose.

Perhaps where Noonan gets led astray is in the first premise of his reconstruction of the argument: while we must be able to speak of denoting concepts (should they exist), there is nothing in the semantic theory of denoting concepts that weds us to thinking such statements must be attributed their expected values (or even any stable values whatsoever). A more measured and valid conclusion would be to state that there is some disconnect between the existence of denoting concepts and the assumed semantic theory that is thought should accompany them—indeed, the very theory of meaning which motivated denoting concepts in the first place. But this is a very different conclusion. It does not state that denoting concepts cannot exist, only that statements expressing something of them (i.e., statements in which denoting concepts arise non-denotatively) cannot be intuitively appraised within the theory of meaning that first proposed them.

But this much is already isolated in Demopoulos’ interpretation of the passage: an interpretation that is sufficient for the rejection of the theory of denoting concepts. It also better fits with some of Russell’s other aims in “On Denoting”. After introducing the “certain rather curious difficulties” with the theory of denoting concepts, Russell goes on to show that we can denote without denoting concepts, and using the new theory of descriptions, Russell provides a solution to the George IV-type puzzles without recourse to denoting concepts. If the older theory were inconsistent, no such comparison would be required. Russell engages in such a comparison to show that an ontologically simpler theory (that encounters no difficulties in the face of his epistemology) is, in fact, at the ready.
5. Understanding the Gray’s Elegy Argument Holistically

Although Russell rejects the theory of denoting concepts, too much can be taken from this rejection. The Gray’s Elegy Argument need not be read as a complete refutation of denoting concepts, nor must a reading show that “On Denoting” calls into question the very existence of denoting concepts in our ontology. On the contrary, a proper reading shows what sorts of metaphysical and semantic commitments Russell was able to maintain given the relative shortcomings of the theory of denoting concepts vis-à-vis the theory of descriptions, and those that he had to reject. What of Russell’s earlier metaphysical views are preserved by the theory of descriptions? Firstly, propositional realism: the notion that propositions are independent entities, the constituents of which are entities in themselves.  

Secondly, preserved is our ability to grasp propositions that are composed wholly of objects with which we have acquaintance, but that nonetheless allow us to speak of (and think about) entities with which we have no acquaintance, be they infinite numbers or non-existent French monarchs.

What is lost by moving from one theory to the other? Demopoulos tells us that

Demopoulos clearly means no new ontological notions; this is certainly correct. The new theory of descriptions employs the propositional function and the variable, already in the ontological economy of the theory of denoting concepts. It merely eliminates the need to employ denoting concepts (though, as we have seen, not because they are inconsistent entities). However, such a reading does not draw our attention to the radical shift in semantic method that accompanied the Gray’s Elegy Argument in “On Denoting,” and it was this radical shift in semantic method that prevented Russell from simply rejecting the theory of denoting concepts out of hand. Required by the new theory of descriptions was the method of contextual analysis, replacing Russell’s earlier atomism. Some parts of sentences (e.g., descriptive phrases) no longer have their own independent and constant meaning (in fact, they have no meaning at all), and only sometimes do they denote. Russell also needed to reject the notion that natural language expressions were “transparent” to their propositional counterparts. As Russell tells us in “On Denoting”,

when there is anything with which we do not have immediate acquaintance, but only definition by denoting phrases, then the proposition in which this thing is introduced by means of a denoting phrase do not really contain this thing as a constituent, but contain instead the constituents expressed by the several words of the denoting phrase. (55-56.)
This is a far cry from what he states in *Principles*:

… it must be admitted, I think, that every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning; a perfectly meaningless sound could not be employed in the more or less fixed way in which language employs words. The correctness of our philosophical analysis of a proposition may therefore be usefully checked by the exercise of assigning the meaning of each word in the sentence expressing a proposition. On the whole, grammar seems to me to bring us much nearer to a correct logic than the current opinions of philosophers; and in what follows, grammar, though not our master, will be taken as our guide. (42)

This program of propositional reduction in “On Denoting” effectively eliminates entities from propositions in the new theory that would have found their way into either or both the proposition expressed and the proposition asserted in the old theory.

In short, Russell dropped most of the major tenets of Platonic Atomism. The old view, with its attenuate metaphysics, could no longer be maintained as a complete semantic account of how propositions were to be analysed, and the proposition thus became the basic element of semantic evaluation in the theory of descriptions.

That the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument exists at all within “On Denoting”, rather than a simple remark about the impossibility of denoting concepts, is our best indication that Russell took the theory of denoting concepts as a possible (though unworthy) competitor to the theory of descriptions and, therefore, did not see the old theory succumb to some relatively straightforward inconsistency. Understood in this way, the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument is not a convoluted expression of the confusions he came to find in the theory of denoting concepts, but rather Russell’s careful (if awkward) recognition that a sea-change had occurred in his semantics, and that the relationship between his new semantics and his existing epistemology had to be negotiated (so that the proposal of the former would not jeopardise the viability of the latter). In comparison to older readings of “On Denoting”, ontological considerations play but a very minimal role here, subordinated to the central role of semantic and epistemological considerations. We do well to see how much of our picture of the philosophy of language has been structured by this sea-change, and how significant a proper interpretation of the Gray’s *Elegy* Argument is for contemporary readings of “On Denoting”.¹³

Notes

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In *Principles*, a proposition is a finite unity “when, and only when, the aggregate of its simple constituents is finite.” (§145) A proposition is an infinite unity if this is not the case, i.e., it is an aggregate of an infinity of simples, or it is not composed of simples, but rather complexes which are themselves infinitely divisible.

Of course, the view generalises to explain how we grasp propositions that include other entities with which we lack acquaintance for other reasons.

Russell attributes his metaphysical views regarding propositions—explicitly (a) the mind-independence of propositions, (b) the mutual independence of entities, and the reality of relations—to the work of Moore, when in *Principles* he tells us, “On fundamental questions of philosophy, my position, in all its chief features, is derived from Mr. G.E. Moore. I have accepted from him the non-existential nature of propositions (except such as happen to assert existence) and their independence of any knowing mind; also the pluralism which regards the world, both that of existents and that of entities, as composed of an infinite number of mutually independent entities, with relations which are ultimate, and not reducible to adjectives of their terms or of the whole which these compose.” (Preface, xviii) Russell elsewhere attributes his view of the externality (i.e., anti-idealism and anti-holism) of relations to Moore. (§27) Moore gives his best expression to the externality of relations in his “The Nature of Judgment” (1899).

The moniker requires some explanation. The modifier “Platonic” is employed by Hylton in his *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (1990) to capture the unproblematic acceptance, by both Moore and Russell, of abstract objects in their views near the turn of the century, especially Moore’s dissertation (which successfully won the Prize Fellowship at Trinity College) of 1898, and Russell’s *Principles*. For a complete explanation, see footnote 7 on page 112 of Hylton. Also Moore himself thought the metaphysical system he had developed, the system in which the mind has direct cognitive contact with propositions and their constituents, found certain affinities with Plato’s work. In a letter to Desmond MacCarthy, cited in Hylton (1990, 137), Moore writes, “I am pleased to believe that this is the most Platonic system of modern times.”

One can see this both in *Principles*, and in his letter to Frege of 12 December 1904.

Demopoulos gets the name from a passage in *The Problems of Philosophy* (58). Russell writes: “The fundamental principle in the analysis of propositions containing descriptions is this: *Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.*”

The terminology of “denotative occurrences” and “term occurrences” of denoting concepts comes from Cartwright (1987).

See Demopoulos’ schematic representation of this argument on page 449 of Demopoulos (1999).

As Demopoulos puts it in Demopoulos (1999), “… we succeeded in characterising the denoting concept we seek, but to do so we have to give up the principle—central to the theory of denoting concepts—that the linguistic reference of denoting
phrases is always to be explained in terms of the denotation of denoting concepts.” (450)

10 The theory of descriptions was first fully introduced in “On Fundamentals”, much of which is mirrored in the Gray’s Elegy passage of “On Denoting”.

11 Premises (1) and (2) are paraphrasings. The other premises and conclusion are quoted verbatim from Noonan (1996, 93).

12 We see preservation here from Russell’s earlier views in the sense-datum theory that he came to develop after “On Denoting”. Propositions are built up out of sense-data with which one has immediate acquaintance, though these sense-data are, strictly speaking, self-subsistent objects. We come to know things about sense-data, and this is always the mark of their independence from our mental construction. In Problems of Philosophy (42), Russell argues that it is likely that sense-data rely on perception, but this does not make them mental constructs. For Russell, perception is an act of the body. At most, sense-data require the interaction of a body like ours with the proper environment, but they are in no way idealist. This observation is thanks to Kremer (1994, fn. 9).

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