# Russell against Frege and Meinong

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"Empty" definite descriptions—definite descriptions that have no referents:

> the present King of France
>
> the round square

## 1. Empty descriptions and the law of the excluded middle

> By the law of excluded middle, either '*A* is *B*' or '*A* is not *B*' must be true. Hence either 'the present King of France is bald' or 'the present King of France is not bald' must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list. Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig. (p. 233)

(B)  the present King of France is bald

(NB)  the present King of France is not bald

*An inconsistent set of statements:*

i)  Either (B) or (NB) is true

ii)  If (B) is true then the set of bald things must contain the present King of France

iii)  If (NB) is true then the set of non-bald things must contain the present King of France

iv)  neither set contains the referent of 'the present King of France'

**Law of Excluded Middle**  for any sentence $\phi$, "Either $\phi$ or not-$\phi$" is true

## 2.  Statements of nonexistence

(K)  The King of France does not exist

*Another inconsistent set:*

1.  (K) is true

2.  If (K) is true, then the referent of 'the King of France' is a member of the extension of the predicate 'does not exist'

3.  But nothing is in the extension of the predicate 'does not exist'

**Rule of truth for subject-predicate sentences**  A subject-predicate sentence "*a* is *F*" is true if and only if the referent of the subject is a member of the extension of the predicate

## 3.  Empty descriptions and Frege

> The sentence "Odysseus deeply asleep was disembarked at Ithaca" obviously has a sense. But since it is doubtful as to whether the name 'Odysseus' occurring in this sentence has a nominatum, so it is also doubtful that the whole sentence has one. However, it is certain that whoever seriously regards the sentence either as true or false also attributes to the name 'Odysseus' a nominatum, not only a sense…(p. 220)

Frege's two claims:

1.  terms like "Odysseus" and "the present king of France" have no referents

2.  sentences containing those terms have no referents either and so no truth values

(EB)  The King of England is bald

(FB)  The King of France is bald

*Russell's argument from aboutness*

1. If Frege's theory is true, then (EB) is about the referent of 'The King of England'

2. If 1 is true, then: if Frege's theory is true, then (FB) is about the referent of 'the King of France' if it is about anything

3. (FB) is not about the referent of 'the King of France'

4. If (FB) is about nothing, then (FB) is nonsense

5. (FB) is not nonsense

6. Therefore, Frege's theory isn't true

   If we say [(EB)], that is, it would seem, not a statement about the complex *meaning* 'the King of England', but about the actual man denoted by the meaning... By parity of form, [(FB)] also ought to be about the denotation of the phrase 'the King of France'. (p. 232)

(FD)  If Ferdinand is not drowned, Ferdinand is my only son

*Russell's argument from conditionals*

1. If Frege's theory is true, (FD) lacks truth value

2. (FD) does not lack truth value

3. Therefore, Frege's theory isn't true

## 4.  Empty descriptions and Meinong

Meinong says that definite descriptions must refer in order to be meaningful, and that "empty" descriptions *do* have referents. There really is a round square, a King of France, a golden mountain. They don't *exist* (although they "subsist"). So these sentences are true:

> The golden mountain is made of gold.
>
> The round square is round.
>
> The round square does not exist

Russell says:

> In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies.  Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can… robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects. (p. 240)

And also: what about "The *existing* gold mountain"?