In the essay before you, the truth about the workings of language, one of the fundamental pillars of human coexistence, is at stake. Our focus shall be upon the operation of reference. How is it that upon reading 'the essay before you, or 'the fundamental pillars', you independently find meaning in what I have written? Bertrand Russell set out to answer this question through his Description Theory – a theory Peter Strawson maintained was massively flawed.

This essay shall proffer that Strawson's criticism of the The Description Theory, crystalised by the citation in the present essay's title, is salient, convincing, and correct. This conclusion shall be reached in three steps: firstly, an exposition of Russell's Description Theory. Subsequently, a discussion of Strawson's criticism and what it consists in. Finally, I shall analyse the upshot of the clash between Russell's theory and Strawson's criticism – a clash of which I believe Strawson's criticism to be victorious. I shall analyse this upshot through the paradigm of The Substitution of Identicals, which shall be showcased in the final section.

In this exposition of Russell's Description Theory, I shall discuss Russell's motivations to come up with a novel theory, the intention of the theory, and how the theory operates in practice.

Russell is motivated by his epoch's rampant idealism, which proposes we can successfully refer not only to things with which we are not yet acquainted, but even to things with which it is impossible ever to be acquainted. *Acquainted* here means perceived via sense data i.e., what is seen, touched, heard, and so forth. Russell contrasts '*acquaintance*' with '*knowledge about'* as, respectively, "the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach my means of denoting phrases." (Russell 1905: 479) Problematically, certain constituents of the latter group seem meaningful, despite not existing: 'the cowboy amoeba, 'the talking snow', 'the unpretentious philosopher', for example. Idealists claim that despite the inexistence of their referents, these expressions do still successfully refer. This is

anathema to Russell, who consequently works to recentre reference around what exists, via the theory of reference he develops.

In so doing, he stumbles upon three dilemmas for the non-idealist: Negative Existentials; The Law of Excluded Middle; and The Substitution of Identicals. The Substitution of Identicals will serve as the paradigm through which I evaluate Russell and Strawson's conflicting arguments; I hope that rigorous discussion thereof shall allow me to demonstrate amply but economically the mistake that Russell makes, to which the title of this present essay alludes. I will explicate this problem, and The Description Theory's solution to it, in the final section, when I bring the theories of Russell and Strawson together. For now, I will explain how The Description Theory works, hence how Russell theorises that we successfully refer to singular objects delineated by the definite article 'the'.

In 'On Denoting' Russell exhibits the essence of his theory via the following example. The bracketed numbers are my addition, and shall grant us clearer comprehension of Russell's strategy:

'Thus "the father of Charles II. was executed" becomes :—
"(1) It is not always false of x that x begat Charles II. (2) and that x was executed (3) and that 'if y begat Charles II., y is identical with x' is always true of y".'
(Russell 1905: 482)

Highly logical and archaically expressed, Russell's approach may seem perplexing; let us deconstruct it. When we use 'the', followed by a singular object, what we are really doing is asserting facts about the world. We make 3 kinds of assertion: (1) an existential assertion; (2) an assertion of categoricity; (3) an assertion of uniqueness. Below, I exemplify these assertions in layman's terms. For 'the father of Charles II. was executed' to refer meaningfully:

(1) "There must exist some *thing,* x, such that x is a male whose offspring is Charles II. – this is what a father is."

(2) "Additionally, this *thing,* x, must have been executed, so we shall categorise it as such: an executed *thing.*"

(3) "Since 'the' is used, then there must exist only a single unique *thing,* x, which is a male whose offspring is Charles II."

Enormous work is done by this idea of *some thing,* x, which is effectively a placeholder for whatever we wish to refer to. Russellians claim Russell hereby succeeds in his objective of grounding his theory in the *real.* Although 'x' can be any unique *thing*, critically, it can only be a unique *thing* that existed at some point, and which has a property with which we can be acquainted (in this case, of having been executed).

Strawson does not believe this approach suffices, rather that it is deeply flawed in its failure to recognise the difference between the meaning of an expression and a specific use of an expression. In the following section, I shall dissect why Strawson thinks so, and what he proposes to do differently.

Here begins the second section of this essay, where I expose Strawson's main protestations: why and in what he believes Russell's Theory of Description to have a fundamental problem.

Strawson's objection to Russell, as the title of my essay indicates, is predicated upon a distinction Strawson underscores between the meaning of an expression and of the use of said expression in a particular context. Stated most succinctly, Strawson asserts that to talk about the meaning of an expression is to talk "about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer or to assert." (Strawson 1950: 327) This is distinct from the *use* of an expression.

When we talk about the *use* of an expression, we are talking instead about "whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all" (Strawson 1950: 328). Put differently, when we talk about the use of an expression, we are judging whether the expression, in a particular instance, is being employed in accordance with the rules of correct usage which constitute the expression's meaning.

A rudimentary example will permit us to see both Strawson's objection in action and therefore how he believes Russell's theory confuses expressions and the use of expressions in a particular context.

Imagine that philosophers are running an experiment comprised of a rational adult being directed into a room alien to them, full of miscellaneous objects (all distinctly different from one another, meaning no confusion between similar objects), with the sole instruction "Find the bag full of bonbons." The Strawsonian *meaning* of the expression "the bag full of bonbons" pertains to the rules and conventions that would allow the expression to refer successfully to something in the world. To our rational adult, these rules which allow for successful reference – hence, the expression's meaning – are approximately as follows: conventionally, the definite article 'the' indicates there is a unique thing to be sought out; conventionally, 'bag' describes a soft, flexible container of sorts, typically of paper or plastic; conventionally, 'full of' informs us that the large majority of the volume of a given container is occupied; conventionally, 'bonbons' evoke images of a brightly-coloured, chewy, sweet.

It is of critical importance that we recognise that based upon the *meaning* of the expression "the bag full of bonbons" that I have elucidated above, there are still theoretically many different bags full of bonbons to which that expression could refer upon usage: the bag could be made of plastic or paper; it could be full to the point of overflowing, or full only to the lower threshold of the term "full", vague as it is; the bonbons could be blue, or pink, or red. So, crucially, what refers is *not* the meaning of the expression, since its meaning, as

shown immediately above, is insufficient to pin down a specific bag of bonbons. What refers specifically is the philosophers' *use* of the expression "the bag full of bonbons". The expression's employment, on this particular occasion, in accordance with the rules of correct usage, entails successful reference, such that the subject of the experiment can find the specific bag full of bonbons to which the use of the expression refers.

When Strawson claims Russell confused expressions with their use in a particular context, he observes that for any expression which is used to refer uniquely, Russell seemed to believe that the expression's "meaning *must* be the particular object which [it was] used to refer to." (Strawson 1950: 328) I hope my example above has gone some way to show you, the reader, why the meaning of an expression – such as "the bag full of bonbons" – is markedly different from the particular object to which it may be used to refer on any given occasion, hence why Russell's belief was flawed.

On this revelation, I shall progress to this essay's final section where I return to and explain the problem which Russell must face in the Substitution of Identicals, and will conclude that Strawson rightfully dodges this problem by highlighting the fundamental flaw in The Description Theory which we have just discussed.

To reach this conclusion I will demonstrate how Strawson's criticism, once acted upon, leads us to a more realistic theory which better resolves this puzzle that Russell set out to solve.

Why is the Substitution of Identicals a problem, how does it challenge Russell's non-idealistic approach? Russell suggested that when I ask a question such as, "Is Emmanuel Macron the current President of France?" ('question P' from here onwards.) I could be walking into a trap of triviality. As recognised by those well-acquainted with continental politics, 'Emmanuel Macron' and 'the current President of France' presently refer to the same thing. Hence, says Russell, "either [term] may be substituted for the other in any

proposition without altering the truth or falsehood of that proposition."
(Russell 1905: 485) In making this substitution, one would surely be
right to question were I not merely asking "Is Emmanuel Macron
Emmanuel Macron?". Russell's theory endeavours to disallow this
perversion of the original inquiry, preventing its transformation into the
trivial.

Russell's theory responds to concern here by claiming that
when written out in its true form – provided by the application of his
theory – the possibility of such disruptive substitution disappears.
Russell (1905: 488) suggests the true form of question P is something
more akin to this (I have added the bracketed numbers explained in
the first section, prior to the relevant clause, to redemonstrate how the
theory is applied):

(1) Is there one, (3) and is there only one, entity (2) who is
currently recognised in France as President, and is Emmanuel
Macron identical with that one entity?

By removing the expression 'the current President of France',
Russell's theory seems to rid us of the possibility that by a Substitution
of Identiticals, a genuinely meaningful question may be reduced to one
which is meaningless.

However, Russell's solution, whilst stopping the question
becoming trivial, still remoulds our original question into a new one –
one that we did not literally ask. If Russell is right, signifying that many
of the questions we ask daily are mere covers for different, more
complex questions underneath, this would have concerning
ramifications for how much control we have over our own language.

Fortunately, were Russell's theory and its implications an
intimidating Zeppelin airship, hovering in the airspace of philosophical
truth, Strawson's objection is the rogue pebble – elevated by the
whirlwind of rational thought – that shall pierce and deflate its balloon.
For Strawson, The Substitution of Identicals is no problem at all. He
says:

"The bogey of triviality […] arises for those who think of the object referred to by the use of an expression as its meaning, and thus think of the subject and complement of these sentences as meaning the same because they could be used to refer to the same person." (Strawson 1950: 342)

À la Strawson, the Substitution of Identicals only becomes a problem for those who adopt Russell's theory, and hence his mistake, from the get-go. Shall the application of Strawson's approach to our Macronian example fare better?

To find out, we must first demarcate the two key terms in our exemplary question P: 'Emmanuel Macron' and 'the current President of France'. According to Strawson, were I to walk up to you in this instant and pose question P, it is the case that the objects referred to by my use of these expressions are one and the same: the man we call Emmanuel Macron. However, the meanings of these expressions are non-identical, which renders problematic the substitution of either of them.

Think about the meanings of these two expressions, the linguistic conventions governing their use. Regarding 'Emmanuel Macron', this is a proper noun, a human name. Excepting cases where full names are shared between different individuals, convention dictates that such names can be used to refer successfully – intimately and directly – to one uniquely identifiable human being upon whom the name has been bestowed.

Au contraire, the meaning of 'the current President of France' differs. Conventions tells us that this expression could be used to refer successfully to any sole individual ('the'), who is presently ('current') recognised as President ('President') in an entity named France ('of France'). Russell's 'true form' seems to share this Strawsonian meaning of 'the current President of France', however this is *not* a rapprochement between the two theories. Rather, it evidences further the exact error Strawson attributed to Russell, of equating meaning and the referent of a specific use. Russell's solution asks, effectively, if

Macron satisfies the conventions that allow for 'the current President of France' to refer. My earlier example shows why this solution is no solution at all: an uncountable number of possible bonbon-filled bags satisfied the conventions that allow for 'the bag full of bonbons' to refer. What discriminated between these possible bags, and specifically distinguished one, was a particular *use* of the expression, for which Russell never accounts.

Alas, in this section I clarified why the Substitution of Identicals is a non-problem for Strawson: we cannot substitute two things which are non-identical, and by virtue of different meanings, the expressions substituted are non-identical. Regardless, I insisted furthermore that Russell's proposed solution, seen through a Strawsonian lens, remains plagued by his fundamental mistake.

Ultimately, Strawson prevents our human questions undergoing the violent reformulation for which Russell advocates, which, whilst attempting to prevent our questions being transformed into the trivial, nevertheless dismembers the questions we originally devised. This becomes necessity when one goes along with Russell's mistake as diagnosed by Strawson, who proposes a cure that better solves the original problem and allows us to regain confidence in the questions we pose. Isn't that the least we can ask for?

I have striven in this essay to construct a sort of garden path, flanked by the colours and smells of quality exposition and exemplification. I hope the path has proved as alluring as I intended, and that you have thus followed it to its congenial conclusion: that Strawson's criticism of Russell is salient, convincing, and correct. Here concludes this paper.

<u>REFERENCES</u>

- Russell, Bertrand (1905). 'On Denoting'. *Mind,* 14: 479-493
- Strawson, P.F. (1950). 'On Referring'. *Mind,* 59: 320-344