

Russell's Views On Names As Descriptions  
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The philosopher Bertrand Russell was an empiricist, that is, he believed that all knowledge is derivative from one's personal experience. One consequence of this belief that is considered in his chapter 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description', in *Problems of Philosophy*, is that proper names cannot be *a priori* knowledge. This essay describes what Russell is claiming about proper names, discusses his reasons for holding this view, and enumerates the two exceptions to his beliefs.

In the chapter in question, Russell first examines closely what is meant by the word "knowledge". He concludes that there are two sorts, knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. Further, knowledge of things – that is, of tangible objects – can be distinguished into two kinds: *acquaintance* and *description*. Knowledge by acquaintance, which is obtained through "sense-data", "memory", and "introspection", is the foundation of all knowledge. Indeed, all resources available to the mind are at root supplied by those three sources of acquaintance. In contrast, knowledge by description, which Russell feels is a mental synthesis of acquaintance and truths, supplies the vast amount of data that is not immediately available from sensual experience.

According to Russell, a description can be definite – specific to one instance –, or ambiguous – a general type. One example of a definite description is a proper name. Russell states that "the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description" (Russell 54). His statement is based on the observation that all knowledge must be rooted in what we are directly acquainted with. A proper name is merely a symbol, which we may or may not connect with a real person whom we perceive through our

senses. To be expressed overtly, it must imply particulars that can be understood by all. For example, someone previously familiar with “Mr. Jones” might be able to connect that word to whom it refers. For strangers, however, it is meaningless until it is tied to some particular they can sense, such as “the man sitting by the foyer with the pinstripe suit.”

The description – or symbolic representation thereof – that is ascribed to a person need not remain static. Russell continues, “The description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times” (Russell 54). The only static element is the very person who is being described, and clearly the same person can be described in more than one way.

Russell must hold this view to justify his belief that knowledge derives ultimately from the senses. If a proper name could somehow be understood *a priori*, that is, without knowledge by acquaintance, his assertion that acquaintance is the foundation of knowledge would be contradicted.

The generalization about proper names depending on knowledge by acquaintance fails in two instances. Firstly, when someone is referring to himself or herself, the proper name acts as a direct replacement for the “self”. To replace the proper name with a description would be superfluous. As the person the description would refer to is making the statement directly, a statement about oneself does not need to imply a description. Russell, aware of this exception, comments, “Here the proper name has the direct use which it always wishes to have, as simply standing for a certain object, and not for a description of the object” (Russell 54).

The second failure of the generalization is the degenerate case of a proper name about which nothing else is known but the very name itself. Russell asserts that a

description must contain particular references to things with which we are acquainted, for if it did not, only universal concepts could be extrapolated. Such a description would only convey information that “follows logically from the description” (Russell 56). It follows from Russell’s argument that even less can be known about a proper name with no connections to a description. If the particulars associated with a proper name are unknown and are not made available, all judgment must be based entirely on logical deductions from the “noise or shape with which we are acquainted” (Russell 59).

Thus, Russell justifies his empiricism when it concerns the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name. The proper name is a symbol, which represents the description that refers to things we are acquainted with and that relate to the actual person. Significantly, interchanging descriptions of someone can be done very easily, without ever losing the mind’s firm grip on the real person in question.

#### Works Cited

Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford Press. London: 1997.