

REVIEWS

Robert J. Clack, *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Language*. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1969, v+100 pp., Dfl. 14.40.

Although this book is not, and is not meant to be, a contribution to the solution of any particular problem, it is useful and informative. It presents, in outline, Russell's Theory of Descriptions and the motivations underlying it. Heavy emphasis is laid on the fact (too often overlooked) that Russell, in setting up his Theory of Descriptions, was guided by motivations which lay beyond logic pure and proper: Russell was concerned with the central philosophical question of the structure of reality, the 'basic furniture of the world'. The Theory of Descriptions was meant to be an instrument to help clarify our thoughts on this matter. Chapter I ('The Quest for Logical Form') deals mainly with this philosophical purpose. In Chapter II ('The Uses of Reconstructionism') some idea is given of the Theory of Descriptions and of the ways in which Russell meant it to solve certain problems of ontology. Chapter III is called: 'Critique of Russell's Philosophy of Language', but consists mainly of a defence of Russell's views against objections raised by other philosophers.

The last chapter is no doubt the weakest. Clack formulates only one criticism of his own against Russell's theory, a criticism of method. It is formulated on the last two pages of the book. In his interpretation, Russell assumes that "the *ultimate* test of whether propositions are properly clarified is whether they contain expressions other than those designating objects known by acquaintance". This implies, he says, that Russell takes the basic ontological categories as given in advance. To regard the Theory of Description as a means of finding out what the structure of the world is, must therefore be circular. He concludes that "our final evaluation of Russell's ideal language program will be determined, to a great extent, by our estimate of the soundness of his choice of basic ontological categories". I am not sure that Clack does full justice to Russell here, nor that Clack is consistent. Earlier in the book he points out, correctly, that Russell's programme of reducing sentences to their ultimate logical form is taken to be relevant for problems of ontology on the *assumption* that there must be complete isomorphism between propositions and 'facts'. The reduction is guided by Ockham's maxim that no more entities should be assumed than is necessary. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to see the Theory of Descriptions as an attempt at making explicit Ockham's notion of necessity, given the unprovable assumption of referential isomorphism. In other words, as Clack himself says (p. 92): "To what kinds of entities do our forms of speech commit us?" is the question Russell wished to answer. Or, in other words again: what is the cleanest possible ontology we can arrive at?

But anyway, the book is clearly meant to be an exposé, rather than a critique. As such, it has merits and shortcomings. Up to a point it will illuminate the uninitiated reader. Here and there, however, this reader will have to remain puzzled because essential parts of Russell's arguments are left out. Thus, on p. 49–50, where Clack discusses the absolutely essential argument for the elimination of definite descriptions ('incomplete symbols') from logical form, he does not mention the ontological paradoxes which, in Russell's view, can only be avoided if definite descriptions are eliminated. (The complete argument is found in Russell's 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 1905.) The book is, moreover, definitely poor on the logical side, despite the central relevance of logical concepts for Russell's programme of semantic reduction. There is hardly any formalism to be found. Quantification theory is totally left out of account. Only the concept of class is discussed. A not too critical outsider might believe, on having read this book, that it is possible to understand Russell's Theory of Descriptions without having a fair knowledge of formal logic.

The book would have been of much greater relevance and interest if the author had taken into account the new developments in semantics of natural language, both in linguistics and in philosophy. Although, as Clack points out, Russell was not a practitioner of linguistic analysis, it is in this field that his Theory of Descriptions is at present most relevant and controversial. Systematic linguistic observation raises many crucial problems with regard to the Theory of Descriptions, even when this is taken within the terms of Russell's own programme. Russell neglected the problem of a generalized and systematic translation procedure, or a formal mapping, of the sentences of a natural language into their logical form. Philosophers and linguists alike are now beginning to be well aware of these problems, but this does not appear from the book. It is a pity that the author does not consider it to be 'particularly apposite to engage in a detailed examination of the theory of descriptions and try to determine the particular respects in which it may or may not be adequate for the purposes for which it was formulated', as he says in a footnote on p. 53.

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