Abstract:

Applying Occam's razor in order to minimize ontological commitments is among the central methods of Bertrand Russell's philosophy after 1905 and onwards. The year 1905 was specially significant for Russell in that respect, as he published in this year the groundbreaking paper titled 'On Denoting'. In this paper, he introduced, for the first time, the today widely acknowledged semantical theory, Theory of Descriptions. According to the canonical interpretation of Russell, which is represented, for the most part, by W. V. O. Quine's paper 'Russell's Ontological Development' (1966), Russell tended to embrace 'Meinongian' ontological commitments: these were ontological commitments to coherent and non-actual entities such as the present king of France (possibilia) and ontological commitments to incoherent entities such as the round square. In Quine's view, Russell could not dodge such commitments until he discovered Theory of Descriptions. This interpretation has been challenged recently and it is the main objective of this essay to defend Quine against his opponents. I provide a detailed account of those parts of Russell's philosophy before 'On Denoting' which precluded him from refuting conclusively the problematic ontological commitments. In order to provide such an account, we dive deep into the early Russell's philosophical thought and reconstruct his then semantical views the primary source for which is *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903). This applies especially to the so-called Theory of Denoting Concepts, the predecessor of Theory of Descriptions. Besides this, we tackle other relevant topics such as Russell's early theory of propositions and the related problem of propositional unity, Russell's early logicism, his notion of variable and generality and so on. One of the secondary objectives of this essay is to demonstrate that any Meinongian ontological commitment to contradictory objects was incompatible with Russell's logicist view of mathematics. In the final part of the essay, an account of Theory of Descriptions will be provided, with special attention to showing how this theory helped Russell in dodging successfully the problematic Meinongian ontological commitments. The position associated with the early Russell's realism which we characterize as 'Meinongianism' is meticulously distinguished from Alexius Meinong's phenomenological theory of intentionality.