Bertrand Russell's 'On Denoting' [*OD*] published in 1905 is one of the most influential philosophical texts of 20th century. The theory presented on its pages has been intensely discussed in the field of philosophy of language and today it forms part of every rational curriculum students of philosophy are expected to master before they are able to complete their degrees. This is Russell's Theory of Descriptions—a theory that gives an intriguing account of how descriptions or, in Russell's then parlance, 'denoting phrases' contribute to the meaning of the sentences in which they are deployed. F. P. Ramsey called Russell's theory a 'paradigm of philosophy,' referring to its sweeping eliminative analysis based on distinguishing the logical form of a description from its surface form (a rendering that is merely 'grammatical').[1] Russell's analysis stands as a poignant methodological embodiment, within the constraints of the linguistic turn in philosophy, of the fundamental distinction of philosophy *per se* between an appearance of something and the reality of that thing hiding behind the misleading veil of its appearance.

In this essay, I will track down and reconstruct in detail what I take to be Russell's main reason for developing his Theory of Descriptions. The theory did not come to Russell all of sudden. It had a predecessor the knowledge of which hardly reaches beyond the circle of devoted Russellian scholars. This was a Frege-style semantical theory based on the idea that there are so-called denoting concepts.[2] This theory was exposited in and applied throughout *The Principles of Mathematics* [*Principles*] (1903).

According to W. V. O. Quine's influential version of the narrative concerning the revolution in Russell's thought brought about by the Theory of Descriptions, the ontology of *Principles* was populated by what Quine takes to be unwanted entities such as the present king of France.[3] In reference to the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong, the contemporary literature calls such entities 'Meinongian'. Quine's account does not put the Theory of Denoting Concepts under scrutiny; it clearly implies, however, that it was an attempt to provide a semantical account of descriptions which failed exactly where the Theory of Descriptions succeeded: It failed to

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1 Ramsey (1931), 263.

2 Henceforth, it is called the Theory of Denoting Concepts.

3 Quine presented this view in his 'Russell's Ontological Development' (1966).

purge the unwanted entities from Russell's ontology. The moment Russell embraced his Theory of Descriptions is thus depicted by Quine as a decisive step that put Russell on his path towards ontological austerity.

Quine's account has the advantage of being able to neatly accommodate Russell's own retrospective on the matter. Yet, it has been challenged. The early Russell's thought has received a growingly thorough examination in the last three decades, to a considerable extent due the fact that a large portion of Russell's unpublished works were made available by the editors of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* series. Quine's account should certainly not be taken for granted without any further inquiry, as Russell's defense of the Theory of Descriptions, in any of his published writings, is based on arguments against the naive semantics attributed by Russell to Meinong and arguments against G. Frege's semantics of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, not on criticisms explicitly aimed at his earlier position in *Principles*. Concerning Russell's criticisms of Frege, regardless of whether they are just or not, it is not difficult to see that the same or very similar arguments might apply to the Theory of Denoting Concepts, as denoting concepts are posits akin to Frege's Sinne. The notorious Grey's elegy argument is such. When it comes to Russell's arguments against Meinong's (but, more precisely, Meinong-style) naive semantics, the situation is much less clear.

Does the early Russell's semantical treatment of descriptions based on the idea that there are denoting concepts entail an ontological commitment to entities such as the present king of France or the round circle? Quine's answer is 'yes' in the case of possibilia (exemplified by the present king of France) and, as we will see, he remains agnostic in the case of contradictory entities. Some Russellian scholars proposed a different answer. According to them, Russell's theory of denoting concepts was designed to account for genuine referential failures! If this was the case, the superiority of the Theory of Descriptions over its predecessor, if there is any after all, certainly cannot consist in purging the unwanted, Meinongian entities from the early Russell's ontology.

I will argue in favor of Quine's interpretation. There is textual evidence, it must be admitted, that shows that even as early as in *Principles* Russell wanted his then semantical treatment of descriptions to account for genuine referential failures. Most probably, this occurred

at some later phase of writing the book. Could Russell deliver, though? I will argue that he could not.

There are passages in *Principles* that indicate that the so-called puzzle of negative existentials (existential judgements) forced the early Russell to adopt a view that made genuine referential failures impossible to accommodate for him. Russell could not dispense with Meinongian entities. Reading the passages in question carefully reveals that Russell envisaged the puzzle of negative existentials as a piece of reasoning that consists in a semantical application of a notion of intentionality (aboutness). This has been entirely omitted by the scholars who oppose Quine's interpretation of Russell.

I will provide the puzzle, as Russell understood it, with a detailed presentation in order to make explicit how a notion of intentionality was utilized in it. The puzzle will be reconstructed and most importantly it will also be applied to descriptions of contradictory entities. Russell could not dispense with both possibilia and contradictory entities. He could not embrace them either! I will explain in detail why embracing contradictory objects would be detrimental to the early Russell's logic and mathematics. This reveals another whole dimension of the early Russell's struggle to construe a satisfactory semantics of descriptions. His inability to cope with the puzzle of negative existentials in a way that avoided an ontological commitment to entities such as the round circle posed a serious threat to the foundational project of *Principles* as a whole. This might explain Russell's urgent need after the completion of *Principles* to elaborate on his semantical account of descriptions.[4]

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4 That Russell felt in need of elaborating, after the completion of Principles, on his views concerning descriptions is evidenced in several manuscripts. I will refer to some of them later. (For comparison, see a more comprehensive account in Rodríguez-Consuegra (1989-90).) Russell's motivation to improve on his views was, to a great extent, due to a hope that a proper semantical treatment of descriptions could help him to deal with the paradox of classes named after him. It might be objected that this hope, not really any concern about possibilia and contradictory entities, fueled the progression of Russell's thought towards his Theory of Descriptions. This is a valid point, but only as long as we treat the two topics as sharply separated from each other. In this essay, I don't discuss Russell's paradox, but I believe that there is an important connection between Russell's early attempts to avoid it and the problems emerging with an admission of entities such as the present king of France and the round circle. Russell's hope that a semantical theory of descriptions would help him cope with the paradox consisted in a suspicion that its emergence is due to an illegitimate ontological commitment, the commitment to the existence of classes. Although this wasn't, in the end, Russell's preferred solution, the so-called 'no classes theory' remained part of his theory of mathematics. Russell's idea that there are illegitimate ontological commitments was at the center of the post-Principles development of his semantical thought.