Russell expounded his theory of descriptions in a number of places, but perhaps the best known source is his 1905 article, “On Denoting” [1]. I think it may still be fruitful to discuss the doctrine of that article since some readers may disagree as to its main point.

Theories of descriptions concern the analysis of sentences containing definite descriptions. For example, “The present queen of England is shapely” or “The least prime number is even.” Let us refer to the description itself as proper or improper according as there is or is not a unique object described. Thus the descriptions “The present queen of England” and “The least prime number” are both proper since they uniquely describe Elizabeth Windsor and two, respectively. But the descriptions “The present king of France” and “The author of Principia Mathematica” are improper since the first describes nothing and the second describes Russell and Whitehead equally well. The difficulties involved in the analysis of sentences containing descriptions (I will say “description” as short for “definite description”) are most apparent in connection with improper descriptions. This should not be surprising, since improper descriptions are rarely used knowingly, and thus usage does not provide a clear guide. On even the most elementary question of analysis, the truth value of such sentences, we find disagreements. Consider the sentence: “The present king of France is bald.” According to Russell’s theory, it is false. According to the “chosen-object” theory of Frege[2], elaborated by Carnap[3], in which all improper descriptions are treated as if they uniquely described some previously chosen

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1This paper has benefited from a number of sources, including a seminar at Princeton, a colloquium at Cornell, discussions with Montgomery Furth, and National Science Foundation Grant GP-4594.
object, the sentence is true (taking Yul Brynner as chosen object). According to the “truth-value-gap” theory of Frege, elaborated by Strawson[4], in which improper descriptions are treated as having meaning but describing nothing, and sentences containing such descriptions are treated as themselves meaningful but having no truth value, the sentence is neither true nor false. I am aware of no theory according to which the sentence is both true and false, though no doubt such a theory has been or will be proposed.

This much is well known about Russell’s theory: He takes the propriety of the description to be a part of the content of certain sentences containing descriptions and thus counts them false if they contain improper descriptions. More specifically, he claims that a paradigm sentence of the form “The such-and-such is so-and-so” is equivalent to “One and only one thing is a such-and-such, and that one is so-and-so.” In symbols:

\[ F_{x}G_{x} \] is equivalent to “\( (\exists x) ((y) (G_{y} \equiv y = x) & F_{x}) \).”  \( (1) \)

This analysis does not provide a unique understanding of sentences of the form “The such-and-such is not this-and-that,” which may be treated as equivalent to “One and only one thing is a such-and-such and that one is not this-and-that,” thus assimilating “not this-and-that” to the “so-and-so” of the paradigm; but the given form may also be treated as equivalent to “It is not the case that one and only one thing is such-and-such and that one is this-and-that,” thus applying the paradigm to “the such-and-such is this-and-that” and understanding the given form as its negation. This ambiguity is regarded by Russell as a simple scope problem on a par with the party invitation which reads, “Bring your wife or come stag and have a good time.” And he introduces the terminology of primary and secondary (and by natural extension tertiary, quaternary, and so forth) occurrences to indicate the intended scope of the description in sentences of the given form. (Later, in Principia Mathematica [5], he introduces the more technically satisfactory device of scope indicators.)

These two features then, (i) that the sentence “The present king of France is bald” is taken to be equivalent to “One and only one thing is a present king of France and that one is bald,” and (ii) that this leads to scope problems in the case of “The present king of France is not bald” which comes out true if the description is given secondary occurrence but false if the description is given primary occurrence, I take

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2”Über Sinn und Bedeutung” [2]. See especially the discussion of sentences containing “Odysseus.”