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III REFERENCE AND DESCRIPTIONS

There is a long philosophical tradition according to which the basic structure of language and the basic structure of reality are the same. The basic linguistic structure is supposed to be that of subjects and predicates while the basic ontological structure is supposed to be particulars and universals. Although these issues were treated in the main introduction of this book, a brief review is worthwhile.

Consider the sentence

Socrates is wise.

It can be divided into two parts: "Socrates" and "is wise." "Socrates" is the subject and "is wise" is the predicate. The function of "Socrates" and of subject expressions generally, according to this long tradition, is to refer to, pick out, or identify a particular object, in this case the man Socrates. Always, or at least typically, particular objects are individual things that have a position within space and time. So it makes sense to say that Socrates lived in Athens in the fifth century B.C. The function of "is wise" is to express or designate the property of being wise. Properties are things that particulars have and can share with other particulars. Thus, Socrates shares the property of being wise with Plato, Aristotle, and all the other wise human beings who ever lived. Because properties can be shared, they are sometimes called "universals." Thus there is an asymmetry between subjects and predicates. Socrates is one thing; he is not shared by other things; but being wise is shared by many particulars.

As it stands, our explanation of the functions of subjects and predicates is inadequate because it does not give any indication of the purpose of referring or predicating. What is their point? One can understand this only by understanding the function of subject/predicate sentences as a whole; their function is categorization. To categorize something physically is to group objects into different types or sorts. If one sorts coins, then one sorts all the pennies together, all the nickels together, all the dimes together, and so on. One might put each kind of coin into a box or container of some kind. Subject/predicate sentences have the function of mentally or conceptually categorizing things. Subject expressions denote individual objects, like individual coins, and locate them in the category expressed by the predicate, like the containers used for

sorting coins. The function of "Socrates is wise," then, is to refer to Socrates for the purpose of categorizing him as having the property of being wise. If he fits into that category, then the statement is true. If he does not fit into that category, then the statement is false.

Of the two terms, 'subject' has exercised philosophers more. The reason is that philosophers have traditionally been concerned with whether anything that humans believe or say is true; and if anything is true then, it seems, language must somehow attach to the world.

Further, language attaches to the world through the relation of reference which holds between subjects and particulars. Although this claim appears to solve a problem, it actually creates many. One of the most basic is the Paradox of Reference and Existence:

(1) Everything referred to must exist.
(2) 'Hamlet' refers to Hamlet.
(3) Hamlet does not exist.

These three propositions are inconsistent because (1) and (2) entail

(3′) Hamlet exists.

which contradicts (3). Although most nonphilosophers would try to resolve the paradox by denying (1), most philosophers hold that (1) is true. They take this position because if it were possible to refer to things that did not exist, then reference could not guarantee that language attached to reality. Frege, Russell, and Strawson all agree that it is (2) that is false. The various explanations for why (2) is false are ingenious, if not always plausible.

According to Frege, (2) is false just because (1) and (3) are true. The reason that people think that (2) is true is that they confuse two kinds of meaning: sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). The sense of a word is the descriptive content that in effect gives a language user the wherewithal to pick out the referent. The *Sinn* or descriptive content for a proper name, like any meaningful word, has to be something that is shared by speaker and hearer. If a *Sinn* were not shared, communication would be impossible. (See the introduction for Section VIII, "The Nature of Language.") Frege recognizes that the primary way in which one person grasps a *Sinn* may differ from the primary way in which another person grasps it. For example, one person may grasp the *Sinn* of 'the morning star' as the brightest object in the morning sky, excluding the sun and moon, while another person may grasp the same *Sinn* as the last object, excluding the sun and moon, to disappear in the morning. Consequently, Frege holds that the *Sinn* of proper names is disjunctive. The *Sinn* of 'the morning star' being something like the *brightest star in the morning sky, excluding the sun and moon, or the last object, excluding the sun and moon, to disappear in the morning.* Other names, such as 'Plato' and 'Aristotle' will have even more elaborate *Sinne* because people primarily grasp those objects in many more ways than 'the morning star' is. For names associated with many descriptions, each disjunctive element may be given a weight, and the referent would be the object with the highest score of descriptive accuracy.

The distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* gives Frege a neat solution to the puzzle about identity statements when combined with one additional concept: The cognitive significance of a sentence is the combination of the sentence's *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. The sentence

The morning star = the morning star

is trivial and uninformative because both the *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* of both terms flanking the '=' sign are identical. In contrast, the sentence,

> The morning star = the evening star

is nontrivial and informative because, even though the *Bedeutung* of each term is the same, the *Sinn* of 'the morning star' is different from the *Sinn* of 'the evening star'. If we now add the concept of cognitive significance, that is, the combination of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung,* we can say that the difference between trivial identity statements and nontrivial ones is due to the difference in their cognitive significance.

The word translated as 'proposition' in "On Sense and Nominatum" is '*Gedanke*', which is translated as 'thought' in Frege's article, "The Thought," in Section I.

Let's now briefly consider how Russell would explain the falsity of (2). For him, 'Hamlet' does not refer (i.e., directly denote), because 'Hamlet', like all other ordinary proper names, whether of real or unreal objects, is a disguised or abbreviated description and not a genuine proper name. 'Hamlet' might be an abbreviation for 'The Danish prince who killed his uncle, who was married to widowed mother'. This description is not true of any object because (3) is true.

Although P. F. Strawson differs from Russell on many important matters, their views about ordinary proper names are similar insofar as Strawson thinks that proper names are "backed" by descriptions. In other respects, Strawson's account diverges from Russell's in important ways. For Strawson, it is people, not words or phrases, that primarily refer. (In his "Mr. Strawson on Referring," Russell in effect replied that talk about what a speaker does in using language has to do with psychology, not philosophy.) Also, since 'Hamlet' is a genuine proper name, a speaker may try to use it to refer, according to Strawson, but will fail to refer because (3) is true. Consequently, the speaker will fail to make a statement or express a proposition, and so there will be nothing to which a truth-value might be attached. In 1950, Strawson was not completely clear about this aspect of his theory, and so he expressed the point misleadingly by saying that when reference fails, "the question of whether [the speaker's] . . . statement was true or false simply *did not arise.*" Later he became clear that the failure to refer to something would result in no statement at all.

When "On Referring" was reprinted in *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* (ed. Antony Flew [1956]), Strawson added a few footnotes that qualified some of his positions. In the first one, he said that he regretted describing the use of definite descriptions in fiction as a "spurious" use, and added that he now preferred to call these uses 'secondary' ones. Later in the article, he expresses his wish to change the sentence, "Hence we can, using significant expressions, pretend to refer, in make-believe or in fiction, or mistakenly think we are referring when we are not referring to anything" to read as follows: "Hence we can, using significant expressions, refer in secondary ways, as in make-believe or in fiction, or mistakenly think we are referring to something in the primary way when we are not, in that way, referring to anything." These changes suggest that by 1956 Strawson started taking fictional uses more seriously than he had in 1950. However, there are two problems with his changes. First, given that he subscribes to the Axiom of Existence, what kind of existence should he think fictional objects have? Would he hold that it would be an existence that would correlate with the "secondary use" of language, that is, a secondary existence, like "subsistence," which would be intermediate between existence and nonexistence? If he did, then he would be subject to the Russellian objection that to say that fictional objects have a secondary existence is a pitiful or paltry evasion. Second, the phrase, 'secondary use,' remains somewhat pejorative, like a second-class citizen.

The problem in my opinion is the Axiom of Existence, which Frege, Russell, Strawson, and almost every other philosopher of language subscribes to. I think that axiom is straightforwardly false because so far as the use of language is concerned, referring to nonexistent objects is the same as referring to existent ones, and, as a linguistic act,

no more difficult to do. In each case, the speaker uses some word or phrase either to introduce an object into discourse or to continue discussing an object already introduced. And since the introduction is linguistic, the presence of the object is not required. To see this clearly, it is helpful to give a brief and simplified rational reconstruction of how various objects get introduced into discourse during the course of language-learning and then to contrast that with how a language, already learned, introduces objects. When language-learning begins, the first things that parents talk to toddlers about and about which the toddler can talk are existent objects within the sensible environment of both. At the second stage, the speaker and hearer can talk about existent objects, previously experienced and talked about, that are not currently present. At the third stage, the speaker and hearer can talk about no longer existent objects that were once experienced by both the speaker and hearer. At the fourth stage, the speaker can talk about objects she has experienced that the hearer has not; and it does not matter whether these objects are existent now or not. At this stage, descriptive phrases are used to introduce objects (and also proper names). For example, a parent may say, "Great grandmother Helen would have loved to see you," to a child who has never seen the grandmother and never will. At the fifth stage, the speaker and hearer can talk about objects that never existed, and it does not matter whether they are objects that will someday exist ('your future grandchild') or never will exist ('Pegasus'). The speaker introduces such objects in exactly the same way that she did in the fourth stage, linguistically. To move from an earlier to a later stage requires only a little imagination, and it is not necessary to go through every intermediate stage to get to the fifth one.

It is no good for someone to object that sentences of the form, 'S refers to O with name or description D', only make sense if there are values, that is, existent objects, for O; for that objection begs the question. The Axiom of Existence looses its point once an account is given of how reference can occur in the absence of an existent object. However, it may be helpful to add another element.

Reference, whether to real or fictional objects, must combine with predication to express propositions; and propositions are true or false. Consequently, if reference to fictional objects occurs, it must occur as part of a proposition, and hence there must be ways of evaluating such propositions as true or false. And there are. The sentence, 'Conan Doyle referred to Sherlock Holmes with the name "Sherlock Holmes"', would be true if in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, "Sherlock Holmes lit his pipe." Some philosophical theories of fiction claim that every speech act about fiction should be understood as prefaced by a fiction-operator such as 'in fiction' or 'According to Conan Doyle in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*'. I think these theories misrepresent the function of the phrases in question. Those phrases operate in the same way that 'According to the Magna Carta' or 'According to the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution', or 'According to *A Thousand Days*', namely, they indicate where one is to go for the evidence to evaluate the propositional content of the sentence.

So far as the understanding and evaluation of statements and other speech acts is concerned, there is no difference between some ancient history and fiction. In both cases, often the only evidence is the primary sources, texts. I am not espousing linguistic idealism. I am not claiming that there is nothing outside the text. I am not saying that what makes a proposition true in general is another text. If someone claims 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', then what makes it true is the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon; but the best evidence for that fact are certain ancient manuscripts. Similarly, if the narrator of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* says, "Mother died today; or

maybe yesterday. I really can't be sure," the best evidence of that is some text. I will not say what makes a fictional statement true; the issue is too difficult and not to the point. We assume that it is a fact that some statements in and about fiction are true, and construct a theory of reference consistent with that fact.

As a kind of intentional activity, talking only requires intentional objects. Sometimes the intentional object exists and sometimes it does not; sometimes the intentional object once existed and no longer does, and sometimes the object never did and never will.

Let's now return to the issue that began this discussion, Strawson's claim that talk about fiction is a "secondary" use of language. As my rational reconstruction indicated, talk about nonexistent objects, of which fictional objects are the salient kind, is secondary to talk about existent objects. But this is a point about language learning, not about the use of language learned. Once learned, talk about existent objects has no priority over talk about nonexistent objects. To think it does is to commit the genetic fallacy.

A distinction is sometimes drawn between real-world talk and fictional talk. In his stories about Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle used fictional, not real-world, talk to talk about Sherlock Holmes. (And I have already conceded that fictional talk in general is dependent on real life talk in general.) But when we, Conan Doyle's readers and critics, talk about Sherlock Holmes, we are not talking fictional talk. We are engaging in real-world talk to talk about a fictional object. And this real-world talk is logically dependent on Conan Doyle's fictional talk, because if he had not created the character in fiction, then we could not be talking about him now. So some real-world talk is logically dependent on fiction. In other words, some real-world talk is "secondary" to some fictional talk.

One last point on this topic. Fictional talk, talk about fiction, and real-world talk cannot be effectively segregated from each other. Real people, places, and things are talked about in fictional talk; this happens most conspicuously in historical fiction, but it also occurs in most fiction that would not be categorized as historical, such as any novel with a contemporary setting. Tom Wolfe wrote one novel about the real New York and one about the real Atlanta, Georgia; it contained many fictional characters, but some real people too. Since we have already seen that fictional characters exist in real-world talk, let's end by pointing out that real objects and fictional objects can be compared and contrasted in the same sentence: The presidential candidate in Jeremy Larner's *The Candidate* had much more integrity than Bill Clinton. Not only can we understand this sentence; we can know it is true.

I have been discussing the issue of how language attaches to the world by discussing the Paradox of Reference and Existence. Another aspect of this issue concerns the question of whether language attaches directly (immediately) to the world or whether it attaches indirectly (mediately). Russell says 'directly'; Frege and Strawson say 'indirectly'. One reason that Russell says 'directly' is that he wants to avoid skepticism. If the connection between the mental world of a human being and the nonmental world is indirect, then, Russell thinks, one can never be sure that what one is in fact referring to is the thing that one thinks one is referring to. A person may want to connect with reality at one point and unwittingly connect with it at a different point. Any mediating element, according to this view, has the potential of going awry or otherwise failing. (On the concept of intermediaries in philosophy, see Avrum Stroll, *Surfaces* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], pp. 152–159.) This is why Descartes thinks his 'cogito' avoids skepticism. Since nothing stands between a thinker and her thinking, a thinker cannot be mistaken about her existence as a thinker.

Similarly, Russell's distinction between the way proper names attach to reality, to wit, directly, and the way descriptions do when they do, to wit, indirectly, is grounded in a more basic epistemic distinction between knowledge by acquaintance, which is required for the use of genuine proper names, and knowledge by description, which is sufficient for the use of definite descriptions.

Although it is not immediately evident, even descriptions end up having words directly connected with their meanings. For example, the sentence, 'The king of France is wise' may be analyzed as 'There exists an object x such that x reigns malely over France and for all y if y reigns malely over France, then x is identical with y'. All the predicative or relational general words in this sentence ('reigns', 'malely', and 'is identical with') directly denote their meanings, namely, concepts or universals. Other words ('and' and 'if . . . , then') denote other general objects, truth-functions. (I assume 'France' is a logically proper name and am silent about quantifiers and variables, as Russell largely is.)

In contrast with Russell, proper names attach indirectly to reality according to Frege and Strawson. For Frege, *Sinn* mediates between the name and the referent, although he does hold that the mind is in direct contact with *Sinne*. For Strawson, as we said, proper names have to be "backed" by some descriptions that help the hearer pick out the object the speaker intends the hearer to pick out. When he says, "There are no logically proper names," he means that Russell is wrong to think that proper names denote their objects immediately and without the help of some descriptive content (Section I of "On Referring"). When he goes on to assert that "there are no descriptions (in this sense)," he means that *pace* Russell descriptions do not assert the existence of the things they are used to refer to; rather, the existence of the referent is presupposed.

Although Russell and Strawson are seemingly diametrically opposed, Keith Donnellan tries to effect an Hegelian-like synthesis of their views. They are both right and both wrong, and he has something better to offer that incorporates what is correct in his predecessors. For, according to Donnellan, there are two uses of descriptions, where Russell and Strawson saw only one. Russell focused on "the attributive use," while Strawson focused on "the referential use." Donnellan himself is particularly interested in the referential use, which is the same as or very close to the way proper names are used. Whether Donnellan is right depends crucially on the propriety of the distinction between attributive and referential uses.

Distinctions can be introduced in one or both of two different ways: by characterization and by examples. To characterize a distinction is to specify some property in virtue of which the distinction obtains. For example, there are two kinds of propositions: Atomic sentences are those of which no proper part is a sentence. Molecular sentences are all the others. In this example, the property of *having no proper part that is a sentence* is the characterizing property. Only one such property is needed and appropriate. If two properties were used, say, one to characterize atomic sentences and another to characterize molecular sentences, then there would be the risk of ending up with an improper distinction: There may be some things that have both properties or some with none. Sometimes a characterizing property can be broken into two parts. For example, suppose that our universe of discourse includes only human beings, and we define a bachelor as someone who is an unmarried, adult male. In this case, the one characterizing property of *being an unmarried, adult male* can be broken down into three parts (*being unmarried, being adult,* and *being male*). Nonetheless, the characterizing property is the one formed by the conjunction of the three simpler properties.

The other way of introducing a distinction is by examples. Here are two examples of atomic sentences:

Adam is happy,
Beth is rich.

Here are two examples of molecular sentences:

Adam is rich and Beth is happy;
It is not the case that Adam is rich.

One problem with introducing a distinction by examples is that the principle of the distinction is not made clear. So, even if a person develops a facility for recognizing the difference between things of kind K_1 and things of kind K_2, she may not know on what basis she is making the distinction. It is said that people who identify male and female chicks ("chicken-sexers") are virtually infallible but cannot explain how they do it: "It just looks like a female." Another problem, more serious, is that if a person does not know in virtue of what property a distinction is made, more than one property may be operating in making the division. In fact, I believe that Donnellan's distinction suffers in this way. Sometimes the examples that he gives turn on the difference between how many or what kind of beliefs the speaker and hearer have (e.g., the Smith's-murderer scenario and the martini-drinker scenario); and sometimes the examples turn on the desires of the speaker (e.g., the book on the table scenario). While Donnellan explicitly denies that the beliefs of the speaker are a crucial element of the distinction between attributive and referential uses (Section IV of his article), his denial is consistent with my point that sometimes the examples used to establish that there is such a distinction turns on the beliefs of the speaker and sometimes not.

Let's return to the general discussion of distinctions. Sometimes both the method of characterization and the method of examples is used in explaining a distinction, as in this case.

An atomic sentence is a sentence of which no proper part is a sentence, for example, 'Adam is happy' and 'Beth is rich'. A molecular sentence is any nonatomic sentence, for example, 'Adam is rich and Beth is happy'.

Immanuel Kant said that concepts without percepts are empty, and percepts without concepts are blind. Substitute 'characterization' for 'concept' and 'example' for 'percept' and you will see the sense in using both characterization and examples when drawing distinctions. Of course, using both does expose one to the possibility of incoherence; the examples and the characterization may not match. Suppose a prime number is defined as a whole number not divisible by any number without remainder other than by one and by itself, and four is given as the example of a prime number. It is obvious that the example does not fit the characterization. (*Exercise:* Give a different example in which we would be inclined to say that the characterization does not fit the examples.) The reason that the lack of fit between characterization and examples may go undetected in philosophy is that the distinctions (and hence the concepts used in characterizing the distinction) are often not understood clearly. To a large extent, philosophy consists of working toward clarifying basic concepts, and once the concepts become clear, a science is born.

Let's now consider what I take to be some defects in Donnellan's distinction between two uses of definite descriptions. His characterization is as follows: "A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in a description, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out who or what he is talking about and states something about that per-

son or thing" (Section III of his article). (Actually, this is only a partial characterization, since it applies only to assertions.) Now suppose that two men pass by. The one wearing a red shirt is quite attractive, the other quite unattractive. The speaker says, "The man in the red shirt (whoever he is) is quite attractive." The speaker is using the description 'The man in the red shirt referentially, according to Donnellan, since she intends that description to enable her audience to pick out whom or what she is talking about. However, the speaker is also using the description attributively, since she is talking about that person whoever he is, as the parenthetical phrase indicates. In fact, the function of the phrase 'whoever he is' is to indicate that the speaker has no elaborate knowledge of the object being referred to, and not to indicate a special use of a description. In order to save Donnellan's distinction, some philosophers say that some uses of definite descriptions are both referential and attributive, that is, that the distinction is not a proper one. But that is not Donnellan's view.

The fact that phrases of the form 'whoever x is' has the function of indicating relative absence of knowledge can also be used to show that Donnellan has not successfully associated the referring use of an expression with the way proper names are used. Suppose the winner of a lottery is "Stanislaus Martin" and that he is identified by that name even though he has not yet claimed his prize. Someone might say, "Stanislaus Martin, whoever he is, is the winner." This shows either that there is an attributive use of proper names, contrary to Donnellan's intentions, or that he has failed to characterize the referential use.

There are many other problems, I believe, with the way Donnellan draws his distinction. One is that he does not keep all the elements in his scenarios constant. For example, in the Smith's murderer scenario used to illustrate the referential use, the environment is the scene of the crime, the dramatis personae are only the speaker and the hearer. In the scenario used to illustrate the attributive use, the environment is a courtroom, the dramatis personae are the speaker, hearer, and the defendant. In the book on the table scenario used to illustrate the referential use, the speaker's motive is to have a book to read and the table need not be antique. In the corresponding scenario used to illustrate the attributive use, the speaker's motive is to remove an object that could damage the table, and it is necessary (for that example) that the table be antique. (Motives are not communicative intentions.) What Donnellan needed to show is that in the very same situation, the function of the description changes as the speaker's communicative intention, with respect to the description, changes; and this he did not do.

Two final points: In "Reference and Definite Descriptions," Donnellan did not make clear whether the attributive-referential distinction was supposed to be semantic or pragmatic. I believe that his later articles indicate that he wants it to be a pragmatic one. Some philosophers have argued that it is syntactic, but Donnellan has rejected this interpretation. The other point is that the sense of having an object "in mind" needed clarification. Donnellan's later work shows that he means that the speaker's use of a name is linked by a historical or causal chain to the intended referent. Donnellan's views about these chains are similar to those expressed by Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity,* part of which is Selection 20 in Section IV of this book.

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