

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language

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Strawson, "On Referring" and Russell, "Mr. Strawson on Referring"

"On Referring"

I.

- Strawson argues that Russell's theory of definite descriptions is mistaken. To show how it is mistaken, Strawson first considers the question that prompts such a theory in the first place:

Q: How can a sentence with a denoting phrase that fails to denote be meaningful? Russell was concerned with avoiding Meinong's absurd conclusion. Strawson provides two fallacious arguments for Meinong's conclusion. (He fully recognizes that they are fallacious.)

- Note Strawson's distinction between the *grammatical* and *logical* subjects of a sentence. Strawson summarizes Russell by explaining that, for Russell, definite descriptions can appear as grammatical subjects, but they are not logical subjects. Rather than serving as subjects in standard subject-predicate sentences, their real logical form is existential.

- Strawson emphasizes that on Russell's view only logically proper names can serve as subjects in sentences of the subject-predicate form. The meaning of a logically proper name is its referent. If a logically proper name were to fail to refer (as is impossible), then it would have no meaning.

- Strawson disagrees with Russell by holding that definite descriptions are neither logically proper names nor analyzable in the Russellian manner (i.e., as an existential sentence). In fact, Strawson claims:

There are no logically proper names and there are no descriptions  
(in this sense).

II.

- Strawson makes a distinction between a sentence/expression, its use, and its utterance.

◦ The use of a sentence includes the context, and it is only the use of a sentence (and not the sentence itself) that is truth-evaluable. A sentence can have different uses, and the same use can have different utterances.

◦ Similar points hold for expressions, but for a modification with respect to use. The use of an expression is that which it refers to in a particular context.

◦ Sentences and expressions do not have truth/falsity or reference in themselves — it is something we do in using them.

‘Mentioning’, or ‘referring’, is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do. Mentioning, or referring to, something is a characteristic of a *use* of an expression, just as ‘being about’ something, and truth-or falsity, are characteristics of a *use* of a sentence.

◦ Consider the example of ‘I’.

• “Generally, as against Russell, I shall say this. Meaning (in at least one important sense) is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression (in the sense in which I am using the word) is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions. . . . The source of Russell’s mistake was that he thought that referring or mentioning, if it occurred at all, must be meaning.”

◦ That is, Russell did not distinguish a sentence/expression from its use. Russell, Strawson alleges, mistakenly thought that the meaning of a logically proper name (e.g., ‘this’) is its referent. Strawson says that the meaning, instead, is “the conventions governing the use of the expression.” The expression itself, Strawson insists, does not refer to anything — only its *uses* refer. (Slogan: People refer, not expressions.)

◦ Example: “The table is covered with books.”

◦ Strawson on reference-failures:

If, when he utters it, he is not talking about anything, then his use is not a genuine one, but a spurious or pseudo-use: he is not making either a true or a false assertion, though he may think he is. And this points the way to the correct answer to the puzzle to which the theory of descriptions gives a fatally incorrect answer.

### III.

- Strawson notes his disagreements with Russell's analysis of "The present King of France is wise.":

1. It is not the case that an utterance of this sentence must be either true or false. Strawson: Since there is no present King of France, if the sentence were uttered now it would be neither true nor false. To respond with "There is no King of France" is *not* to contradict the utterance.
2. It is not part of an assertion of this sentence that there presently exists a unique King of France.

Strawson: These utterances *imply* that there exists a unique King of France, but they do not assert or entail it.

So once more I draw the conclusion that referring to or mentioning a particular thing cannot be dissolved into any kind of assertion. To refer is not to assert, though you refer in order to go on to assert.

- We should distinguish between using an expression to make a unique reference, and asserting a unique reference. This distinction, Strawson claims, will help us to solve some "ancient logical and metaphysical puzzles"!

### IV.

- The grammatical distinction between subject and predicate corresponds to two different linguistic tasks: the referring and attributive tasks.

- The influence of grammar on metaphysics:

The distinction between particular and universal, between substance and quality, are such pseudo-material shadows, cast by the grammar of the conventional sentence, in which separable expressions play distinguishable roles.

- Strawson charges that logicians have neglected conventions for referring because logicians are preoccupied with definitions and formal systems.

- 3 ways in which referring expressions can differ:

1. The context-dependency of the reference they make (contrast 'I' with 'the author of *Waverley*')
2. Their descriptive meaning (contrast 'Horace' with 'the round table')
3. Those which are regulated by general conventions and those which are not (contrast 'the round table' with 'Grimpy')

- Note Strawson’s comparison of Russell to Locke.

V.

- In this section Strawson considers 3 additional “problems about referring uses.”

a) Indefinite references

Again, doesn’t it seem that Strawson has a fairly weak objection to Russell when he writes things like:

Examples are such sentence-beginnings as “A man told me that ...”, “Someone told me that ...” The orthodox (Russellian) doctrine is that such sentences are existential, but not uniquely existential. This seems wrong in several ways. It is ludicrous to suggest that part of what is asserted is that the class of men or persons is not empty.

But is this so ludicrous?

b) Identification statements

c) The logic of subjects and predicates

“Mr. Strawson on Referring”

- Russell claims that he has kept two problems distinct: the problem of descriptions and the problem of egocentricity.

- Russell:

In the example “The present King of France is bald” Strawson’s objections focus entirely on the word ‘present’. Strawson’s objections would fall if I instead had used ‘in 1905’, and such a sentence would serve my purposes just as well.

○ Here is a better example: “the square-root of minus one is half the square-root of minus four.”

- In fact, Russell claims that he had already written Strawson’s supposedly new theory of egocentricity!

- Russell argues that there *must* be some words that are significant only because they refer: the example he gives is of ‘red’ and an attempt to describe red to a blind man. Russell writes:

How do we know what is meant by such words as “red” and “blue”? We cannot know what these words mean unless we have seen red and seen blue.

This may be true, but is it relevant?

- Check out Russell’s hilarious example about “I ain’t never done no harm to no one.”
- Russell sees his dispute with Strawson over bivalence as a verbal dispute:

For my part, I find it more convenient to define the word “false” so that every significant sentence is either true or false. This is a purely verbal question.