

Phil/Ling 375: Meaning and Mind

[Handout #15]

P. F. Strawson: On Referring

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§ Strawson's Main Goal:

___ To show that Russell's theory of definite descriptions ("the so-and-so") has some fundamental mistakes.

Main topic:

§ Uniquely Referring Terms:

___ We use expressions of certain kinds to mention or refer to some individual person or single object or particular event or place or process, in the course of doing what we should normally describe as making a statement about that person, object, place, event, or process.

Examples:

| singular demonstratives | Proper names | singular pronouns | definite descriptions |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 'this', 'that' | 'Venice,' 'John' | 'he', 'she', 'it', 'I', 'you' | 'the old man', 'the king of France' |

One of the questions the theory of descriptions was designed to answer was the question:

___ How can such a sentence as "The king of France is wise" be significant even when there is nothing which answers to the description it contains?

Q: Is 'The present king of France is wise':

- ___ true; or**
- ___ false; or**
- ___ meaningless?**

I. Discussion On Russell's Theory

§ Two Arguments Concerning the King of France:

[A]

1. The phrase, "the king of France," is the subject of the sentence S.
2. If S is a significant sentence, S is a sentence about the king of France.

3. But if there in no sense exists a king of France, the sentence is not about anything, and hence not about the king of France.
4. Therefore, since S is significant, there must in some sense exists (or subsist) the king of France.

[B]

1. If S is significant, it is either true or false.
2. S is true if the king of France is wise and false if the king of France is not wise.
3. But the statement that the king of France is wise and the statement that the king of France is not wise are alike true only if there is (in some sense) something which is the king of France.
4. Hence, since S is significant, there must in some sense exists the king of France.

§ Russell's rejection of the two arguments:

Let D = 'the king of France'

1. The mistake arises from thinking that D, which is certainly the grammatical subject of S, is also the logical subject of S.
2. But D is not the logical subject of S.
3. If face S, although grammatically it has a singular subject and a predicate, is not logically a subject-predicate sentence at all.
4. To exhibit the logical form of the proposition, we should require the sentence in a logically appropriate grammatical form, in such a way that the deceptive similarity of S to a sentence expressing a subject-predicate proposition would disappear, and we should be safeguarded against the above arguments.

§ Strawson's criticisms of Russell:

[Russell's logically proper name (LPN)]:

1. The meaning of such an expression *just is* the individual object which the expression designates. (Mill's theory of names)
2. An expression intended to be a logically proper name is meaningless unless there is some single object for which it stands.
3. To be a (logically proper) name at all, therefore, it must designate something.
4. These LPNs and they alone can occur as subjects of sentences which are genuinely of the subject-predicate form.

Russell recognizes only two ways in which sentences which seem, from their grammatical structure, to be about some particular person or individual object or event, can be [meaningful]:

- a. The first is that their grammatical form should be misleading as to their logical form, and that they should be analyzable, like S, as a special kind of existential sentence. (e.g. Russell's analysis of *secondary occurrence*)
- b. The second is that their grammatical subject should be a logically proper name, of which the meaning is the individual thing it designates.

Strawson's criticism:

___ Russell is unquestionably wrong in this, and that sentences which are significant, and which begin with an expression used in the uniquely referring way, fall into neither of these two classes. This is the mythology of the logically proper name.

___ Expressions used in the uniquely referring way are never either logically proper names or descriptions, if what is meant by calling them "descriptions" is that they are to be analyzed in accordance with the model provided by Russell's theory of descriptions.

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

II. Strawson's Theory**§ Strawson's Distinctions between *Use* and *Mention***

(I shall refer to an expression which has a uniquely referring use as "an expression" for short; and to a sentence beginning with such an expression as "a sentence" for short.)

(A1) a sentence → has meaning but no truth value

(A2) a use of a sentence → used by a person and expresses a proposition

(A3) an utterance of a sentence → a speech act

(B1) an expression → has meaning but no reference

(B2) a use of an expression → used by a person and denotes an object

(B3) an utterance of an expression → a speech act

“The King of France is wise.”

[case one]

___ if one man uttered it in the reign of Louis XIV and another man uttered it in the reign of Louis XV, it would be natural to say that they were respectively talking about different people;

[case two]

___ if on the other hand two different men simultaneously uttered the sentence during the reign of Louis XIV, it would be natural to say that they were both talking about the same person.

1. **The two men who uttered the sentence in [case one], each made a different *use* of the same sentence;**
2. **The two men who uttered the sentence in [case two], made the same *use* of the same sentence. However, they also made two different utterances of the same sentence.**

§ Meaning vs. Reference

[**meaning**] = the rules, habits, conventions governing the correct use of an expression or a sentence to refer to someone or to assert something.

__ **Meaning is a function of a sentence or an expression.**

[**reference**] = the object referred to by a speaker in using the name.

__ **Reference is a function of the use of the sentence or the expression.**

__ **Reference is determined by the speaker's intention.**

Strawson's Claims:

1. We cannot talk of the sentence being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion or to express a true or a false proposition.
2. We cannot talk of *the sentence* being about a particular person, for the same sentence may be used at different times to talk about quite different particular person, but only of a *use of the sentence* to talk about a particular person.
3. An expression is used to mention or refer to a particular person in the same way a sentence is used to talk about him. But the expression (B1) cannot be said to mention, or refer to, anything, any more than the sentence can be said to be true or false.
4. 'Mentioning', or 'referring', is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do.
5. 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.
6. Meaning 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.
7. To give the meaning of an expression 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.
8. The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to. The meaning of a sentence cannot be identified with the assertion it is used, on a particular occasion, to make.
9. To talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use on a particular occasion, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer to or to assert.
10. So the question of whether a sentence or expression is significant or not has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether the sentence, uttered on a particular occasion, is, on that occasion, being used to make a true-or-false assertion or not, or of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all.

§ Against Russell

The source of Russell's mistake was that he thought that referring or mentioning, if it occurred at all, must be meaning. He did not distinguish (B1) from (B2); he confused expressions with their use in a particular context; and so confused meaning with mentioning, with referring.

Because Russell confused meaning with mentioning, he thought that if there were any expressions having a uniquely referring use, which were what they seemed (i.e. logical subjects) and not something in disguise, their meaning must be the particular object which they were used to refer to. Hence the troublesome mythology of the logically proper name.

If I ask: "Is the sentence true or false?" I am asking an absurd question. The question is absurd, because the sentence is neither true nor false any more than it is about some object. Of course the fact that it is significant is the same as the fact that it can correctly be used to talk about something and that, in so using it, someone will be making a true or false assertion.

§ Strawson's Solution to the Puzzle of the Excluded Middle

"The present King of France is wise." → The sentence itself is *significant* (meaningful), but it has different uses.

If used by a speaker at a time when there was a king of France, it could be (i) or (ii):

- (i) true → genuine use
- (ii) false → genuine use

if used now:

- (iii) vacuous → spurious use: we simply fail to say something that is either true or false

§ Conclusion

1. The important point is that the question of whether the sentence is significant or not is quite independent of the question that can be raised about a particular use of it, viz. the question whether it is a genuine or a spurious use, whether it is being used to talk about something, or in make-believe, or as an example in philosophy.
2. The question whether the sentence is significant or not is the question whether there exists such a language habits, conventions or rules that the sentence logically could be used to talk about something; and is hence quite independent of the question whether it is being so used on a particular occasion.
3. **Strawson's analysis of "The present king of France is wise":**
"The king of France is wise" is certainly significant; but this does not mean that any particular use of it is true or false. We use it truly or falsely when we use it to talk about someone.
4. **Russell's mistakes is missing two important distinctions:**
 - (i) the distinction between what may be said of an expression and what may be said of a particular use of it;
 - (ii) the distinction between the uniquely *referring* use of expressions and the *predicative* or *ascriptive* use of expressions.
5. **If we recognize this distinction of use for what it is, we are on the way to solving a number of ancient logical and metaphysical puzzles.**