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P. F. Strawson: *On Referring*

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

§ 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 personal and impersonal pronouns	definite descriptions

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 in 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.**
___ **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
(A2) a use of a sentence
(A3) an utterance of a sentence

(B1) an expression
(B2) a use of an expression
(B3) an utterance of an expression

[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.**

§ Strawson's Claims:

A. 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.

B. 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.

C. 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.

D. 'Mentioning', or 'referring', is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do.

E. 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.

F. 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.

G. 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.

H. 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.

I. 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.

J. 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.

§ 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.**

Keith Donnellan: *Reference and Definite Descriptions*

§ Review

What is the connection between proper names and definite descriptions?	
Frege	Proper names are disguised definite descriptions and an object becomes the referent of the name by satisfying the implied description.
Russell	(1) Proper names are like definite descriptions in that the existence of the referent is presupposed. But sometimes the presupposition can fail to be satisfied, and that's when the sentence is false (but meaningful). (2) If definite descriptions were capable of referring at all, they would refer to something only in so far as that thing satisfied the description.
Strawson	(1) The meanings of proper names and definite descriptions are determined by linguistic conventions; and their referents are determined in the particular contexts of use (by the speaker's intention). (2) When the referent does not exist, the use is spurious use and the utterance has no truth value.
Donnellan	(1) Definite descriptions have two uses and only in the attributive use does the satisfying relation determine the right referent. In the referential use, the speaker's intention determines the referent even when the referent does not satisfy the description. (2) What use is being used in each context is not determined by the truth of the speaker's beliefs, and not by the sentence itself either. It seems to be determined purely by what the speaker has in mind – the speaker's intention.

§ Donnellan's View on Other Theories

1. Russell's theory, as a theory of definite descriptions, apply, if at all, to the attributive use only.
2. Strawson's view (2) works not for definite descriptions used referentially, but for the attributive use.
3. Russell's theory was wrong because it ignores the referential use. Strawson's theory is wrong because it fails to make the distinction between the referential and the attributive use and mixes truths about each.

§ Two functions of definite descriptions: Referential vs. Attributive

* Strawson:
___ **Referring: "What (Who, which one) are you talking about?"**
___ **Attributive: "What are you saying about it (him, her)?"**

* Donnellan:
___ **referential use: when definite descriptions are used to refer to what a speaker wishes to talk about.**
___ **attributive: when definite descriptions are used to assert something about the subject being talked about.**

The distinction is not determined by the sentence; it's determined by the *use*.

The same definite description occurring in one and the same sentence may, on different occasions of its use, function in either way.

We could not say of the sentence in isolation from some particular occasion on which it is used to state something.

§ On Russell and Strawson

1. Strawson and Russell seem to make a common assumption here about the question of how definite descriptions function: that we can ask how a definite description functions in some sentence independently of a particular occasion upon which it is used.

2. A second assumption shared by Russell's and Strawson's account of definite description is this. In many cases a person who uses a definite descriptions can be said to presuppose or imply that something fits the description.... Both Russell and Strawson assume that where the presupposition or implication is false, the truth value of what the speaker says is affected. For Russell the statement made is false; for Strawson it has no truth value.

Donnellan's view:
___ **It will turn out that one or the other of the two views may be correct about the non-referential use of definite descriptions, but neither fits the referential use.**

§ Donnellan's Theory: Referential Use vs. Attributive Use

[referential use]
___ **A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing.**

___ **The definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job -- calling attention to a person or thing -- and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well.**

[attributive use]
___ **A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so.**
___ **The definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description.**

(1) Example:
___ **"Smith's murderer is insane."**

[Attributive Use]
___ Suppose first that we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person in the world, we might exclaim: "Smith's murdered is insane."

[Referential Use]
___ Suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion at his trial. We might sum up our impression of his behavior by saying, "Smith's murderer is insane." If someone asks to whom we are referring, by using this description, the answer here is "Jones."

(2) Example:
___ **"Smith's murderer is insane" when Smith committed suicide and the phrase does not fit anyone.**

Analysis:
___ In both situations, in using the definite description "Smith's murderer", the speaker in some sense presupposes or implies that there is a murderer. In both cases we have used the predicate "is insane", but in the [attributive use], if there is no murderer, there is no person of whom it could be correctly said that we attributed insanity to him. but in the [referential use], where the definite description is simply a means of identifying the person we want to talk about, it is quite possible for the correct identification to be made even though no one fits the description we used. We were speaking about Jones even thought he is not in fact Smith's murderer and, in the circumstances imagined, it was his behavior we were commenting upon.

Generalizing form this case, we can say that there are two uses of sentences of the form, "the Φ is Ψ."
___ **In the [attributive use], if nothing is the Φ then nothing has been said to be Ψ.**
___ **In the [referential use], the fact that nothing is the Φ does not have this consequence.**

(3) Example:
___ **"Who is the man drinking a martini?"**

[Referential Use]:
___ Suppose one is at a party, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a martini glass, one asks this question.... If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer.

[Attributive Use]:
___ Contrast this case with the use of the same question by the chairman of the local Teetotalers Union. He has just been informed that a man is drinking a martini at their annual party. He responds by asking his informant, "Who is the man drinking a martini?" In asking the question the chairman does not have some particular person in mind about whom he asks the question; if no one is drinking a martini, if the information is wrong, no person can be singled out as the person about whom the question was asked.

In the referential use of a definite description we may succeed in picking out a person or thing to ask a question about even though he or it does not really fit the description; but in the attributive use if nothing fits the description, no straightforward answer to the question can be given.

(4) Example:
___ **"Bring me the book on the table."**

If "the book on the table" is being used referentially, it is possible to fulfill the order even though there is no book on the table. ... But imagine that we are told that someone has laid a book on our prize antique table, where nothing should b put. The order cannot now be obeyed unless there is a book that has been placed on the table.

In the [referential use] the definite description was a device for getting the other person to pick the right book; if he is able to pick the right book even though it does not satisfy the description, one still succeeds in his purpose. In the [attributive use], there is, antecedently, no "right book" except one which fits the description; the attribute of being the book on the table is essential.

(5) Example:
___ **"Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?"**

(a) There is a man carrying a walking stick.
(b) The man over there is only carrying an umbrella.
(c) It is not a man at all, but a rock that looks like one.

(Donnellan: I think I still have referred to something, to the thing over there that happens to be a rock but that I took to be a man. But in this case it is not clear that my question can be answered correctly.) **=> problematic view**

(d) There is nothing at all; there is no rock, nor anything at all, to which I mean to refer, it was perhaps a trick of light that made me think there was a man there.

(Donnellan: perhaps here we have a genuine failure to refer at all, even though the description was used for the purpose of referring.)

(6) Linsky's example:
___ **"Her husband is kind to her" said of a spinster.**

[Attributive use]:
___ If the speaker has just met the lady, and noticing her cheerfulness and radiant good health, makes his remark from his conviction that these attributes are always the result of having good husbands, he would be using the definite description attributively. Since she has no husband, there is no one to pick out as the person to whom he was referring.

[Referential use]:
___ i) If the use of "her husband" was simply a way of referring to a man to be the lady's husband, he would have referred to that man even though neither he nor anyone else fits the description.
___ ii) The man the speaker referred to may indeed be kind to the spinster the speaker may have said something true about that man.

§ Summary

1. **When a definite description is used referentially, the speaker presupposes of some particular someone or something that he or it fits the description. No such presupposition is present in the attributive use of definite descriptions.**

2. **The particular presuppositions that we find present in referential uses are not ones we can assign to a definite description in some particular sentence in isolation from a context of use. The sentence by itself does not tell us any of this.**

3. **What is reference? When do we succeed in referring? What makes a reference successful?**
 * When the definite description is used referentially:
 ___ **not by a satisfying relation as Frege and Russell claims.**
 ___ **It's successful as long as the audience sees to what one refers even though neither it nor anything else fits the description.**
 ___ **But it's also successful even when the audience fails to pick out the right referent.**
 ___ **Reference fails when the speaker would not admit that he is referring to the thing. [speaker's intention]**

4. **When the definite description is used attributively, then the person or object becomes the referent of the description via a "fitting" or "matching" relation.**

5. **Genuine proper names, in Russell's sense, would refer to something without ascribing any properties to it. ➔ back to Mill's direct reference theory**

6. **In the referential use as opposed to the attributive, there is a right thing to be picked out by the audience and its being the right thing is not simply a function of its fitting the description.**

Read Naming and Necessity, Lecture I

No essay due next week. Work on your paper instead.