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Jake Tobias

"Essence and the New Theory of Reference"

Traditionally, two puzzles have been the subject of much speculation in the philosophy of language. One is the problem of identity statements which Frege discusses in "Sense and Reference," the question of how a statement of the form "*a* is identical to *b*," when true, can contain knowledge not found in the corresponding statement, "*a* is identical to *a*." The second puzzle asks, "How can we say something about what does not exist?" (Donnellan, 217). Both of these problems were solved by some form of the traditional theory of meaning most commonly attributed to Russell. The theory states that these problems disappear if the terms involved are not names but definite descriptions, and that proper names are actually concealed definite descriptions. The first problem is solved by saying that statements of the form "*a* is identical to *b*" contains knowledge in that it predicates two different descriptions to the subject. The second problem is solved because statements of the form "*a* does not exist" simply say that there is no *a* in the class of objects which fits the set of descriptions or has the set of properties denoted by the definite description or name.

While the traditional theory of meaning and reference seems to solve these puzzles, problems with this theory have been pointed out by philosophers such as Kripke, Donnellan, and Putnam, who have been brought together as proponents of "the new theory of reference." These philosophers argue that reference takes place independently of identifying descriptions. The traditional theory of reference does not account for situations in which reference takes place even when the descriptions associated with the name are false, nor does it account for the possibility of counterfactual situations. Donnellan points out that a description may be simply a tool used to refer to a certain thing, even if the description does not in fact fit the thing referred to. Kripke uses the concept of possible worlds to show that a name does not correspond to a definite description or set of descriptions. Surely, we can imagine other possible worlds or counterfactual situations in which Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet* or Aristotle was not a philosopher. According to the traditional theory of reference, statements like "Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet*" entail a change in the meaning of "Shakespeare." But it is certain that the meaning of the name does not change, for we intend to refer to the same object each time we use the name "Shakespeare." Kripke addresses this problem by distinguishing between "rigid" and "nonrigid" designators. Rigid designators refer to the same thing in all possible worlds independent of contingent properties. A name may be "fixed" by the use of a definite description, but once this takes place, the name can be used independent of the description.

The introduction of the concept of rigid designators is the first aspect of the new theory of reference. The second move of the theory is to extend this analysis of proper names to common nouns. Kripke argues that the properties of substances such as gold are contingent and that what it is to be of a certain species cannot be analytically determined by some specified set of properties. It is possible to imagine a world in which it turned out that all cats were really robots sent by Martians to spy on us. Therefore it is not analytic that all cats are animals. Our names for things must not be based on a certain set of properties or descriptions.

So far, this description has shown the negative aspect of the new theory of reference: names are not hidden descriptions. For the theory to be an alternative to the traditional view, it must answer the question, "If names do not refer to sets of properties or descriptions, what *do* they refer to?" An answer to this question must rely on some notion of the essential nature of an object, for if the name does not refer to an object's contingent properties, it is the essence which is named. It is necessary, therefore, for the new theory of reference to show how the essence of an object can be determined.

In the case of proper names, an "historical analysis" is proposed to determine the referent of a given name. Such an analysis would trace the use of a name to its origin. In the case of most proper names, this origin would be the "baptizing" of an object with a particular name. This, of course, is not the only way objects are "tagged" with names. Nicknames may be given at any time by any of a number of manners, and objects are often misnamed in such a way that the object itself is not involved in the process.

Furthermore, the historical root of a true existential statement, such as "Santa Claus does not exist," cannot be found in the naming of an object at all. Donnellan answers this problem by coining the term "block" to refer to a case in which a thing is not named, but the impression that a thing is named is conjured in some way. In the Santa Claus example, the block would have occurred when the story of Santa Claus was presented as if it were fact.

The point of the historical analysis, in any case, is that for the use of any name, a relation between that name and some object can be found which determines the referent of the name. In the simplest of these cases, the relation would be that the person was once named in a manner something like, "I hereby name *this* person 'Shakespeare.'" Presumably, at the instant of the naming, the essence of the person could be determined. It is interesting to note that in "Identity and Necessity," Kripke says that Russell's logically proper names are names of "our own immediate sense data," and that "the only such names which occur in language are demonstratives like 'this' and 'that.'" What the historical analysis does, essentially, is find the point when such demonstratives were used in naming the object. In a way, the historical analysis finds the point when a "logically proper name" was in fact used to refer to a person.

That the essence of a thing can be determined through immediate sense data, and consequently through a historical analysis, is a major presumption, and should not be taken for granted. Determining the essential property which makes a person a person has been the subject of much debate through the history of philosophy. Locke argues that the essence of a person is his or her continuous consciousness, but later claims that the real essence of a thing cannot be known. In the case of the essence of a person, problems in medical ethics show that it is not always clear when a person begins or has ceased to exist. Only the nominal essence, which is determined by the interest of the speaker(s), can be known. If the nominal essence is determined by the speaker, the link between the naming of an object and the name's use cannot show what exactly the name refers to. Locke's view of essence will be further discussed in this paper.

To extend the new theory of reference to common nouns, it must be claimed that the essence of a species or natural kind can be found and that this is what was referred to when the paradigm model of the substance or species was first labeled. This is argued by Putnam in "Meaning and Reference" and by Copi in "Essence and Accident." By arguing that meanings "just ain't in the head," Putnam argues in effect that meaning is not subjective, but is determined by the scientific community. The argument can be summarized as follows. When one points to a glass of water and says, "This is water," the relation the speaker describes is not one between the contingent properties and the name, but is a "theoretical relation." One is not simply pointing to a colorless, odorless, etc., liquid, for we can imagine a world in which a liquid with the same contingent properties is, in fact, not water. If a person were to call the similar liquid "water," he or she would not be changing the meaning of the word. Instead, there is an essential quality that makes water water and the otherwise similar liquid not water. According to the scientific community, this quality is its molecular structure, H₂O.

In "Essence and Accident," Copi argues that despite Locke's claim that the real essence of a species cannot be known, and that the nominal essence is subjective, science has found a way to find what is indeed the real essence. Copi begins his essay with a summary of the Aristotelian notion of essence. For Aristotle, the question of essence arose out of the paradox of change, expressed thus: "If an object which changes really changes, then it cannot literally be one and the same object which undergoes the change. But if the changing thing retains its identity, then it cannot really have changed" (Copi, 177). Aristotle's solution was that if a thing survives a change, one or some of its contingent attributes or *accidents* have changed, but its *essence* has remained the same. To Aristotle, "to know each thing...is just to know its essence..." (quoted in Copi, 178). This sounds strikingly like the new theory of reference. But what Copi presents as the "most serious objection" to this solution is serious indeed. Copi tries to refute this objection, which states that "the distinction between essence and accident is not an objective or intrinsic one between genuinely different types of attributes. ...[T]he alleged distinction between essence and accident is simply a projection of differences in human interests or a reflection of peculiarities of vocabulary" (Copi, 180). Locke expressed this objection in his *Essay*. To Locke, the real essence of a thing is a set of properties which determine the all other properties of that thing. This view differs drastically with Aristotle's, for since all the properties of an object depend on its essential properties, any change of the object entails a change in its essential properties. Furthermore, Locke argues that there can be no knowledge of the real essences of things. But Copi argues that it is not Locke's concept of real essence which is analogous to Aristotle's, but his concept of "nominal essence." This nominal essence is the set of complex ideas including those which are noticed to "go constantly together" and excluding those which are "peculiar to each" (quoted in Copi, p. 183). Locke argues that this grouping is based on human interest and not on ontological fact. Copi claims that Locke's view is actually more similar to Aristotle's than it is different, and that the difference springs from Locke's view that "the only objects of our knowledge are the ideas that we have in our minds." Copi refutes this notion on the basis that it "is the germ of

skepticism," and claims that the reservation of the term "knowledge" for what is certain "has but little to commend it" (Copi, 186).

Copi's strongest argument, however, is not in equating Locke's "nominal essence" with Aristotle's "essence," but in stating that Locke's "true essence" can in fact be found. Locke's insistence that true essence cannot be found was due to the inadequacy of science in Locke's time. Now, on the other hand, "modern atomic theory is directly concerned with the insensible parts of things," and it is getting progressively nearer to the goal of knowing the real essences of things (Copi, 187). Locke's distinction between the nominal and real essences of things based on the fact that nominal essences are only determined by human interest is, according to Copi, no longer absolute. Science is in the business of determining those properties upon which all other properties depend. The essences which science seeks to discover, then, are real rather than nominal. This argument applies to the new theory of meaning in that since there is a way to determine the real essence of a species, all that needs to be done in order to determine the referent of a common noun is to find the essence of whatever it was that was historically labeled with the noun in question. Of course this cannot be done for all nouns--it is only the names of natural kinds to which this analysis applies--nor is it a simple matter to find the essences of members of a natural kind. For all we know, we could be wrong that water is H₂O. But what is important is that the essence of a thing can be known, and it is that theoretical essence to which a name refers.

But Copi's argument is flawed--he does not escape the fact that essences are relative to interest and vocabulary. It is in the interest of science to call whatever is H₂O water and whatever isn't something else, for this satisfies the desire of the scientist to develop theories and rules which explain the behavior of things in the universe. But if there can indeed be another world in which a substance has all the properties of water but has a different chemical composition (a possibility which science would argue against, and which, if discovered true, would force science to reformulate all of its rules and theories), the distinction would be meaningless to a thirsty person. Quine argues, in "The Two Dogmas of Empiricism," that scientific "knowledge" is only the most pragmatic belief for achieving certain goals. The proponents of the new theory of reference do not show that science is any more than this type of belief. The theory may be helpful in understanding language, but it does not display some ultimate truth about the essences of things and so cannot state exactly what any word refers to.

Furthermore, in the case of proper names, it is possible, as argued above, that the essential nature of a person is not a continuous consciousness, but some other quality which the person happened to have when he or she was tagged with a particular name (e.g., having a body). The new theory of reference does not fully explain what it is that proper names refer to; the determination of the essence of a person is as subject to the particular interest of the person using the name as is the essence of the referent of a common noun.

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