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On the Theory of Descriptions

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Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 21, Bedford Square, London, W.C.1, on
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VII—ON THE THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

By TED HONDERICH

(1)

The Theory of Descriptions may be said, truly and misleadingly, to have its genesis in a certain referential account of meaning. This familiar account, which may also be said to be written into the theory, is to the effect that the meanings of a certain large class of terms are those single things for which the terms stand. There appears to follow the consequence that certain terms, or perhaps certain marks or sounds, must be without meaning since there are no things for which they stand. Some of these terms, however, although grammatically members of the relevant class, are perfectly significant. We have, with the entry of such expressions as “the golden mountain”, “the fountain of youth” and the rest, seeming contradiction between the referential account of meaning and our confidence of the meaningfulness of certain terms and their containing sentences. The Theory of Descriptions is the answer to our difficulties. It is a theory, we are told, as to a rewriting of such sentences as (*R*) “The fountain of youth is in Hampstead”. If we produce rewritings in accordance with the theory, we see that what we get does not offend against the referential account of meaning. Each of the relevant terms in what we get is such that it can be regarded as standing for some thing. For the sentence just given we have:

- (1) There is something which is a fountain and gives youth.
- (2) There is not more than one thing which is a fountain and gives youth.
- (3) There is nothing which is a fountain, gives youth, and is not in Hampstead.

Given that (1) to (3) are in accordance with the referential account and that they exhibit something usually called the true logical form of *R*, we are entitled to take *R* as significant while persisting in the given account of meaning. Our manipulations, clearly enough, reduce to this: we extract the seemingly offending terms from the class to which the referential account of significance applies directly, and give them a formulation which accords with that account. We discard grammatical form as a criterion for class-membership.

Let us add to this vignette in the course of considering Professor Strawson's innovating and celebrated criticisms in "On Referring",¹ which are my main concern in this paper. They are still widely supposed, I think, despite certain criticisms² and modification,³ to be destructive of the Theory of Descriptions. It is sometimes granted and often assumed that the theory remains acceptable for purposes of formal logic and perhaps something more.⁴ Conceived as we have conceived it, as applicable to ordinary language, it is thought to fail for four reasons given in "On Referring". This dismissal, whatever else may be said against the theory, seems to me ill-judged.

(2)

The reason to be considered first has to do with terms to which the Theory of Descriptions does *not* apply, or does not apply in a certain way. There are sentences, grammatically like *R*, whose grammatical form is not at variance with their logical form. What this means, and probably all of what it means, is that their subject-terms are not such that the sentences require rewriting on the model exemplified above in order to bring them into seen consistency with the given referential account of meaning. The subject-terms in question *do* stand for particular things, which

¹ *Mind*, 1950. Reprinted in A. G. N. Flew (ed.), *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* (London, 1956), and Robert R. Ammerman (ed.), *Classics of Analytical Philosophy* (New York, 1965).

² Wilfred Sellars, "Presupposing", *Philosophical Review*, 1954.

³ P. F. Strawson, "A Reply to Mr Sellars", *Philosophical Review*, 1954.

⁴ E. J. Lemmon, "Sentences, Statements and Propositions", in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (eds.), *British Analytical Philosophy* (London, 1966).

things are their meanings. If we are to have an example of such sentences we must first take a certain decision with respect to another problem. Logically proper names, as we may call terms of the kind we are considering, have the property that we are "acquainted" with the things they mean. Russell's notion of acquaintance is rooted in an elusive familiarity, technical and very capacious.⁵ To have acquaintance with something is to have "direct awareness" of it, something which involves no inference or knowledge of truths. Some but not all of the objects of acquaintance are given in perception. If we take it, as Russell does not, except in conciliatory moments, that we can have acquaintance with persons, rather than merely with the sense-data out of which we "construct" them, it may be that this is a sentence of the kind we want:

Harold Wilson is our leader.

Professor Strawson objects that there are no logically proper names. That is, precisely, there is (1) no term which has as its meaning an individual object which it designates, (2) no term which depends for its meaningfulness on the existence of an individual object.⁶ The first claim is indubitable: indeed I can never drink the meaning of the expression "the pint of bitter" and it is not the meaning of "Harold Wilson" that leads us. All that remains interesting about the claim, if not for our purposes, is how it came to be made by those who made it. If the claim is false, of course, what is mistaken is not merely an implication of the Theory of Descriptions, the implication that there are some sentences which begin with logically proper names and do not need rewriting. One property of logically proper names, that their meanings are their referents, is shared with the larger class of terms of which they are only some of the members. It is this class which is the subject-matter of the given referential account of meaning. Moreover, one essential point about the rewritings, on the model of (1) to (3) above, is that only such terms occur in the relevant places. This fact contributes to the respectability of sentences like *R*. The Theory of Descriptions therefore may

⁵ See, for example, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1910-11.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 323.

be said to begin from, to incorporate, and also in a way to imply a mistake. This is true and misleading. What it may falsely suggest is that there is a *raison d'être* for the Theory of Descriptions *only* if the given referential account is assumed, and that the theory depends upon it.

It is all too plain that Russell usually writes as if meanings were things or objects, and that there is no more to be said. However, a moment's reflection brings something else to mind. Meanings are things *for which terms stand*, things *which are denoted by the terms*. Furthermore, and differently, meanings are things *with which we are acquainted*. Here there is implicit recognition that the meaning of a term has to do with a term-thing relation. Indeed we are told by Russell, a bit late in the day, that "when we are clear both as to what a word is in its physical aspect, and as to what sort of thing it can mean, we are in a better position to discover the relation of the two which *is* meaning."⁷ What I wish to notice is that there is a second referential account of meaning, one which certainly is not obviously false. It is, rudimentarily put, that there is a large class of terms whose significance *does* depend on the sometime existence of referents. The meaning of such a term, we may simply if uncomfortably say, is a convention or rule which connects the term with things of a certain kind. For such terms, there are conventions to the effect that the terms are used to refer to or to describe things of a certain kind. Let us now suppose that we have independent reasons, perhaps grammatical ones, for regarding a certain term as falling within the class of terms in question. However, there is no thing for which the term can stand, no referent. There is no thing open to acquaintance which can be related to the term. With such a term, perhaps "the fountain of youth", we again appear to face contradiction. Certainly we cannot hold all of these to be true: that the term has meaning, that it can have it in only the given way, and that it has no referent. Given this second referential account, then, several things follow.

The first is that there exists a problem, generated by a defensible account of meaning, to which the Theory of Descriptions suggests

⁷ *The Analysis of Mind* (London, 1921), p. 191.

an answer. The second is that what we have agreed to call an implication of the theory, that there are sentences which begin with logically proper names, is not settled as *wholly* false. Certainly there are no terms whose referents are their meanings. It may reasonably be maintained that there are terms whose meaningfulness *depends on* the existence of referents. Thirdly, and obviously, we can escape the conclusion that the Theory of Descriptions must incorporate a mistaken account of meaning. Here and elsewhere, incidentally, one encounters a vagueness which derives from uncertainty as to what propositions, exactly, are to be counted as part of the theory. I have implicitly accepted a perhaps generous conception, one which allows for the relevance of the criticism that has just been considered and in part rejected.

All of what has been said so far depends on there being a clear and cogent meaning-account of the second kind. I am not under the illusion that I have clarified anything of the kind, or indeed that I shall. Nor do I think that in general there would be much point in so general an account. Any contemporary discussion of the Theory of Descriptions, any brief one, given what has happened in the philosophy of language and related disciplines over the past half-century, must take some giant steps. I shall limit myself to this one: the presupposition of the given account of meaning, applicable to a considerable class of terms including denoting or uniquely referring expressions. Professor Strawson does not specifically dispute it. His relevant observations are to the effect that meaning is a matter of conventions and he does not consider that the significance of some expressions, including those with which he is concerned, is a matter of conventions dependent upon referents. In further mitigation, two other points. (1) The fundamental objection to such an account of meaning, when in the past it has been presented in one or another form, has concerned its scope. That is, it has often been advanced by its proponents as an account of absolute generality. As such, it appears to destroy itself on, among other things, the logical particles. No such generality is presently intended, or need be. (2) The word-thing relation on which everything rests has

sometimes been claimed to call out for discarding on grounds of obscurity. To say a word stands for a thing or is related to it by a rule is to say that the word is taken to denote a class of things, that is, to be such that it can be used to refer to or describe each member of a class. There is a great deal more to be said, best said by way of notions not so firmly located in what now seems a kind of philosophical archaeology. That sufficient can be said seems to me true.

(3)

At the centre of "On Referring" are valuable distinctions between a sentence, a use of a sentence and an utterance of a sentence, a uniquely referring expression, a use of such an expression and an utterance of such an expression. One and the same sentence, "The revolution will not come to Baden", may be used of different revolutions. If so, we have two uses. Two speakers may make the same or different uses of the sentence, use it to make the same or different statements. If so, two utterances. Clearly enough, we can also distinguish an expression from uses and also utterances of it. Let us attend to expressions and to the second criticism of the Theory of Descriptions, one which pertains to their most important property. Take for example an expression such as "the provost of the college". One can use the expression, perhaps in the sentence "The provost of the college is a man of delicacy", to *mention* or *refer to* a particular man. But the expression itself cannot be said to mention or to refer to anything. Mentioning or referring is not something an expression does. Rather, it is something that is characteristic of a use, by us, of an expression. Unfortunately, it is possible to fall into confusion and to suppose one is talking about expressions when in fact one must be talking about their uses. Russell, we are told, does so. This is the origin of a fundamental misconception: he sees a problem where none of the kind exists, a supposed problem to which he gives as a solution the Theory of Descriptions.

I have sketched the problem, real or supposed, in the first section of this paper and in the second section suggested that it persists when one takes up a related account of significance. Professor Strawson first specifies it, reasonably enough, in this

way: "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, *i.e.*, in this case, nothing which answers to the description 'the king of France'?"⁸ He goes on to establish the distinctions between sentences and expressions, their uses and their utterances. He also establishes, in particular, the connexion between a use of an expression and referring, and the want of connexion between the expression *simpliciter* and referring. The meaning or significance of an expression, we are then rightly told, is quite independent of the expression's being used referringly

. . . to talk about the meaning of an expression . . . 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. . . . So the question of whether (an) . . . expression *is significant or not* has nothing whatever to do with the question . . . of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all.

The source of Russell's mistake was that he thought referring or mentioning, if it occurred at all, must be meaning. . . . he confused expressions with their use in a particular context, and so confused meaning with mentioning, with referring.⁹

This itself is a mistake. There is a quite clear distinction between (1) the contention that for an expression of a certain kind to be significant it must be related by a rule or convention to a referent or referents and (2) the contention that for an expression of this kind to be significant it must actually be used referringly, must enter into an actual linguistic act of a certain kind. The first contention amounts to what in essence is now familiar to us, the second referential account of meaning. I have suggested that it is, among other things, true. The second contention is false and ludicrous. Language, indeed, is full of expressions that very likely exemplify the truth of the first contention and the falsity of the second. No one has yet used referringly the expression "the

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 327-8.

first person to disagree with this argument ” and I doubt, barring non-cooperation, that anyone ever will. What I wish to maintain, then, is that we must distinguish between supposing that an expression’s significance is dependent on certain conventions having to do with referents and supposing that it is dependent on a linguistic act of referring. The falsity of the second supposition, and also the many obscurities about referring, certainly do not impugn the truth of the first. The first does give rise to the problem to which the Theory of Descriptions may be offered as a solution. Russell accepts something very like the first, unfortunately conjoining it with the mistaken identification of meaning and referent. He certainly does not espouse, very likely did not consider, and is in no way committed to the second.

(4)

Professor Strawson supposes that the Theory of Descriptions also has an origin of another kind. Russell rejected Meinong’s other-world of strange meaning-objects, such as the round square. He rejected the conclusion of the following argument but, we are told, conceded the more important of its principles. *S* is the sentence “ The king of France is wise ”.

- (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, in some world) something which is the king of France.

Hence (4) Since *S* is significant, there must in some sense (in some world) exist (or subsist) the king of France.¹⁰ The principle which Russell is thought to have accepted, clearly enough, is this one: Any sentence that is significant and of the type of *S*, whether or not the uniquely referring phrase is satisfied, is either true or false. Certainly there are reasons for thinking

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 322.

that Russell accepted this as a principle in his thinking. It appears, that is, to have been a premiss of his reflections as well as fundamental to his conclusion, the Theory of Descriptions. In "On Denoting", it seems to be assumed that the law of the excluded middle applies to the sentence, "The present king of France is bald", and also assumed that there is a problem as to how the sentence can be either true or false.¹¹ One can say, then, for what it is worth, that the idea that all sentences of the relevant kind have truth values was of importance to the formulation of the Theory of Descriptions. Truth-gaps are to be closed, and the theory does it. Professor Strawson objects that sentences *never* have truth values. If I were now to use the sentence "I shall have more to say of this" in order to make a statement, as indeed I might, what would be true would be the statement, not the sentence. One might choose to say that the sentence *as used* would be true.¹² Still, not the sentence itself. Just as referring is said to be a matter of the use of expressions, so truth and falsity is a matter of the use of sentences. I wish now to insist only on this: we can, if we want, accept this doctrine as it stands without conceding that there is no real problem to which the Theory of Descriptions is a possible solution. We may leave undisputed the claim that Russell was partly led to his theory, or a formulation of it, by a mistaken identification of meaning-bearers and truth-bearers, and a consequent worry about the truth values of certain sentences. This in no way puts into question the fact noticed above, that given a certain defensible account of the meaning of a certain class of terms, there is a problem about terms which appear to lack referents.

(5)

The centre of Professor Strawson's rejection of the Theory of Descriptions is the conclusion that there are no descriptions. "Expressions used in the uniquely referring way are never . . . descriptions, if what is meant by calling them 'descriptions' is

¹¹ *Mind*, 1905.

¹² E. J. Lemmon, *op. cit.*

that they are to be analysed in accordance with the model provided by Russell's Theory of Descriptions."¹⁸ One argument for this conclusion is that when I do in fact mention or refer to something I do not in *that* act make any statement. In the usual case, I follow my referring with describing, and so do state something. If I am interrupted and do not get to the describing, I state nothing. So far so good, but there is a question of the relevance of this to the Theory of Descriptions. Russell, so far as I know, never did have anything to say about expressions uttered in isolation, not followed implicitly or explicitly by verbs. Does it then follow from the Theory of Descriptions that if someone does this he has stated something? Discussion of this point, given the rest of what I wish to maintain, would be otiose. A superior approach to the conclusion that there are no descriptions is simply that in making a statement, say *t*, by the use of the sentence, "The picture in the alcove was framed in Boston", I do *not* make the following quite separate existential assertions:

- (1) There is something that is a picture and is in the alcove.
- (2) There is not more than one thing that is a picture and is in the alcove.
- (3) There is nothing that is a picture, in the alcove, and was not framed in Boston.

When someone refers to something by using a uniquely referring expression, and then in some way describes whatever it is, it is a mistake to take the act of referring for other than the harmless, necessary thing it is. The statement that is made, partly by way of an act of referring, is not to be dissolved into three existential assertions. The act of referring makes no contribution to such assertions, because no such assertions are made. Statement *t* cannot be dissolved in any such way. The Theory of Descriptions, in asserting that it can, is a mistake. What is to be said truly about referring is that it is a linguistic act, one which depends for its success both on the expression used and the context of utterance. It is true that to make statement *t* is to imply or

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 323-4.

presuppose that (1), (2) in an amended form¹⁴, and (3) are true. That is, the truth of these statements is a necessary condition of the truth or falsity of *t*. To assert *t* is not either to state or to *logically* imply (1) to (3). If what is presupposed by *t* is false, then *t* is not false, or true, but neither.

The acceptability of this doctrine depends, ultimately, on informed linguistic responses. When Green says that the censor of the Aristotelian Society will have something to say, and Brown says there is no censor, should we say he has contradicted Green? Should we say Green's statement is false? I am inclined to think that rather more needs to be done, in the way of analysis of the fundamental notions involved, before the question can be forgotten. Professor Strawson, troubled by the readiness with which we should regard as false certain statements in ways different from *t*, but with unsatisfied descriptions and hence false presuppositions, has somewhat modified his thesis.¹⁵ He persists in its essence and in, I think, its unqualified application to statements like *t*.

Partly for the reason just given, having to do with the necessity of further inquiry, and partly because this particular controversy is of secondary importance given the position to be taken up in this paper, I wish to grant that the doctrine of presupposition undercuts Russell's central contentions. It rebuts the claim that ordinarily when I refer and describe in order to make a particular statement, I make or logically imply among others the existential statement that there exists a thing of the kind to which I have referred. That Russell did assert this, and that it is a mistake, is certainly consistent with the fact that he always took himself, despite vagaries of expression and concessions to simplicity and style, to be dealing with other than context-dependent or "ego-centric" statements. The latter reminder is the substance of his reply¹⁶ to "On Referring", but it goes no way toward dealing with the criticism. That is, it may be taken as mistaken with respect to *any* statement like *t* to suppose that in virtue of the

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 332-3.

¹⁵ "A Reply to Mr Sellars", *op. cit.*, pp. 224 ff.

¹⁶ "Mr Strawson on Referring", *Mind*, 1957.

initial referring expression the speaker also makes certain existential statements. At any rate, whether the supposition is mistaken does not obviously depend on context-dependence, or lack of it, of the original statements.

What I wish to grant, then, is the substance of Professor Strawson's acute criticism. What I wish to dispute is the implied consequence of any such acceptance.

(6)

What the Theory of Descriptions requires is not purging but reinterpretation, if that is not too small a word, and also relocation. Russell applies his theory to what he describes, in different places, as sentences, propositions, expressions of propositions, assertions, what may be affirmed. Propositions are variously defined, sometimes as sentences, sometimes as what we believe when we believe truly or falsely. What may safely be extracted from this, and got more directly elsewhere, is that the Theory of Descriptions is about truth-bearers. From the point of view of actual logical error, clearly enough, there is no danger in regarding sentences as truth-bearers *if* each of the sentences in question is context-independent and thus with one and only one use. Even here, however, one can distinguish between the sentence and its assertion, between a word-string satisfying certain grammatical considerations and the statement that can be made with it. Let us take it, then, as we have in the preceding section, that the theory as stated concerns statements. What it asserts, then, is that there is some relation between a particular statement, perhaps u , that the king of France is bald, and a set, v , of existential statements. What is the relation between u and v ? Statement u is said to mean v , to be correctly interpreted as v , to reduce to v , to be correctly analysed as v , to imply v . What is intended, pretty clearly, is the claim that there is equivalence of meaning. What is also supposed, of course, is that v deserves to be given weight over u , but that need not concern us.

What we have, in sum, is that the theory is about truth-bearers, statements according to our usage, and that it claims equivalence between these and other sets of existential statements. The

theory so conceived reflects Russell's intention and may be taken to have been refuted by Professor Strawson. Nonetheless, that is not the end of the story. We began with a problem, that of explaining the significance of certain terms and hence their containing sentences, given a certain general account of significance. This undissolved problem is about sentences, meaning-bearers rather than truth-bearers. It is impossible to avoid thinking, at least in reading "On Denoting", that Russell began with it. Let us, as he did not, persist in its consideration alone. To do so is, in effect, to give a new locus to the Theory of Descriptions, or to a reconstruction of it. The reconstruction has to do with the relation stipulated between, as we now have it, a *sentence* and something else. The theory, reconstructed, is this.

The significance of such a sentence as "The king of France is wise" is to be explained in this way: it may be used to make a true statement when true statements can also be made by the following sentences: (1) There is something that rules over France, (2) There is not more than one thing that rules over France, (3) There is nothing that rules over France and is not wise.

With what reason can this be regarded as a version of the Theory of Descriptions? The name matters little, but there are substantial similarities between this and Russell's doctrine. What we have is a way of dealing with the root problem, that one generated by a certain account of meaning and the existence of certain meaningful terms without particular referents. As in Russell's doctrine, the procedure depends on pressing into service, in the explanation of the meaning of a certain term, an undetermined variable and assorted predicates. The predicates, but not the original term, satisfy the requirements of the referential theory. The essential difference between what we have and what Russell provides is that these predicates occur in a rule for the use of the original sentence, not in the expression of statements held to be equivalent in meaning to an original statement.

Do we have sufficient as well as necessary conditions for the true use of the sentence? The answer can be in the affirmative if we take it that the sentences in question are not in their use

context-dependent. If we suppose, as some have, that all sentences are or can be translated into context-independent sentences, the account may be regarded as of general scope.¹⁷ If we think otherwise, then the account must be amended in a way suggested by one of Professor Strawson's comments.¹⁸ The uniqueness condition, expressed in the formulation above by way of the sentence, "There is not more than one thing that rules over France", must be altered. Furthermore, if we think that not all sentences are or can be translated into context-independent sentences, it can be maintained that what we have specified are only necessary conditions for the true use of a sentence. That is, it may be said, we shall have to add a good deal about contextual conditions that must be satisfied. On the other hand, it may well be preferable to regard the rules which specify such conditions as constituting a general presupposition in the explanation of the meaningfulness of particular sentences. Given some such point of view, we could again regard the model of explanation just given as sufficient. It will need only mentioning, I trust, that the revised account which I have given does not have the consequence that if I assert that the king of France is wise I also make or logically imply certain existential assertions. Whether or not I do, and I have accepted that I do not, the answer to the question is not determined by the given account. The given account is consistent with the claim that I merely imply, where this is not a logical implication, that there is someone who rules over France, *etc.*

The Theory of Descriptions, redescribed, is far from giving answers to all of the many problems that emerge in the consideration of the grounds and ways of meaningfulness. It may provide, nonetheless, the structure of a correct account.

¹⁷ See, for a recent discussion, Lemmon, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 332-3.