

Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions

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PROPER NAMES AND IDENTIFYING DESCRIPTIONS*

There is an extremely plausible principle about proper names that many philosophers up to the present have either assumed or argued for. I will call it the 'principle of identifying descriptions'. One illustration of it is in this passage from Strawson's *Individuals*:

... it is no good using a name for a particular unless one knows who or what is referred to by the use of the name. A name is worthless without a backing of descriptions which can be produced on demand to explain the application. ¹

The "backing of descriptions" Strawson speaks of supposedly functions as the criterion for identifying the referent of a name, if it has one, or, alternatively, for deciding that there is no referent. If I say, for example, 'Homer is my favorite poet', then, roughly speaking, the descriptions I could supply in answer to the question, 'Who is Homer?', provide the 'backing of descriptions'. And these in turn either pick out a single individual as the referent of the name (as it occurs in my utterance) in virtue of his fitting these descriptions or make it true that there is no referent - that Homer did not exist.

While this initial statement of the principle needs refinement and the acknowledgement of variants, it seems at first sight almost indisputable that some such principle governs the referential function of proper names. Must not a user of a proper name know to whom or what he is referring? And what can this knowledge consist in if not the ability to describe the referent uniquely?

Nevertheless, I believe the principle to be false. In the first sections of the paper I will state the principle more precisely and fill in some of the details of how it would have to operate. The exercise of trying to make it more precise and giving various needed qualifications is enough, I think, to rob it of some of its initial attractiveness. I will then, however, meet it head-on by means of counter-examples. I will argue that (a) a proper name may have a referent even though the conditions laid down by the principle

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are not satisfied and (b) where the conditions are satisfied, the object that ought to be the referent according to the principle need not be the true referent. In the course of this I will suggest certain positive things about how the referent of a name is determined, though these will not amount to an alternative principle.

II

What I call the 'principle of identifying descriptions' should not be thought of as expressing the thesis that proper names have a sense (or meaning or connotation). (That thesis, I think, suffers in any case from vagueness about what is to count as showing that an expression has a sense.) Anyone who holds that proper names have a sense almost certainly subscribes to the principle, but the converse is doubtful. In his influential paper, 'Proper Names' ², John Searle begins with the question, 'Do proper names have senses?', and he ends by saying that in a sense they do and in a sense they do not. Searle, however, though he would not without heavy qualification ascribe senses to proper names, is one of the prime examples of a philosopher who defends the principle I have in mind. In this he is in company with Frege who would have no reluctance in talking about the sense of a proper name.

The simplest application of the principle, to be sure, can be found in the view of someone such as Russell who holds that proper names are concealed definite descriptions. Russell says, "... the name 'Romulus' is not really a name [that is, in the 'narrow logical sense'] but a sort of truncated description. It stands for a person who did such-and-such things, who killed Remus, and founded Rome, and so on." ³ And again, "When I say, e.g., 'Homer existed', I am meaning by 'Homer' some description, say 'the author of the Homeric Poems'..." ⁴ Russell associates with the use of a name some definite description for which the name is a simple substitute - the same proposition would be expressed by a sentence containing the name as by the sentence formed from it by substituting the associated description for the name.

This tight connection between proper names and definite descriptions was rightly challenged by Searle in 'Proper Names'. Yet Searle still retains the backing of descriptions and these serve, as they would also for Russell, as criteria for identifying the referent, albeit in a looser and more complicated manner:

Suppose we ask the users of the name "Aristotle" to state what they regard as certain essential and established facts about him. Their answers would be a set of uniquely referring descriptive statements. Now what I am arguing is that the descriptive force of "This is Aristotle" is to assert that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true of this object.⁵

Without doubt this departs significantly from Russell's simplistic view. It allows for (what surely we should allow for) the possibility, for example, of discovering that Aristotle was not the teacher of Alexander the Great without having to deny Aristotle's existence, which would be impossible on Russell's view if that description was part of the associated description for our use of 'Aristotle'. Only a 'sufficient number' of the things we believe about Aristotle need be true of some individual for him to be Aristotle.

But the flexibility introduced is limited. Vague and indeterminate as we may leave the notion of 'sufficient number', behind our use of a name a set of descriptions still operates to determine the referent. The formulation of the principle of identifying descriptions I shall give will allow both for Searle's looser and Russell's tighter connection between names and descriptions.

I should like to make one more general comment about the issue I am concerned with. The importance of the principle in question is not confined to a narrow issue about how proper names refer. It also has a bearing on the general problem of reference. For proper names constitute something like a test case for theories of reference. A peculiar feature of the situation is that two classical but opposing paradigms for referring expressions can both lead one to adopt the same theory about proper names. The model referring expression has been for many philosophers of language, I believe, a definite description (used 'attributively' in the terminology I used elsewhere⁶). An object is referred to in virtue of possessing uniquely the properties mentioned in the definite description. It is not hard to see how this standard leads to adopting the principle of identifying descriptions for proper names. Proper names are referring expressions, yet on the surface fail to exhibit any descriptive content. Given definite descriptions as the paradigm, one is forced to look under the surface (which amounts to looking into the user(s) of the name) for the 'backing of descriptions' that must be there.

The major alternative to a definite description as the paradigm of a

referring expression is represented by Russell's and Wittgenstein's (in the *Tractatus*) notion of a name in the 'narrow logical sense'. Ordinary names, of course, are not names at all in this sense; they cannot meet the austere requirements of referring in some mysterious, unanalysable and absolutely direct way to their referents. And given this notion of 'genuine' names, Russell adduces very good reasons why no such ordinary name as 'Homer' or 'Aristotle' can be a genuine name. But some account has to be given of how ordinary names function. Russell saw no alternative but to treat them as concealed definite descriptions, what they name, if anything, being whatever is denoted by the concealed description. (Had he thought of Searle's perhaps more sophisticated view, there seems no reason why he should not have adopted that for 'ordinary' proper names.)

Strangely enough, then, two antagonistic models of what a genuine referring expression is like lead their proponents to the principle of identifying descriptions. Demonstrating that that principle is mistaken would not irrevocably discredit either model, but it would, I think, take away much of the motivation for adopting either. Ordinary proper names may not have as much claim to being genuine referring expressions as Russell's names 'in the strict logical sense' (could we but understand what those are and discover some of them), but as against definite descriptions it is hard to see how they could come out second best. If their mode of functioning, however, is not captured by the principle of identifying descriptions, if, that is, they do not name in much the same way a definite description denotes⁷, then can definite descriptions possibly be model referring expressions?

And on the other side, if ordinary proper names are neither names 'in the strict logical sense', as they surely are not, nor concealed descriptions, then some other relationship will have to be recognized as holding between some singular expressions and what they stand for. In that case, much of the reason for supposing that there are such things as names 'in the strict logical sense' will be gone. For it is clear from Russell's writings, at least, that these are introduced in part because he felt that definite descriptions not *really* being referring expressions (but only denoting expressions), some other sort expression must serve the purpose of allowing us to talk directly about things in the world. If (ordinary) proper names do not function via the relationship of denoting nor through whatever relation-

ship Russell's names are supposed to enjoy, then perhaps the way they do function represents the alternative Russell was seeking.⁸

III

The principle of identifying descriptions is a two-stage thesis, the second stage depending upon the first. It states, in the first place, that (with some qualifications to be noted later) the user(s) of a proper name must be able to supply a set of, as I shall call them, 'non-question-begging' descriptions in answer to the question, 'To whom (or what) does the name refer?' The important qualifier, 'non-question-begging', I will explain later⁹. I will call these descriptions that speakers supposedly must be able to supply 'the set of identifying descriptions'.

Secondly, the principle states that the referent of a proper name (as used by a speaker in some particular utterance), if there is one, is that object that uniquely fits a 'sufficient' number of the descriptions in the set of identifying descriptions. As a corollary, when no entity (or more than one) satisfies this condition, the name has no referent and a negative existential statement expressible by a sentence of the form '*N* does not exist' (where '*N*' is the name in question) will be true.

I have tried to state the principle so as to make it possible for alternative positions still to embody it. I should like to show that we ought not to accept *any* of the versions of it to be found in the literature. Thus, for reasons that will emerge, I leave it open in the first part whether the set of identifying descriptions is to be formed from what *each* speaker can supply or from what speakers collectively supply. In the second part, the 'sufficient number' of descriptions that an object must satisfy to be the referent might be *all* of them, as in Russell's view, or some *indeterminate number* of them, as in Searle's.

The counter-examples I later give are directed against the second part of the principle; they are designed to show that *even if* the user(s) of a name must be able to supply a set of identifying descriptions, as laid down by the first part, these descriptions do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for what shall count as the referent. But the first part of the principle is not without difficulties. To strengthen my case against the principle I want first to point out some of these while formulating some of the needed qualifications to the principle as I have just stated it.

IV

There are two views on the source of the set of identifying descriptions that supposedly must back up the use of a proper name.

We find in Russell and Frege¹⁰ the idea that different speakers who use the same name in an otherwise identical propositional context will most likely not express the same proposition (or thought, in Frege's terminology). This happens because very probably they do not associate with the name the same set of descriptions. The propositions might have different truth-values, because the speakers, with different sets of identifying descriptions, may be referring to different things¹¹ Russell and Frege, in other words, look to the individual speaker for the set of identifying descriptions. In contrast, Searle tells us that the set of identifying descriptions is formed from the descriptions users of the name give of what they refer to. And Strawson, in discussing this question¹², imagines a situation in which a name is used by a group in which each member "knows some distinguishing fact or facts, not necessarily the same ones, about Socrates, facts which each is prepared to cite to indicate whom he now means or understands, by 'Socrates'". He then suggests that we form a "composite description incorporating the most frequently mentioned facts" and continues, "Now it would be too much to say that the success of term-introduction within the group by means of the name requires that there should exist just one person of whom all the propositions in the composite description are true. But it would not be too much to say that it requires that there should exist one and only one person of whom some reasonable proportion of these propositions is true."¹³ Given this difference of opinion, I allowed for alternatives in the statement of the principle. Both means of determining the set of identifying descriptions contain difficulties. To take the Russell-Frege view first, it seems to me, though evidently not to them, absurd to suppose that a beginning student of philosophy, who has learned a few things about Aristotle, and his teacher, who knows a great deal, express different propositions when each says 'Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander'. Even if this can be swallowed, there are very unpleasant consequences. Given the second part of the principle of identifying descriptions the student and teacher possess different criteria for identifying Aristotle and even for establishing his existence. For the student Aristotle would be a person satisfying (sub-

stantially) some fairly small number of descriptions; for the scholar of philosophy a much larger number would determine the existence and identity of Aristotle. This means that if each affirm Aristotle's existence there is the theoretical possibility, at least, that one is correct and the other wrong. Yet suppose that the smaller supply of descriptions available to the student turns out generally to be incorrect (we can imagine him to be unfortunate enough to have been told mostly things about Aristotle that historians of Greek philosophy are mistaken about). Would he really be in error in saying that Aristotle existed? Should we say to him, if we uncover the errors, 'Your Aristotle doesn't exist, though Professor Smith's does.'?

Worse still, suppose that the few things the student has 'learned' about Aristotle are not only not true of the individual his teacher refers to, but turn out substantially to be true of, say, Plato. He has been told, perhaps, that Aristotle wrote the *Metaphysics* when, in fact, Plato wrote it and Aristotle cribbed it, etc. Should we say that he has all along been referring to Plato, though his teacher, for whom these few descriptions are not the only source of criteria for what the referent is, continues to refer to Aristotle? The principle of identifying descriptions seems to lead to that result when interpreted in this way.

The more liberal view that utilizes descriptions suppliable by users of the name, in the plural, is not in much better shape. In the first place, what group of speakers is to form the reference set from which the 'composite description' is to be drawn? Searle speaks of properties 'commonly' attributed to Aristotle. Commonly attributed by whom? By contemporary speakers? One thing seems certain: the speakers in question cannot be *all* those who have ever used the name 'Aristotle' to refer to Aristotle. Aside from the appearance, at least, of circularity, none of us would likely ever be in a position to know what properties that group would attribute to Aristotle. Childhood friends of Aristotle, who did not follow his subsequent career, would have a quite different set of descriptions of him from ours. I doubt that we shall ever know what those were. Using this *total* class of those who have ever spoken of Aristotle is a practical impossibility and can hardly form the basis for our use. (It would also seem to do violence to the motivation behind the principle of identifying descriptions - that users of a name should be able to supply criteria for identifying the referent.)

On the other hand, to limit the group of speakers whose descriptions will generate the 'composite description' to, say, those at a particular time yields consequences similar to those of the Russell-Frege view. Different times and ages might have different beliefs about Aristotle. And in conjunction with the second part of the principle of identifying descriptions it would be possible that the affirmation that Aristotle existed should have different truth-values from one time to another. Or, because of the particular beliefs they held, we could imagine that the people of one age, unknown to any of us, referred to Plato when they used the name 'Aristotle'. On the Frege-Russell view any two people using the same sentence containing the name 'Aristotle' and believing that they are referring to the same person, etc., very likely do not express the same proposition. The more liberal view only expands this possibility to different groups of people.

v

The first part of the principle of identifying descriptions tells us that users of a name must be in a position to supply a set of identifying descriptions. (For the sake of argument I will at times allow that this is so, although what positive remarks I make will imply that there is no necessity involved.) How are we to understand this? Strawson says, " ... When I speak of 'preparedness to substitute a description for a name', this requirement must not be taken too literally. It is not required that people be very ready articulators of what they know."¹⁴ I think he is surely right to allow us this latitude. Small children and even adults often use names without literally being able to describe the referent in sufficient detail to guarantee unique identification.

I imagine the reason philosophers who have discussed proper names so often use historical figures such as Aristotle, Homer, etc. is just that these names are introduced into our vocabulary via descriptions of facts about their bearers and most of us are prepared to give something like uniquely denoting descriptions. But it is less clear that we are ready to describe our friends, people we have met here and there, or even public figures of our times whose images have not yet been crystalized into a few memorable attributes. At the very least it would be an effort to insure that a description of someone we know fairly well and whose name we use often is both accurate and unique. The first part of the principle, then, seems to require

of us a high level of ability - unless what counts as having the ability is very broad indeed. (Even though it is hardly like being able to describe the referent, the ability to *point* to the referent is usually included as if it were simply a variant.)

Construe it as broadly as you will, is there really a requirement that the user of a name be able to identify by description (or even by pointing) what the name refers to? The following example, which anticipates a bit some later results, may cast doubt on this. Suppose a child is gotten up from sleep at a party and introduced to someone as 'Tom', who then says a few words to the child. Later the child says to his parents, "Tom is a nice man". The only thing he can say about 'Tom' is that Tom was at a party. Moreover, he is unable to recognize anyone as 'Tom' on subsequent occasions. His parents give lots of parties and they have numerous friends named 'Tom'. The case could be built up, I think, so that nothing the child possesses in the way of descriptions, dispositions to recognize, serves to pick out in the standard way anybody uniquely. That is, we cannot go by the denotation of his descriptions nor whom he points to, if anyone, etc. Does this mean that there is no person to whom he was referring? It seems to me that his parents might perfectly well conjecture about the matter and come up with a reasonable argument showing that the child was talking about this person rather than that. For example, they might reason as follows: "He's met several people named 'Tom' at recent parties, but only Tom Brown did something that might make him say, 'Tom is a nice man'. Of course, Tom Brown isn't nice and he was just indulging in his usual sarcasm when he told him, 'You have a nice pair of parents', but the sarcasm wouldn't have registered."¹⁵

If this is a reasonable example, it seems the question of what a speaker referred to by using a name is not foreclosed by his inability to describe or even to recognize or point to the referent. The reasoning of the parents in this example is not aimed at finding out what descriptions the child could give, if only he were able to articulate them. I used a child in the example to sharpen the picture of someone with no descriptions or other means of identifying the referent uniquely; but adults also sometimes conjecture about other adults concerning what person they were referring to in using a name. Is it beyond doubt that in such instances the inquiry must ultimately be concerned with what descriptions the user of the name could supply? The examples later on will challenge this, yet even now

examples such as the one I have given seem to me to make the requirement that every use of a name have behind it a backing of descriptions highly suspicious (even without relying on what appears to me beyond question, that no one has yet given a clear account of what the ability to describe a referent amounts to).

VI

Before turning to counter-examples one more preliminary issue should be settled. In stating the principle of identifying descriptions, I inserted the condition that the descriptions that 'back up' the use of a name should not be 'question-begging'. The qualification has vital significance because there are certain descriptions that a user of a name (providing he can articulate them) could always provide and which would always denote the referent of the name uniquely (providing there is one). No argument could be devised to show that the referent of a name need not be denoted by these descriptions. At the same time anyone who subscribes to the principle of identifying descriptions would hardly have these descriptions in mind or want to rely on them in defence of the principle. Some examples of what I shall count as 'question-begging' are the following:

- (a) 'the entity I had in mind'
- (b) 'the entity I referred to'
- (c) 'the entity I believe to be the author of the *Metaphysics*'.

I think it is clear about (a) and (b) and only a little less so about (c) that if descriptions such as these are included in the 'backing of descriptions' the principle would become uninteresting.

Strawson, in fact, explicitly excludes descriptions such as (a): "[the speaker] cannot, for himself, distinguish the particular which he has in mind by the fact that it is the one he has in mind. So, there must be some description he could give, which need not be the description he does give, which applies uniquely to the one he has in mind and does not include the phrase, 'the one he has in mind' ".¹⁶ Although Strawson mentions a particular description, it is certain that he would exclude from consideration similar ones. In particular, (b) above surely would not count for him. The point of the 'backing of descriptions' is to explain how an object gets referred to by a proper name. Descriptions that fit the referent

simply in virtue of the fact that the speaker did, in fact, refer to it or had it in mind as the object he meant to refer to are question-begging in answer to the question, 'who (or what) did you refer to?' in the same way that 'What I have in my hand' would be question-begging in answer to the question, 'What are you holding in your hand?'

It is only a little bit less obvious that descriptions of the form, 'the object I believe to be ϕ ', such as (c) above, must likewise be excluded from the set of identifying descriptions.

Call descriptions such as 'the author of the *Metaphysics*' *primary* descriptions; call those such as 'the man I believed to be the author of the *Metaphysics*' *secondary* descriptions. Suppose that all primary descriptions the user(s) of a name can supply are false of everything. The backing of secondary descriptions would be useless in the same way that 'the object I had in mind' would be. For if I cannot rely on my primary descriptions to pick out uniquely what I refer to, trying to identify the referent via a description of the form 'the one I believed to be (though it is not) ϕ ' would amount to no more than trying to identify *the object I had in mind* when I held that belief.

In what follows, then, I will count what I have called 'secondary' descriptions as question-begging.

VII

In the next sections I construct counter-examples to the principle of identifying descriptions. To do this I must show that there are possible situations in which the referent of a name does not satisfy the conditions the principle lays down or situations in which an entity satisfying those conditions is not the referent. The principle tells us that the referent of a name, if there is one, is that entity that fits some sufficient number of a certain set of descriptions, namely the set suppliable by the user(s) of the name. It is important to note that in denying this, one need not deny that there are some constraints on what the referent of a name may be - *some* description which it must fit. But this is only to allow that there may be a 'backing of descriptions' that serve as *necessary* conditions, while the principle tells us that such a backing of descriptions also serves as sufficient conditions.

Thus, I should want to argue, for example, that *theoretically* Aristotle

might turn out to be a person who did *not* write the *Metaphysics*, was *not* the teacher of Alexander, etc.; that is to say, a person who does fit 'a sufficient number' of the descriptions we, as users of the name, would now supply. But I need not argue that even theoretically he could turn out to be, say, a fishmonger living in Hoboken or Plato's dog (although in incautious moments I am inclined to believe in even this outlandish theoretical possibility). If anyone wants to maintain that our use of the name is such that being a human being or not living in modern times, etc. are *necessary* for being the referent of the name, I have no objection here to offer against a 'backing of descriptions' in that weaker sense. Such an attenuated backing would not *uniquely* identify the referent.

A word about the nature of the counter-examples is required, because they will undoubtedly seem artificial and possibly taken on their own not wholly convincing. Their artificiality is in part forced on me by the fact that I want to question not only the simple view of, say, Russell that sees a name as a simple substitute for a description, but also the looser and vaguer view of Searle and Strawson. The latter, however, uses the notion of an ill-defined 'sufficient' number of descriptions. Since the notion of 'sufficient' is ill-defined, it is necessary to invent examples in which, for instance, the referent of a name fits *no* description which is both unique to it and available to the speaker (other than 'question-begging' descriptions). Otherwise, a defender of the view might take refuge in those descriptions. To make sure that there are no remaining contaminating descriptions, the examples have to be fairly extreme ones in which the user(s) of a name are radically deceived about the properties of what they are talking about.

But if these 'pure' examples are in order in everything except their artificiality, then the fact that I do not tell more true-to-life stories should not be an objection. For however vague 'sufficient number' is left, one thing is certain: the Searle-Strawson view cannot be that the referent of a name is any entity that fits uniquely any *one* of the descriptions suppliable by the user(s) of the name. The whole purpose of this variant (as opposed to the stronger Russell view) is to allow that we could discover, e.g., that Aristotle did not teach Alexander without having to deny Aristotle's existence or that *someone else* was the teacher of Alexander. But if any *one* of the descriptions in the set of identifying descriptions counts always as 'sufficient', there will be an overwhelming number of cases in which

there cannot be a unique referent for a name we use - all those instances in which we ascribe to the referent two or more properties which in fact are unique properties of more than one person.

VIII

The first counter-example is the most artificial (but perhaps the most pure). It is a situation in which a speaker uses a name to refer to something though what is referred to is not picked out uniquely by the descriptions available to the speaker. As well, there is something the speaker's descriptions denote uniquely, but that is not the referent.

Imagine the following circumstances: Perhaps in an experiment by psychologists interested in perception a subject is seated before a screen of uniform color and large enough to entirely fill his visual field. On the screen are painted two squares of identical size and color, one directly above the other. The subject knows nothing of the history of the squares - whether one was painted before the other, etc. Nor does he know anything about their future. He is asked to give names to the squares¹⁷ and to say on what basis he assigns the names. With one complication to be noted later, it seems that the only way in which he can distinguish the squares through description is by their relative positions. So he might respond that he will call the top square 'alpha' and the bottom square 'beta'.

The catch in the example is this: unknown to the subject, he has been fitted with spectacles that invert his visual field. Thus, the square he sees as apparently on top is really on the bottom and *vice versa*. Having now two names to work with we can imagine the subject using one of them to say something about one of the squares. Suppose he comes to believe (whether erroneously or not doesn't matter) that one of the squares has changed color. He might report, 'Alpha is now a different color'. But which square is he referring to? He would describe alpha as the square on top. And if this is the only uniquely identifying description at his command then according to the principle I am attacking, he would have referred to the square that is on top. But given our knowledge of the presence and effect of the inverting spectacles and the ignorance of the subject about that, it seems clear that we should take him as referring to, not the square on top, but the one that seems to him erroneously to be on top - the one on the bottom. We know why he describes 'alpha' the way he does; we

expect changes in the square on the bottom to elicit from him reports of changes in alpha, etc. I think it would be altogether right to say that although *he* does not know it, he is talking about the square on the bottom even though he would *describe* it as 'the square on top'. If this is right, we seem to have a case in which the speaker's descriptions of what he is referring to when he uses a name do not yield the true referent so long as we stick to what is denoted by the descriptions he gives. The referent is something different and the thing actually denoted is not the referent.

This counter-example to the principle of identifying descriptions depends upon the supposition that the subject's only description that could serve to pick out the referent uniquely is the one in terms of relative position. But it must be admitted that I have so-far neglected a description of alpha that he could supply, that is not question-begging, and that would in fact uniquely identify alpha despite the operation of the glasses. The subject could describe alpha as, 'the square that *appears* to me to be on top'. We must take 'appears' here in its phenomenological sense. If 'that appears to me to be on top' means 'that I believe to be on top' we would have a question-begging description. But in its phenomenological sense, alpha is the one that *appears* to him to be on top and, indeed, it is just because the square on the bottom is the one that appears to him to be on top that it is the referent of 'alpha'.

There is more than one way to modify the example in order to take care of this objection to it, but an easy way is by having the subject use the name 'alpha' a bit later having forgotten how alpha appeared to him, but recalling the position he took it really to have. Of course in our example as presented the subject would have no reason to suppose that there might be a discrepancy between the actual position of alpha and what position it appeared to him to have and so long as he remembered it as being the one on top, he would presumably say that that was also the way it appeared to him. What is needed is something to make him doubt that his recollection of what position he took alpha to have is an accurate guide to how it appeared to him.

Suppose then that our subject is an old hand at experiments of this sort and knows that inverting lenses are sometimes put into the spectacles he wears. Erroneously he believes he has a method of detecting when this happens. He goes through the experiment as previously described but

with the mistaken belief that his spectacles have not been tampered with and that the squares have the position they appear to him to have. Later on he makes some statement such as, 'Alpha changed color at one point'. But while he remembers his judgment that alpha was the top square (and has absolute confidence in it), he cannot remember how alpha appeared to him at the time nor whether he had based his judgment on the assumption that his visual field was inverted or not. The subject's set of identifying descriptions thus no longer contains the *appearance* description and only the erroneous description of alpha as being the square on top remains as a uniquely identifying description.

IX

If the preceding counter-example was persuasive, then it will also suggest something positive. Its moral might be put this way: When a person describes something, as when he describes what he is referring to, we are not limited to looking for something that fits his descriptions uniquely (or fits them better than anything else). We can also ask ourselves, 'What thing would he *judge* to fit those descriptions, even if it does not really do so?' That question will utilize his descriptions, but will not be decided on the rigid basis of what is denoted, if anything, uniquely by them. In this particular example the influence of inverting spectacles was a deciding factor. We had to know *both* how he described the referent and, what he did not know, that the spectacles would influence his descriptions in a certain way. The role of his set of identifying descriptions' in determining the referent of his use of a name is not that which the principle of identifying descriptions gives it. It had its part, but the question asked about it was different: 'What do these descriptions denote uniquely (or best)?' vs. 'Why should he describe the referent in that way?'

The next counter-example¹⁸ provides a somewhat different insight into how proper names function.

A student meets a man he takes to be the famous philosopher, J. L. Aston-Martin. Previously, the student has read some of the philosopher's works and so has at his command descriptions such as, "the author of 'Other Bodies'" and "the leading expounder of the theory of egocentric pluralism." The meeting takes place at a party and the student engages the man in a somewhat lengthy conversation, much of it given over, it turns

out, to trying to name cities over 100000 in population in descending order of altitude above sea-level. In fact, however, although the student never suspects it, the man at the party is not the famous philosopher, but someone who leads the student to have that impression. (We can even imagine that by coincidence he has the same name.)

Imagine, then, a subsequent conversation with his friends in which the student relates what happened at the party. He might begin by saying, "Last night I met J. L. Aston-Martin and talked to him for almost an hour". To whom does he refer at this point? I strongly believe the answer should be, 'to the famous philosopher', and not, 'to the man he met at the party'. What the student says is simply false; a friend 'in the know' would be justified in replying that he did not meet J. L. Aston-Martin, but someone who had the same name and was no more a philosopher than Milton Berle.

Suppose, however, that the audience contains no such doubting Thomases, and that the rest of party was of sufficient interest to generate several more stories about what went on. The student might use the name 'J. L. Aston-Martin', as it were, incidently. For example: "... and then Robinson tripped over Aston-Martin's feet and fell flat on his face" or "I was almost the last to leave - only Aston-Martin and Robinson, who was still out cold, were left."

In these subsequent utterances to whom was the speaker referring in using the name, 'Aston-Martin?' My inclination is to say that here it was to the man he met at the party and not to the famous philosopher. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that in the initial utterance the speaker's remark would only have a point if he was referring to the famous philosopher, while in the later utterances it is more natural to take him to be referring to the man at the party, since what happened there is the whole point.¹⁹

If in such examples as this there are *two* references made (or even if there is a strong inclination to say that there are) this is something unaccounted for by the principle of identifying descriptions.

To see this we need only ask what the student's set of identifying descriptions consists in each time he uses the name, first when he claims to have met Aston-Martin and later when he recounts events at the party that incidently involve the man he met there. In both cases the set of identifying descriptions would be the same. It will include, first of all,

those descriptions of Aston-Martin he would have given prior to the party - the author of certain works, propounder of certain doctrines, etc. In addition, it would now contain various descriptions derived from meeting the spurious famous man at the party - the man who played the game about cities, whose feet Robin son tripped over, etc.

The full set of descriptions, available to him when he later talks about the party, would be the same whether he was asked, 'Who is Aston-Martin?', at the outset when he claims to have met Aston-Martin at the party or later on when the name occurs in recounting other events involving the man met at the party. *We* may say that the referent changes during the course of his conversation, but the speaker would not. And his full account, i.e. all the descriptions at his command, of who it is he refers to would remain the same. It would contain, for example, both "the author of 'Other Bodies' " and "the man I talked to at the party about cities."

This result, however, is inconsistent with the principle of identifying descriptions. On that principle, the *same* set of identifying descriptions can determine at most *one* referent. But in this example we seem to have two referents and only one set of identifying descriptions.

We extracted from the first counter-example the idea that the question we should ask is, 'What would the user(s) of the name describe in this way?' rather than, 'What (substantially) fits the descriptions they give?' Though these questions may usually have the same answer, the counter-example showed that they need not.

The present example, however, shows that even this distinction is not enough. It would do no good to ask about his set of identifying descriptions, 'Who would the speaker describe that way?' In the example the same set of identifying descriptions is related to two different referents. It seems then that the ultimate question is rather, 'What would the speaker describe in this way on this occasion?', where 'describe in this way' does not refer to his set of identifying descriptions, but to the predicate he ascribes to the referent; e.g., in the example, we might ask on one occasion, 'Who would claim to have met at the party?', on another, 'Who would he want us to believe Jones tripped over at the party?' And although *his* answer, gleaned from his set of identifying descriptions, would be the same in either case, *we* may have reason to answer differently to each question.

It is instructive to look at the use of proper names in historical contexts if only to see why so many philosophers who discuss proper names appeal to examples of it. In general, our use of proper names for persons in history (and also those we are not personally acquainted with) is parasitic on uses of the names by other people - in conversation, written records, etc. Insofar as we possess a set of identifying descriptions in these cases they come from things said about the presumed referent by other people. My answer to the question, 'Who was Thales?' would probably derive from what I learned from my teachers or from histories of philosophy. Frequently, as in this example, one's identifying descriptions trace back through many levels of parasitic derivation. Descriptions of Thales we might give go back to what was said, using that name, by Aristotle and Herodotus. And, if Thales existed, the trail would not end there.

The history behind the use of a name may not be known to the individual using it. I may have forgotten the sources from whence I got my descriptions of Thales. Even a whole culture could lose this history. A people with an oral tradition in which names of past heroes figure would probably not be able to trace the history back to original sources. Yet, for all that, they may be telling of the exploits of real men in the past and they may possess knowledge of them and their deeds.

Yet, in such cases the history is of central importance to the question of whether a name in a particular use has a referent and, if so, what it is. The words of others, in conversation, books and documents can, like the inverting spectacles in a previous example, distort our view of what we are naming. But at the same time it can, to one who knows the facts, provide the means of uncovering the referent, if there is one.

The role of this history leading up to a present use of a name has almost always been neglected by those who accept the principle of identifying descriptions. The sort of description generally mentioned as helping to pick out, say, Thales, is such as 'the Greek philosopher who held that all is water'. Nothing is made of the fact that such descriptions are given by us derivatively. We might be pardoned if we supposed that the referent of 'Thales' is whatever ancient Greek happens to fit such descriptions uniquely, even if he should turn out to have been a hermit living so remotely that he and his doctrines have no historical connection with us at all.

But this seems clearly wrong. Suppose that Aristotle and Herodotus were either making up the story or were referring to someone who neither did the things they said he did nor held the doctrines they attributed to him. Suppose further, however, that fortuitously their descriptions fitted uniquely someone they had never heard about and who was not referred to by any authors known to us. Such a person, even if he was the only ancient to hold that all is water, to fall in a well while contemplating the stars, etc., is not 'our' Thales.

Or, to take the other possible outcome according to the principle of identifying descriptions, suppose no one to have held the ridiculous doctrine that all is water, but that Aristotle and Herodotus were referring to a real person - a real person who was not a philosopher, but a well-digger with a reputation for saying wise things and who once exclaimed, "I wish everything were water so I wouldn't have to dig these damned wells." What is the situation then regarding our histories of philosophy? Have they mentioned a non-existent person or have they mentioned someone who existed but who did not have the properties they attribute to him? My inclination is to say the latter. Yet ignoring the history of these uses of the name 'Thales', the principle of identifying descriptions would tell us that Thales did not exist. But then to whom were Aristotle and Herodotus referring? Surely we cannot conclude, 'to no one'. It seems to me to make sense that we should discover that Thales was after all a well-digger and that Aristotle and Herodotus were deceived about what he did. That would not make sense, however, if we are forced to conclude in such a case that he did not exist. That is, if we neglect the fact that there is a history behind our use of the name 'Thales' or 'Aristotle' and concentrate only upon the descriptions we would supply about their life, their works and deeds, it is possible that our descriptions are substantially wrong without the consequence being that we have not been referring to any existent person.

It is significant that descriptions of the form '*N* was referred to by *A*' should assume central importance in the case of uses of names that are parasitic on their use by others. Not only does the principle of identifying descriptions, as it has usually been defended, fail to prepare us for the special role of one type of description, but we now see that there is a quite ordinary sense in which a person might be ignorant of the nature of the entity he has referred to in using a name. While I do not want to classify

descriptions of this form as 'question-begging' in the way in which 'the entity/ have in mind' is question-begging, it seems nevertheless natural to say that in knowing only that Thales was a man referred to by Aristotle and Herodotus, I'm not in a position to *describe* the man Thales; that is, there is, I think, an ordinary use of 'describe' in which to say only 'the man referred to by Aristotle and Herodotus' is not yet to *describe* Thales. So it seems that we could be in the position of having referred to someone in using the name 'Thales', the same person in fact referred to by Aristotle and Herodotus, although we are not in the position of being able to describe him correctly.

Nevertheless, so long as the user of a name can fall back on such a description as 'the person referred to by Aristotle', the principle of identifying descriptions may be salvaged even if at expense of having to elevate one type of description to special status. But it is not at all clear that such descriptions will in general be available to the user of a name or that without them the failure of his other descriptions to identify the referent uniquely must mean that the name has no referent. In the case of individual people there are surely many who would, for example, identify Thales as the pre-socratic philosopher who held that all is water, but who do not know that he was referred to by Aristotle and Herodotus. And in fact they may not know even the immediate sources of their use of the name; that, for example, Thales was referred to by **Mr. Jones**, their freshman philosophy instructor. In case Thales was in fact the pre-socratic philosopher with that doctrine, such people surely know something about Thales and, in using the name, they have referred to him. But if, in fact, the attribution of this view to Thales is wrong and they are left without any descriptions that uniquely fit Thales, I do not believe it follows that they have not referred to anyone or that (in their use of the name) Thales did not exist. To be sure, they may have available to them some such description of Thales as, 'The one who is commonly believed to have been a pre-socratic philosopher who held that all is water.' But even this may not be true. Everyone may have come to believe that Thales did not have that doctrine. One could continue along these lines, I think, to deny an individual any identifying descriptions, even of the form 'The one referred to by so-and-so' that will serve uniquely to pick out Thales, without the consequence that he has not referred to anyone.

XI

The previous examples have concentrated on individuals and the set of descriptions they could supply. But I think there is no reason to suppose that, with a bit more stretching of the imagination, the same results could not be gotten for the whole of some group in which a name is used. Thus, those who would form the 'set of identifying descriptions' from a collective effort at description seem no better off to me.

Thus, we could imagine a future time, for example, when the plays we attribute to Shakespeare are available and it is believed that Shakespeare was their author, but little else is known about him - perhaps only that he was an actor in Elizabethan times - and, in particular, nothing about the documentation we rely upon in attributing the plays to him has survived. As we now view it, the people of this future generation would be correct in saying that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. But suppose in fact the Baconian hypothesis is correct - Francis Bacon wrote those plays. What should an omniscient being who sees the whole history of the affair conclude about one of these future beings saying that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*? (Surely not that as they use 'Shakespeare' it refers to Bacon - Bacon was not an actor and they may know a great deal about Bacon, enough to insure that he could not have been an actor). It seems to me that the correct conclusion should be that (perhaps because we did not pay enough attention to the cryptologists who claim to find this message in the plays) we and they have made a mistake - we both believe that Shakespeare wrote the plays, though it was rather Bacon and not Shakespeare who is the Bard.

XII

As I have admitted, my counter-examples are necessarily somewhat artificial because of the vagueness of the position I want to attack. Yet, it seems to me that even artificial examples are sufficient because I take the principle of identifying descriptions to be a doctrine about how reference via proper names *must* take place. If these examples show that there are other possibilities for identifying the referent, they do their job. It is the idea that *only* a backing of descriptions identifying the referent by its fitting them (or some sufficient number of them) could serve to connect an object with a name that I question.

On the positive side my view is that what we should substitute for the question, 'What is the referent?' is 'What would the speaker be attributing that predicate to on this occasion?' Thus, in an early example, the parents of a child ask, 'Who would he say was a nice man at a party of ours?' when the child has said, 'Tom was a nice man?' *How* we answer such questions I do not have a general theory about. It seems clear to me that in some way the referent must be historically, or, we might say, causally connected to the speech act. But I do not see my way clear to saying exactly how in general that connection goes. Perhaps there is no exact theory. The shift of question, however, seems to be important. One can explain why the principle of identifying descriptions has seemed so plausible, for example, while denying its validity. If a speaker says '*a* is *cp*', where '*a*' is a name, and we ask, "To what would he on this occasion attribute the predicate '*cp*'?", asking him for descriptions would *normally* be the best strategy for finding out. Generally we know numbers of correct and even uniquely identifying descriptions of the referent of names we use. So others would naturally first rely on these and look for what best fits them.

To illustrate this, we can imagine the following games: In the first a player gives a set of descriptions and the other players try to find the object in the room that best fits them. This is analogous to the role of the set of identifying descriptions in the principle I object to. In the other game the player picks out some object in the room, tries to give descriptions that characterize it uniquely and the other players attempt to discover what object he described. In the second game the problem set for the other players (the audience in the analogue) is to find out what is being described, not what best fits the descriptions. Insofar as descriptions enter into a determination of what the referent of a name is, I suggest that the second game is a better analogy. In that game, on the normal assumption that people are unlikely to be badly mistaken about the properties of an object they are describing, the other players would usually first look for an object best fitting the descriptions given. But that need not always be the best tactics. They may notice or conjecture that the circumstances are such that the describer has unintentionally mis-described the object, the circumstances being such as distortions in his perception, erroneous beliefs he is known to hold, etc.

One final point: I earlier questioned whether we can really expect that there must be a backing of descriptions behind the use of a proper name.

Insofar as I offer an alternative to the principle of identifying descriptions, it has the merit of not requiring such a backing. If a speaker says '*a* is ϕ ', where '*a*' is a name, the question of what he referred to does not hinge on what he can supply in the way of descriptions - though what descriptions he does give, if any, can constitute an important datum. It may be possible to answer the question, "To what would he on this occasion attribute the predicate 'is ϕ '?", without any backing of descriptions.

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REFERENCES

* I am indebted to students and colleagues for comments and suggestions, in particular Professor John Perry and Mr. Theodore Budlong. I believe also that some departure from the traditional alternatives in theories about reference and proper names is 'in the air' and that views along some of the lines I take in this paper I may share with others, although the view I attack is still the dominant one. I believe that Saul Kripke has a very similar position, at least insofar as denial of the prevalent theories go. And, indeed, I think I may owe one of my counter-examples to him through a second-hand source (although I did not understand the relevance until much later). David Kaplan's paper, 'Quantifying In', *Synthese* **19** (1969) 178-214, also seems to me to be in the same vein, though I am not sure I agree with a variety of details and the main purpose of the paper is not to mount an assault on theories of proper names.

¹ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1959, p. 20.

² *Mind* **67** (1958) 166-173.

³ 'Lectures on Logical Atomism' in *Logic and Knowledge* (ed. by Robert C. Marsh), George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1956, p. 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁵ 'Proper Names', *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁶ In 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', *The Philosophical Review* **15** (1966) pp. 281-304, and 'Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again', *The Philosophical Review* **77** (1968) 203-215.

⁷ I assume here Russell's definition of denoting, which I think makes it a well-defined relation and ought always to be kept in mind in discussions of reference so that other relations may be compared with it: An entity *X* is denoted by a definite description, 'the $\langle f \rangle$ ', just in case *X* uniquely possesses the property designated by ' $\langle f \rangle$ '.

⁸ Although I do not have space to develop it, my account of proper names in this paper seems to me to make what I called 'referential' definite descriptions (as discussed in 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', *op. cit.*) a close relative of proper names.

⁹ Below, Section VI.

¹⁰ E.g., in 'The Thought: A Logical Inquiry' (translated by A. M. and Marcelle Quinton), *Mind* **65** (1956) 289-311. Also in P. F. Strawson (ed.), *Philosophical Logic*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967, pp. 17-38.

¹¹ That is to say, *if* what they refer to is a function of the set of identifying descriptions each possesses. In that case there would be the logical possibility of each speaker's set picking out different objects, each possessing the properties one speaker would attribute to the referent, but not those the other would.

¹² *Individuals, op. cit.*, pp. 191-192.

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182, footnote 1.

¹⁵ The last part of the remark is there simply to indicate that the parents need not even consider what the child says to be *true*; not only does the child not have a 'backing of descriptions', but the predicate in the sentence he uses need not apply. This connects up with the position suggested later in the paper.

¹⁶ *Individuals, op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹⁷ In the example as presented I have the subject of the experiment introduce the names. Nothing hinges on this. The experimenters could just as well use the names and give the subjects 'identifying descriptions'. Nor is there any importance in the fact that the example contains people, the experimenters, 'in the know'. For all that, everyone concerned might have the inverting spectacles on that I introduce.

¹⁸ The idea behind this example originated with me from a conversation with Rogers Albritton in 1966 and may derive from Saul Kripke, who has, I believe, a view about proper names not dissimilar to the one in this paper.

¹⁹ For the purpose of keeping the example within limits, I compress the two uses of the name, that I claim refer, unknown to the speaker, to two different people, into one conversation. I have sometimes, however, found it useful to make the case stronger intuitively by supposing that the person met at the party, for example, who is *not* the famous philosopher, becomes a longer term acquaintance of the speaker (who continues under the illusion that he is the famous man). In subsequent conversation, perhaps months or years later and after his friends have met the bogus philosopher, his use of the name is even more clearly a reference to the man he met at the party and whom he continues to see. Yet if he claimed to know, as in my example, J. L. Aston-Martin, in circumstances where it is clear that the point of the remark has to do with claiming to know a famous man, I still think we would suppose him to have referred to Aston-Martin, the famous philosopher, and not to man he met at the party, who later is one of his close acquaintances.