

Arguments for “Descriptivism”

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The classical problem that characterizes the discussion on reference in analytic philosophy is whether when we refer to, for instance, “Aristotle” (proper name) the fact that he was “the Master of Alexander the Great” is included in the sense through which we understand the name. The “descriptive” theory of reference that, starting from Frege and Russell was reinterpreted by Searle and Strawson, contrasts the theories of “direct reference” that are grounded on the causality of external objects on mind (famous authors of this view are Kripke, Donnellan and Kaplan).

Descriptivism can be analyzed on two different levels: first, on the level of the philosophy of language, focusing on how proper names and definite descriptions function in the process of reference; second, on the level of the philosophy of mind focusing on how we grasp objects through sensorial and perceptive processes. I’ll argue for descriptivism as presented by John Searle, who considers both sentences and mental states and processes in comparison with descriptivism by Frege and Russell. I’ll try to clarify why, contrary to Russell (who aimed at eliminating the Fregean “senses”), we cannot avoid to consider the level of the pragmatic sense of linguistic expressions.

1. Proper Names

As it is well known, Frege introduced the thesis that proper names (names and definite description) have two components: “reference” (*Bedeutung*) and “sense” (*Sinn*). Starting from the questions: “Is identity a relation?, “Is it a relation among objects or among names or signs of objects?” we can individuate two fundamental solutions. The first solution is the one presented in the *Begriffsschrift* that privileges the relation among names or signs of objects; the second is the one we find in *Sinn*

und Bedeutung that privileges the relation among objects. In this essay Frege tries to substance the semiotic analysis of the *Begriffsschrift*. The sentences $a = a$ and $a = b$ seem to have different cognitive value: sentences of the first form are valid a priori, they are “analytic”; whether sentences of the second form are not always justifiable a priori. If we intend identity as a relation between what the sign “a” and “b” designate (*Bedeutung*) then $a = a$ seems not to differ from $a = b$ (under the condition that $a = b$ is true). This happens because we obtain a relation in which a thing is with itself and no other thing is with another, namely $a = b$ seems to allude to the fact that the names or signs “a” and “b” designate the same thing. In this sense, the discourse would be about the signs and a relation between signs would be stated. Consequently, we would have to deal with a relation mediated by the connection of each of the two signs with the one designated and this connection is arbitrary. On the one side, we have the possibility to freely establish to let whatever object be sign for anything, on the other we have the necessity to obtain an authentic knowledge. If “a” would distinguish itself from “b” by virtue of its form but not as sign then $a = a$ and $a = b$ would have the same cognitive value: «A difference can arise only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation [*Art des Gegebenseins des Bezeichneten*] of the thing designated. Let a , b and c be the lines connecting the vertices of a triangle with the midpoints of the opposite sides. The point of intersection of a and b is then the same as the point of intersection of b and c . So we have different designations for the same point, and these names (‘point of intersection of a and b ’, ‘point of intersection of b and c ’) likewise indicate the mode of presentation and hence the statement contains actual knowledge» (Frege 1892, p. 152). According to Frege, this example suggest us to intend a sign as connected in addition to what it designates (*Bedeutung*) also to the “sense” of the sign in which the content of the mode of presentation of the object is given. Thus, we will have that the meaning of the expressions ‘the point of intersection of a and b ’ and ‘the point of intersection of b and c ’ is the same, but not the sense. Similarly, the meaning of ‘The Morning Star’ and ‘The Evening Star’ is the same, namely ‘Venus’, but not the sense.

Russell underscored some difficulties in the theory of Frege. A first difficulty arises if we maintain that denotative syntagmata (for instance, “a man”, “some men”, or “The Morning Star”) express a meaning and denote a denotation that concerns cases in which the denotation is absent. If, for example, we consider the assertion “The actual king of France is bald” it does not seem to be an assertion on the complex meaning of “the actual king of France”, but an assertion about the real man denoted by the meaning. So, the assertion “The actual king of France is bald” that has the same form of the previous one, would be on the syntagma “the king of France”, to

have therefore a meaning but not a denotation. This let us suppose that "the king of France is bald" is a nonsense; according to Russell, the proposition is false.

A second difficulty is bound to the consideration of the denotation of a denoting syntagma C as opposed to its meaning. For example, the first line of Gray's Elegy asserts a proposition and "The first line of Gray's Elegy" does not assert a proposition. In the second case, the quoted syntagma expresses the meaning. We have here a problem with the logical relation between meaning and denotation. In particular, it is difficult to hold the connection between meaning and denotation and at the same time to avoid that they identify each other (for the meaning can be grasped only through a denotative syntagma). The denotative syntagma C would have either a meaning and a denotation. But if we want "the meaning of the first line of Gray's Elegy" we obtain "the meaning of 'the curfew tolls the knell of parting day'" that does not correspond to "The meaning of 'the first line of the Gray's Elegy'". If we want the desiderated meaning we must not talk of "the meaning of C" but of "the meaning of 'C'", that corresponds to the one of "C". Things are the same as regards the denotation as "the denotation of C" does not mean the desiderated denotation but an arbitrary one. Thus, if C = "The first line of Gray's Elegy" and the denotation of C = "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" we do not obtain the denotation we wanted of "The first line of Gray's Elegy". Russell's argumentation brings to the conception according to which a denotative syntagma is *essentially part of a sentence* and, differently from the most part of the words, it has no sense by itself. If we would like to know, for example, that Scott was the author of Waverley we must exclude that the substitution of "The author of Waverley" with Scott and thus that Scott = Scott could normally be of some interest for us. Consequently, "Scott was the author of Waverley" (being Scott identical with the author of Waverley) becomes "One and only one entity wrote Waverley and Scott was identical with this entity". If x is whatever entity and "C" a denotative syntagma, giving that the proposition "x is identical with C" is true, then x is the denotation of "C". Scott is the denotation of "the author of Waverley". The "C" under quotation is the simple syntagma and nothing else that we could identify as the *meaning*.

2. Searle's Descriptivism

Searle moves from the thesis that proper names have a sense and this is demonstrated by an analysis of the identity's relation (Searle 1958). Tullius = Tullius and Tullius = Cicero are analytic but the fact that in order to express them we must use determinate words is not trivial. Following Wittgenstein, to explain the use of a

name according to the characteristic of the object to which it refers does not mean to formulate the adequate linguistic rules: rules do not possess a descriptive content. The fact that some propositions are synthetic is however clear if, for example, someone maintains that Shakespeare is Bacon and clearly this is not a matter of the language he/she uses. Searle aims at showing how analytic and synthetic propositions are possible by means of the connection between proper names and their referents; the argumentation makes clear why a proper name has a sense. Differently from Russell, reference is not bound only to the assertion hence to the question of the existence of a certain entity. In this sense, the propositional content is common to a wide variety of illocutive acts like questions, commands, promises, etc (see Searle 1969). To grasp the identity of an object we must distinguish proper names such as “Aristotle”, definite descriptions and demonstratives. Demonstratives require special conditions for the emission of the expression, definite descriptions specify certain characteristics of the objects, proper names do not specify them so, for instance, “Scott” refers to the same entity to which “The author of Waverley” refers, but in the last case some characteristics are specified (Searle 1958). Strawson (1950) showed that the referential use of proper names and definite descriptions presupposes the existence of one and the same object to which they refer and ordinary language has specific expressions that allow the speakers to identify the objects. How does reference occur? It seems important that though proper names do not normally assert or describe characteristics of the objects, still the referential use presupposes that the object possesses certain characteristics. This view can be compatible with Strawson’s thesis that proper names and descriptions differ only in the degree of “descriptive meaning”. At the end, descriptions seem to be relevant for the referential use because they plausibly depend on the context of expressions (speaker’s intention, special and temporal coordinates, situation, identity of the speaker, etc.). This becomes clear in the Searlean thesis that referential uses of a proper name such as “Aristotle” presuppose the existence of an object of which a sufficient number of assertions is true. To referentially use a proper name means to presuppose the truth of some descriptive assertions univocally referential, but these “presuppositions” are not normally formulated or precisely indicated. Proper names have thus the function of “hooks” to which we hang descriptions. These hooks cannot be rigid and specific otherwise they would be redundant as abbreviations of necessary and sufficient criteria of the referential use, criteria that the language has not yet established (a part from, for instance, religious vocabulary). Turning back to the initial example, “Tullius = Cicero” can be considered as an analytic assertion because to each name the same descriptive presuppositions are associated; this does not imply that if they reveal

themselves false the same sentence cannot be used to perform a synthetic assertion (and so to announce a very important discovery).

3. Problems with Descriptivism

The originality and actuality of the Searlean account of proper names resides also in the relationship between philosophy and neuroscience that represents the *leitmotiv* of his work until our days and focuses on the functioning of brain processes in experience and perception. The background of perceptual, conceptual and linguistic capacities and abilities gives us an interesting view on the role of the intentional content for reference. As it is well known, several criticisms have been raised against Searle’s “internalism” that gave rise to a lively and interesting debate (Lepore & Van Gulik 1991). The debates Searle conducted with Kripke, Donnellan and Putnam are useful to show how in the process of reference is always active a certain individual description. For instance, the use of the proper name “Madagascar” shows that it is difficult to isolate the causal chain that relate it to the originally reference to the African land. Originally, “Madagascar” was the name of a part of Africa. Marco Polo while satisfying the Kripke’s requirement to use the name with the same reference used by the “man from whom he learned it” referred to an island in front of the African coasts (the one to which we refer as “Madagascar”). Therefore, it seems that the use of the name “Madagascar” satisfies the causal chain that goes back to the African land but not the reference to it.

Recently, some interesting criticisms have been raised against the Searlean theory of reference to overcome the primacy of the “descriptive content” (Tsohatzidis 2007). Wayne Davies (2007) presents a thoughtful analysis of Searle’s descriptivism and tries to overcome several critical nodes by proposing a view of reference based on the relation between name and subject concept. The “explanation argument” maintains that a name expresses an individual concept that represents that object: «Thus “Aristotle” expresses the concept of Aristotle, which represents Aristotle. Only Aristotle satisfies that concept, so Aristotle is the referent of “Aristotle”. Some would now raise a further question: *What makes it the case that the concept of Aristotle represents Aristotle?* Searle should give the same answer he gives for any other concept: the Intentional content of a mental state is an intrinsic property. For a concept to represent Aristotle is for it to *be* the concept of Aristotle. We can no more explain why the concept of Aristotle represents Aristotle than we can explain why the concept of red represents red» (Davis 2007, p. 113).

Davis individuates three forms of descriptivism in Searle's account of reference that do not allow us to establish the relationship between a name and an individual concept.

The first is represented by "The disjunctive definite description theory" that rests on the fact that when we use a name we presuppose the truth of a sufficient number of descriptions. Consequently, the disjunction of seemingly logically independent propositions is analytic even though no one of them is. Davies quotes the following argument from Searle: «A classical scholar might discover that Aristotle never tutored Alexander or that he did not write the *Metaphysics*; but if the classical scholar claimed to discover that Aristotle wrote none of the works attributed to him, never had anything to do with Plato or Alexander, never went near Athens, and was not even a philosopher but was in fact an obscure Venetian fishmonger of the late Renaissance, then the "discovery" would become a bad joke» (Searle 1967, p. 490).

Against the disjunctive definite description theory Davis notices that we have much evidence that Aristotle was a Greek or that he had something to do with Plato. Therefore, he proposes the alternative hypothesis that the scholar was using the name "Aristotle" to refer to someone other than Aristotle; another is that he was playing some kind of hoax. Actually, we can find a relationship between the name and "sortals" or "categories" in Searle's text *Intentionality* (on this topic see also Geach 1980, Cocchiarella 1984). But even in this case Davis underscores that the sortals Searle proposes are too specific. It is plausible that Aristotle was a "man", but it is logically possible that he was a god or a Martian or "an exceptionally sophisticated machine planted on earth by gods or Martians".

The second is represented by "The second-order definite description theory". This "cluster theory" is present in Searle's earlier work: «The individual satisfying a sufficient number of the descriptive contents users of "Aristotle" believe to be established facts about Aristotle» (Searle 1967, p. 490; Searle 1958, pp. 171-173). The objection to this option recalls the Kripkean one and says that the description is so vague that it makes impossible to establish if it is true of Aristotle. Actually, it is not an intentional content the typical sense of Aristotle would ever express.

The third is represented by "the variable definite description theory" that rests on the thesis that a name does not express a particular intentional content; rather it is used to express different descriptive contents on different occasion, all of which refer to the same object. According to Davies, this move does not convey the "sense" of a name and, in doing so, it does not account for the marked difference in meaning between "Cary Grant is Cary Grant" and "Cary Grant is Archibald Leach". Moreover, it does not provide any criterion for the use of expressions like "Santa

Claus does not exist” which does not pick out the “right object” as Santa Claus does not exist. Davies recalls the Kripkean criticism to Searle according to which it loses the rigidity required for proper names. For instance: (1) “Aristotle” refers to *x* in the possible world *w* iff *x* is Aristotle in *w*’ is true for every world *w*’ accessible from *w* but (2) “Aristotle” refers to *x* iff *x* is the author of *De Anima* in *w* is false for any possible world *w*’ accessible from *w* in which Aristotle is not the author of *De Anima*.

We face another problem with modal sentences like (3) NP is NP in every possible world. In the case of descriptions, the first “NP” typically expresses a truth if it is inside and a falsehood if it is put aside. But if name are rigid designators this structural ambiguity does not affect the truth-value of the resulting statement in both interpretations. Consequently, (4) Aristotle is Aristotle in every possible world is true whether we say that the person who is Aristotle in any possible world is Aristotle in that world, or is saying that Aristotle is such that he is Aristotle in every possible world. The problem with the variable description theory is that (4) should have the semantic properties of a sentence like “The author of *De Anima* is the author of *De Anima* in every possible world” but in fact it is true for one interpretation and false for the other.

Descriptivism has been criticized also from the perspective of the philosophy of perception. For instance, Kent Bach has argued against Searle that he explains awareness of the object only “under a description” and a description is no substitute for awareness: one is aware of the object as just the “cause” of the experience. According to Bach (2007), we must give up the supposition that the content of perceptual experience determines its condition of satisfaction and he proposes an indexical view of experience. In his view an experience is “token-reflexive” not because it refers to itself but because, being perceptual, its content is context-sensitive. The condition of satisfaction is experience-relative. To experience a certain event or state of affairs is to experience it from a certain point of view. A person experiences it in a space-temporal relation to her point of view. But though she experiences it in an experience-relative way, she does not experience it under an experience-relative description. It is by having the experience at a certain time and place, with a certain orientation that the time and the place of the event or state of affairs experienced can be represented as being when and where it is. Robin Jeshon (2007) specifies the relevance of the spatio-temporal location through visual experience in the process of reference. She maintains therefore that Searle’s intentionalistic account is too poor to specify the truth-conditions of indexicals. The originality of Jeshon’s solution of the problem of particularity is the consideration of a rich body of recent experimental research to demonstrate that subjects are able to

consciously track the successive locations of multiple moving objects under considerations that rule out the possibility of a conceptual encoding of their changing location properties.

I think that we could profit from the distinction between “unconscious visual experience”, which provides awareness of the object, and that actually cannot be satisfied and genuine “perception” that is conscious but not indexical in the sense proposed by Bach and Jeshon. Rather, using a phenomenological jargon, it is a “reflex” of the position of our body in the world. In Searle’s words:

It is fundamental to the conceptual apparatus that we have evolved, and that is above all encoded in our language, that we take our physical situation, the situation of our bodies in space and time and the causal relations between our bodies and the rest of the world as a kind of fulcrum for conceptualizing our relations with the world.

We can therefore give a brief description of the relationship between perception and indexicality. Clearly there are linguistic expressions that are indexicals and indicate relations in which the objects stand to the very utterance of the expression itself. For instance, “yesterday” refers to the day before the utterance or “I” refers to the person making the utterance. Searle isolates four types of lexicalized indexical relations: spatial, temporal, utterance-directional (“I” or “we” and “you”) and discursal (like “latter” or “former”). It is easy to grasp the self-referentiality or self-reflexivity of the indexical “I” or of the visual experience. “I” in virtue of its meaning refers to the person who uttered it and if I see an object in front of me then the visual experience of the object itself figures in the conditions of satisfaction. Namely, one’s visual perception is successful only if the features and presence of the object caused that very visual experience. The main difference between the two sorts of cases is that the perceptual cases are “causally” self-referential and the “indexical” cases are not.

Conclusion

On my view, the term “conceptualizing” in the last quotation does not allude to the use of concepts as Davis would prefer or as Jeshon would rather rule out. In this context, “conceptualizing” means to give a “sense” to our linguistic expressions, a sense that is strictly connected with our perceptual apparatus.

Contrary to Russell, all we can do is to give a description of the sense of our linguistic expression in the process of reference. What is relevant is to extend the Fregean account of reference that distinguishes between proper names and objects. Reference has the function to identify objects and to communicate true facts about

those objects to our interlocutors. This is the reason why Frege maintains that referring expressions have a sense. Referring expressions possess a “meaning”, namely a “descriptive content” that allows the speaker to succeed in referring when he utters it. Successful reference is communication of facts (true propositions) about objects. This move presents a step beyond Frege’s descriptivism because in order to give weight to propositions we must distinguish them from the sense. The sense of a referring expression is given by the descriptive general terms entailed by that expression but the sense is often not sufficient to communicate a proposition. Consequently, it is the utterance of the expression “in a certain context” (namely a pragmatic context) that communicates a proposition. For example, the expression “the dog” has the descriptive content entailed by the simple term “dog”; this very content is not sufficient for a successful reference which also requires the communication or the possibility to communicate a uniquely existential proposition (or fact, e.g. “There is one and only one dog barking on the right of the speaker and it is in the field of vision of both speaker and hearer”). The classical formalization $\exists x Fx$ could be used to mean that “the predicate F has at least one instance” instead of “Some object is F”. The meaning of this option does not establish a correspondence between the original proposition and its revised existential formulation; rather it says that the circumstances in which the one is true are identical with the circumstances in which the other is true. This thesis does not entail that the speech act of reference cannot fail like for instance when there is a discrepancy between the referent and the expression used for referring. But it is worthy to remember Frege’s famous slogan “Nur im Zusammenhang eines Satzes bedeuten die Wörter etwas”.

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