

Reference and Fiction

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I

Blame Russell. It was he who simple, intuitive idea that “The present King of France” denotes the (nonexistent) present King of France. That which does not exist, said Russell, cannot be referred to, either. He therefore paraphrased definite descriptions away. Frege held that “the F” is a name; Russell construed it as a sentence-fragment. His rendition won wide acclaim and many considered it as a paradigm for analytic philosophy. Even Wittgenstein, an acute critic of Russell, hailed it as “undoubtedly right”.¹ Yet Russell is wrong. If the semantic contribution that the term “The present King of France” makes to the meaning of the sentence “The present King of France is bald” is the content, that there is one and only one present King of France, then it has the same content as the sentence “There is one and only one present King of France”. That sentence, however, is false, and so the term “The present King of France” is false, too. But that is surely wrong: the term “the present King of France” is not false.

Quine’s love for desert landscapes made him follow in Russell’s footsteps. To banish nonexistents such as Zeus from his ontology Quine analyzes away all proper names, as Russell did definite descriptions, replacing them by predicates. Quine paraphrases “x is Socrates” as “x socratizes” and offers two interpretations of that predicate: (i) it means “identical to Socrates” or else (ii) it is a list of predicates satisfied by Socrates. But (i) leads to an infinite regress, for the name “Socrates” appears in the paraphrase that is supposed to be free of it. Interpretation (ii) has the insufferable (Leibnizian) result that sentences about Socrates are all either analytic or self-contradictory. If “Socratizes” is synonymous to a given list of descriptions, then Socrates may fail to satisfy that list, that is, it may be that Socrates does not socratize, subverting Quine’s intention. Thus, Quine’s attempt to

1. G. E. M. Anscombe, Ed., *Wittgenstein’s Notebooks 1914-1916* (Blackwell, 1961), p. 127: “Deine Theorie des ‘Descriptions’ ganz zweifellos richtig ist”.

eliminate names is a failure.

The strategy behind Russell's and Quine's techniques is to replace a referential device by a method for locating the object referred to. That strategy, I believe, is essentially wrongheaded. Names and definite descriptions signal an intention to speak of single individuals. As Donnellan saw, a definite description is not a strategy for locating the denoted object: the thing that satisfies the definite description may be other than the one it denotes.² I therefore agree with Kripke that names are not weighted descriptions.³ A name denotes directly, not *via* the fact that the denoted object satisfies the sense of that name. A referential term need not be a device for locating the object referred to. Yet Kripke does not remain true to that insight of his. His own causal theory of reference continues the Russell-Quine strategy, and does not break with it. On that theory, a name serves to locate the object it names *via* a social chain that links them.

The causal theory of reference is, that a token-word *t* refers to an object *n* if *t* is linked, through a chain of successive teaching-events in which students intend their token-words to refer to the object named by their teachers' token-word, to *t**, the original token-word intended by its utterer to name *n*, an object he locates. That theory, combined with Russell's view that some singular terms mean the thing they denote, led to another Russellian tenet, revived by Kaplan in the mid-seventies (and supported by a 1973 argument of Putnam that propositions are not mental entities), that some propositions ("singular propositions") contain the objects that are the meanings of the singular terms that occur in them. These theses underlie New Semantics, which is the current orthodoxy in philosophy.

New Semantics has radical consequences for aesthetics. If naming requires causal interaction between name and named, "Hamlet" cannot name Hamlet. It is William Shakespeare, a real person, who first uttered a token of the fictive name (I call names for

2. Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review* 75: 281-304 (1966).

3. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, 1982.

nonexistents "fictive names") "Hamlet"; thus, it exists. Hamlet, on the other hand, does not exist. So, Shakespeare could not have interacted with, and physically identified, Hamlet in a rite of dubbing. Therefore, "Hamlet" does not denote Hamlet. What does it denote? New semanticists say, "nothing". Even if you grant (as Kripke, Kaplan, Plantinga, Adams, and other actualists, do not) that the domain of the real world is not the total domain (i.e., that some beings, such as Hamlet, which do not exist, *could* exist, hence populate other possible worlds), no fictive name can name a nonexistent, for no word we use can interact with a denizen of another world. Interworld commerce is impossible. Fictive names are, therefore, *empty names*. Some thinkers (G. Evans, K. Walton, F. Adams, G. Fuller, R. Stecker, etc.) draw the further conclusion that a sentence whose grammatical subject is a fictive name expresses no proposition, for that subject has no meaning that can join the meaning of the predicate to make a proposition.

I, too, believe that names refer directly, but, since I reject the causal theory of reference, I do not accept the above theses of the New Semanticists. I say that fictive names denote the things to which they are intended to denote. I wish to preserve the basic principle of semantics that a name, "n", refers to *n*. Thus, "Zeus" refers to Zeus. Zeus is a nonexistent being who is absent from the real world (call it "W0"), but he does occur in other possible worlds. In some of these worlds (the *target worlds* of Greek Mythology; WM, for short) Zeus lives on mount Olympus. The referent of "Olympus" is an interworld thing, too. In W0 and in WM Olympus is a mountain in Greece; in some other worlds it does not occur at all, and in yet others it - that very thing, Olympus - is a hill in France. With Russell, I hold that the meaning of a name is the thing it denotes; the meaning of "Zeus" is, therefore, Zeus. Hamlet, the meaning of "Hamlet", is absent from W0 but is present in other worlds, in some of which (*Hamlet's target worlds*: WH) he satisfies what Shakespeare said about him.

Both Zeus and Hamlet are absent from the real world, so "Zeus" and "Hamlet" have the same denotation in W0, i.e., none. But they are not synonymous: synonymous words have the same denotation in *all* worlds, but there are worlds where Zeus occurs and

Hamlet does not occur, and *vice versa*. Thus, the senses of the words "Zeus" and "Hamlet" are distinct, for in some worlds their denotations differ. The proposition expressed by the sentence "Zeus lives on Olympus" contains the referents of the singular terms in that sentence, whether existent (Olympus) or nonexistent (Zeus). Olympus occurs in W_0 and so it exists, Zeus does not occur in W_0 and so he does not exist, but both are things in exactly the same sense.

The causal theory of reference insists that to name an object, a word must causally interact with it. A fictive name does not causally interact with its putative referent, so the only way it can denote is through its sense. However, Kripke⁴ and Kaplan⁵ showed that no description could apply to one possible object only. If fictive names are telescoped descriptions, they are satisfied by distinct beings in distinct possible worlds. I think that argument is decisive, but it does not show that fictive names fail to refer; it shows that fictive names need no mediating senses in order to refer. Like all names, they refer directly. One can show that fictive names cannot refer only by assuming some version (Searle's or Kripke's) of the thesis that a referring device must provide a method of locating the object it names. But this thesis, I think, is wrong.

What is direct reference? Perception is one way of being in direct epistemic contact with an object; so, while aware of n , we may stipulate that t be its name. Intending an object is another way: to intend an object is to be in direct epistemic contact with it. Some philosophers allege that this relation of directly intending an object is "magical"⁶, but then the causal theory of reference is "magical" too, for it requires the namer to single out n , that is, pick out n directly, without using any other device, and name it. Kripke, too, makes

4. *Ibid.* Addenda, pp. 156-8.

5. David Kaplan, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice", in Jaakko Hintikka, Julius Moravcsik, Patrick Suppes, eds., *Approaches to Natural language*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1973, pp. 490-518.

6. That (derogative) term was coined by Hilary Putnam in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981). See pp. 3-5, 16, 51.

intention necessary for referential success⁷; he requires that the original namer intends n in the dubbing rite, and then intend his token "n" to denote it. Intending n in the rite of dubbing is a precondition of naming it. Even if you see n you see innumerable other objects at the same time; so, to single out n as your candidate for naming, you must intend it. Intending is the only direct object-singling device; hence, it is necessary for reference. But then the causal story cannot be explicative of reference.

Some thinkers (e.g., Evans, Fodor, Devitt, and Wettstein⁸) who refuse to accept intending as direct mental reference, identify reference with some causal natural relation K . To verify that reductive thesis we need to find pairs $\langle x, y \rangle$ such x refers to y and check whether $K(x, y)$. We can do it, however, only if we already know that x refers to y , independently of whether $K(x, y)$. How do we know that? Perhaps, as we know qualia: Reference is the way the K relation appears to us, as Red is the way a certain wavelength appears to us and Hot is the way molecular energy appears to us. But that gambit has notorious difficulties, for it does not explain the provenance of the qualia, and denying their reality is highly counterintuitive (indeed, I think, absurd). Anyway, reference is not a quale. Furthermore, what can K be? Due to the immensely varied nature of the signs we use and the objects they denote, no one *physical* relation exists between all signs and their denotata. Due to the radically different uses to which signs are put, there is no single *social-functional* relation between them and their objects, either. As Wittgenstein showed, the role

7. In *Naming and Necessity* and in "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", French, Uehling and Wettstein, eds., *Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, pp. 6-27.

8. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford university Press, 1982, pp. 64-79; Jerry Fodor, *A Theory of Content*, MIT press, 1980; Michael Devitt, *Designation*, Columbia University Press, 1981; Howard Wettstein, "Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake?", *Journal of Philosophy* 83:185-209 (1986).

that numerals play in our language is very different than the role of color-words; we do not use a road's name in the way we use a dog's name; etc. Only intending a sign to refer to an object is common to all acts of dubbing, but intending is neither a physical nor a social-functional relation.

In order to refer to an object, one needs to circumscribe it. Suppose I say (out loud or in my mind) "I name thee 'Pat'" and indicate (mentally or by ostensive gesture) something. How far does the object I named "Pat" extend in space, time, and possibility space? Of course, I do not need (nor am I able) to circumscribe it fully, yet some minimal circumscribing is necessary. That is usually achieved by the use of a sortal. If I stick out a finger and say (or think) "I name *this cat* 'Pat'", then the sortal "cat" circumscribes, to some extent, the item I have referred to: it is the first cat on the straight line from my outstretched finger. Saying that "Pat" names *a cat* I (roughly) specify what items (in space, time, and possibility space) are *the same object as Pat*.

Sortals do not replace direct reference; on the contrary, they presuppose it. The object that "Pat" denotes is circumscribed by the sortal "cat"; if Pat is that *cat*, then we (roughly) know which items in space, time, and possibility-space are Pat, and which are not Pat. But how does one circumscribe what is denoted by "cat"? Let our teacher say: "I name *this thing* 'cat'". Does that mean that "cat" denote the first *thing* on the straight line that extends his finger? No. "Cat" does not name motes of dust, or the disjunctive entity *either a cat or Julius Caesar*. A definition of "cat" using other sortals (e.g., "that animal is a cat") merely postpones the question, for how do you define "animal"? We must use an ostensive definition, but how can it single out one sort only? I answer that we can learn the use of some sortal terms by ostensive definitions because some sorts are more salient for us than others; for instance, green things are more salient for us than grue things. We tend to see things *as cats*, i.e., as falling under the sortal "cat". Thus, salience is necessary for successful reference. An object is salient if we tend to intend it, i.e., attend to it. That relation is not causal. Any thing causally interacts with infinitely many other things; "cat" denotes cats not because cats causally interact with "cat" but because cats are salient to the

human mind, and so we tend to intend them and attend to them rather than to the infinitely many Goodmanian grue-some critters that we could have named, but did not directly.

The point, that in order to refer to n we need to *see n as an F*, is due to Wittgenstein.⁹ We cannot name *that*, whatever it may be, “ n ”, for the term “that” does not circumscribe its purported denotatum at all; n can be conceived of as an inter-index object only if it is conceived of as an F. A diarist intends to refer when he puts the sign t in his diary each time he thinks he encounters n , but if he does not conceive of n under any sortal, that intention fails.¹⁰ Many interpreters attributed that failure to n being a mental object, but I think that is not what Wittgenstein said. The sign t fails to denote because the diarist introduced it by a bare ostensive definition, using no sortal. An object n occurs at many indices (times, places, possible worlds); some items are, and some are not, occurrences of n . Complete circumscription of n is not needed, but unless we conceive of n as an F, no property G (other than Being Non- n) is such that if $G(x)$ then x is not an occurrence of n . The use of a sortal is therefore necessary in order for n to be conceived of as a recurrent object.¹¹

An intention to refer may fail for other reasons, too. If I wish to name what I think is a man I met twice, but in fact these were two different men, my intention to refer fails, for then my term “that man” fails to denote anything. I could coin a name that refers to the pair of people, but that was not my intention. I intended to use my term to refer to something that falls under the sortal “man”, but since that intention cannot be carried out, my attempted referring fails.

9. See my “Meaning, The Experience of Meaning and the Meaning-blind in Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy”, *The Monist* 78:479-95 (1995).

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, sec. 258-264.

11. For a detailed account see my *Types: Essays in Metaphysics*, E. J. Brill, Leiden & New York, 1992, chapters 1-3.

II

Brentano was right: an intended object need not be real. To refer to an object, I said, one must be linguistically competent enough to intend that object under some sortal *F*, but that sortal need have no instances in reality. Linguistic competence has to do with possible situations, not with actual ones. I added that (Frege to the contrary) the linguistic competence required is fairly minimal and does not require that, for *all* possible situations, the sortal *F* determines whether a given object *x* does or does not fall under it. Consider the sortal "cat": the rules on cat-identity do not apply to outlandish eventualities. For example, they do not say how many transplants, and of what kind, a cat may have before we cease to consider it a cat, or how many transplants may take place before we say that their result is not the same cat we have started with but another cat, instead. Our sortals are silent on such outré questions, as they must be: the language, like the law, of finite beings cannot be too specific¹². That in some cases our identity criteria fail does not mean that our sortals specify no identity criteria. In some cases (which philosophers love to dream up) there is no fact of the matter as to the object's identity, but in other cases the answer is clear, and that is all we need.

12. For a detailed discussion of this issue see my "Schematic Objects and Relative Identity", *Nous* 16:295-305 (1982), and "Vague Objects", *Nous* 25:323-40 (1991).

In that respect existents and nonexistents are in the same boat. Surely, Macbeth sees *the same* (unreal) *dagger* throughout Act II, scene i of *Macbeth*? Those who doubt that will also doubt the identity of a given real dagger through time. Hannah Green¹³ tells us that she identified, and distinguished between, the various unreal beings (Anterrabae, Furi, Lactamaeon, etc.) that spoke to her in her reveries; she recognized them as readily as we recognize our friends. Although Green was their only observer, the individuation criteria she used for them are not essentially private. They are not perfect (neither are your criteria for identifying your friends), yet for her needs they were adequate (as ours are for our needs). She could name and reidentify with great confidence each of the nonexistent creatures of Yr she knew. Could Green make a mistake and believe Anterrabae is speaking to her when in fact he is not? Yes indeed; suppose that a certain brain state accompanies appearances of Anterrabae; if that brain state does not occur we have a right to believe that Green has, on that occasion, misidentified the spirit. Or suppose that (as in Wim Wenders' movie *A Journey to the End of the World*) we could take pictures of dreams and then scrutinize them; on careful examination we may conclude that the spirit who introduced himself as Anterrabae was, in fact, Furi. Our criteria for reidentifying individuals, existent or not, are partial, but that does not mean there are none.

On the classical model, the mind is directly aware of its objects. No causal interaction between the mind and its objects is postulated, and thus objects present to mind need not be real, for they need not causally interact with it. Attempts of ancient scientists and modern philosophers to replace that model by a causal one ("an image enters the eye, the retina reverses it, it travels along the nerves to the brain, where it is stored . . .") are scientifically worthless. Worse, it is false that all the objects we are aware of are real objects

13. Hannah Green, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Pan Books, London, 1967.

with which we interact: often, we are visually aware of things unreal. To dream, imagine, and hallucinate is to be visually aware of unreal objects. All the objects we see are collages of bits that never coexisted, for, due to the finite speed of light, the parts of our visual field existed at different times. All the objects we see are collages of elements from different times arranged in new patterns of creative composition. A composer who thinks up a new piece is aware of a thing that does not (yet) exist. To compose is to countenance a nonexistent: the composer is directly aware of a nonexistent she later brings into existence by playing *it*, say, on the piano.

The real or unreal objects we intend are directly present to us. On the only working model of the mind we have, we are directly aware of (real or unreal) objects. An object present to mind need not be represented by a mental sign. If intended objects must be so represented, then, to be aware of the sign, one would have to represent it by another sign, and so on and so forth *ad infinitum*. To intend Pat you need not mentally represent her by a mental picture (call it "Sue") because then you have to represent Sue by another mental sign, etc. No: you may call Pat herself to mind, be aware of her, and name her directly. However, signs may be coined: having named Pat you may call her name to mind; it is easier to invoke "Pat" than to invoke Pat. Naming enables you to think of Pat without being aware of her. You think about her by invoking her name, instead of invoking her.

III

So far, I discussed one way of naming: you dub an object (existent or not) of which you are aware. But you can also name an object of which you are not aware. If you decree that *t* is to denote an object of kind F, then an object of kind F has thereby been denoted. Logicians call this way of naming "Existential Instantiation" (EI). I believe EI is a perfectly legitimate way to refer to objects. You cannot locate the object that *t* names, but if you intended *t* to name an object specifying a possible sortal it falls under, you have successfully referred by *t* to a possible object *n*. From now on, everyone may use *t* to refer to

n. How do we know that *t* named a genuine object (not the alleged abstract entity *arbitrary individual*¹⁴)? We stipulate it. Those who deny that EI is a good way of naming ask, in virtue of what is one object rather than another named by *t*. I reply: in virtue of nothing. An arbitrary choice can be made, so we may stipulate that it was made. The said philosophers want a link that ties *t* to its denotatum, *n*, but I deny that such a link is needed for reference. If you must have a story on what links *t* to its denotatum, say this: *t* denotes that object which the almighty chose to assign to it. If you do not like that story, say, instead, that since an assignment may be carried out, it is possible that it has been carried out. We deal with possibilities, so a possible assignment is all we need.

EI can be used to name *n* only if certain conditions are met. First, the namer should be aware of the institution of naming and intend *t* to be a name. Second, the namer should conceive of the object named under some sortal *F*. Third, *F*-things should be possible: you cannot name a square circle, for no world hosts such things. Fourth, it must be left open at which world does *n* satisfy the condition *F*. You cannot stipulate that *n* is in *W_i*, for that specific world may have no *F*-things in it (that is the deep reason why the Ontological Argument for the existence of God fails¹⁵). Fifth, *n* must not be a known object, for the same reason that, in logic, a name introduced by EI must be new to the context. Within these limits, all intentions to refer by EI succeed. Thus, to use EI is to coin a term, *t*, conceived of as a device for singular reference, specify a condition *F* that the object referred to satisfies in some world, and leave it open which, of all those that satisfy *F* in some world or other, it is. Once an author refers by *t* anyone can refer to that very entity that the author referred to, i.e., to *n*, whether by using *t* or by coining a new name for its denotatum.

When we name by EI we have no specific object in mind, only a name *t* and a condition *F*. We care not which one of the objects that satisfy *F* is so named; but one is. Here I part ways with Robert Howell, to whom I am otherwise greatly indebted. Howell

14. Proposed by Kit Fine, in his *Reasoning with Arbitrary Objects*, Blackwell, 1985.

15. See my *Real Beauty*, Penn State Press 1997, pp. 174-5.

believes that "Hamlet" names Hamlet, but since he accepts the causal theory of reference, he argues that Shakespeare's seeing Hamlet in his mind's eye counts as his having causally interacted with Hamlet.¹⁶ But that is wrong: nonexistents cannot cause real events. Further, although Shakespeare could have seen Hamlet,¹⁷ that is not necessary. Shakespeare may have referred to Hamlet simply by intending "Hamlet" to denote an unreal individual who, in some world, satisfies such-and-such a description. The plot of *Hamlet* is a consistent story, and so Shakespeare's intention did not fail; he managed to refer to Hamlet by "Hamlet" just as he managed to refer to his real son by the name "Hamnet".

Some philosophers hold that the two cases are dissimilar. Shakespeare held Hamnet in his arms and could locate him again, but he had no physical contact with Hamlet and could not locate him. I admit that, but holding an object, in one's arms or mind, though it facilitates naming, is not necessary for it. Naming only requires the namer to activate the naming convention, and that Shakespeare did for Hamlet as well as for Hamnet. "Hamnet" names a person one could locate in the real world (albeit not in other worlds), "Hamlet" names a person we cannot locate in any world. For example, in a world where Hamlet is a Pakistani pauper, not a Danish prince, we may fail to identify him; in a world where another fellow, not Hamlet, satisfies the *Hamlet* description we may mistake him for Hamlet. But so what? Naming is not a sure-fire method for boy scouts to locate a missing person, wherever

16. R. Howell, "Fictional Objects, How they Are and How the Aren't", *Poetics* 8:129-77 (1979).

17. On seeing nonexistents see my "Look, This is Zeus!" in M. Krausz and R. Shusterman, eds., *Interpretation, Relativism and the Metaphysics of Culture*, Humanity Books, Amherst N.Y., 1999, pp. 310-33.

he may hide (“just follow the causal chain, boys!”). The term t is a rigid designator (n is the same individual in all possible worlds), but it need not serve as a tool for detectives who search to locate n in some world. Do not confuse identity with identification: identity is a philosophical issue; identification is better left to the police.

Possible objects are logically stipulated, not discovered. A failure to realize that results in ontological idolatry, confusing possible worlds with the many real worlds of Hugh Everett and David Deutsch. David Lewis, who thinks that all possible worlds are equally real, manifests that idolatry. Even philosophers who (like Adams and Plantinga) are aware of the difference between semantics and astronomy, and say that merely possible worlds do not exist, get confused when it comes to fictional beings. Here is how possible world semantics is *not* to be used. I say: “you could live in Paris”. In the language of possible worlds it becomes “There is a world w where you live in Paris”. Now, how do I know that there is such a world? Did I scout all worlds, persistently looking for one where you live in Paris, until I found it? And how did I recognize you there? To know that a given world satisfies the said description I need to find, in that world, a person who lives in Paris, and verify that he is you. So, how did I establish that the Parisian I found in that world is you, yourself? How do I know he is not a mere look-alike? Most amazing of all, how did I accomplish all these Herculean tasks without leaving town?

As noted by Kripke, that is a bad confusion¹⁸. I did not *identify* a world where a person, whom I *identified* as you, lives in Paris. The semantic model hosts individuals that recur in many worlds; that you, a real being, also occur in some unreal worlds is *stipulated*, not discovered. So is the fact that in some unreal world you live in Paris. I know it to be true because I know that you could live in Paris, not because I discover a world where a

18. Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity", in M. K. Munitz, ed., *Identity and Individuation*, New York university Press, 1971, pp. 135-165. "Those I am opposing would argue, 'Yes, but how do you find out, if the man you are talking about is in fact Nixon?' It would indeed be very hard to find out, if you were looking at the whole situation through a telescope, but that is not what we are doing here . . . And there seems to be no less objection to *stipulating* that we are speaking of certain *people* than there can be objection to stipulating that we are speaking of certain *qualities*." (p. 148)

person whom I discover is living in Paris is also discovered to be you. I can make that stipulation because the possible worlds model allows it, and it allows it since it is constructed precisely for that purpose. We accept that model because it illustrates our notion of possibility. To wonder at the possibility of stipulations that the model was constructed in order to facilitate is the height of ontological naïveté.

Those who deny reference to fictive names ask: "How do you know whether the possible being x in W_i is Hamlet or another guy?" I reply that of course I do not know that, but since I am not about to take a trip to W_i and meet x any time soon, my ignorance about his true location does not worry me much. The possible world model semantically interprets fiction, it does not turn it into a series of guidebooks for interworld travelers. We adopt that model because it systematizes semantics and preserves our pre-theoretical intuitions about reference. Thus, we conceive of a domain that includes all the beings that there could be. That domain includes all those beings that God could have created, that is, all those things whose existence is not precluded by logic. Hamlet satisfies that condition: God could have created him. Therefore, he resides in possible worlds, in some of which he is as Shakespeare (who referred to him) described him. The naive ontologist, who asks how our term "Hamlet" can cross the interworld chasm and attach itself to a being (Hamlet) in another world, mistakes semantics for Star Trek. To ask this is like asking me, when I talk about what I can do, how have I reached out across the interworld chasm, inspected another possible world, found myself there and discovered what I do there. This is silly: to know what is going on in other possible worlds *is* simply to know what is possible.

IV

Fictional things are things; our inability to locate them does not jeopardize their thinghood. There is a similarity between the attempt to reduce thinghood to locatability, and the attempt to reduce truth to assertion conditions. Both these attempts confuse identity with identification. Tarski's definition of truth,

T. True ("p") \leftrightarrow p

does not say how to verify "p". It is not a guide to the truth. It only says that *if* p then "p" is true and *if* not p then "p" is not true. To expect T to help us find which sentences are true is a howler. Similarly, the basic rule of reference,

D. Denotes ("n", x) \leftrightarrow (x=n)

does not say how to find the denotatum of "n". D only says that *if* x=n then "n" denotes it, just as T only says that *if* p then "p" is true. T does not locate the truth-maker of "p" as D does not locate the reference of "n". Intuitionist semantics is, then, a twin to the causal theory of reference: the first attempts to find whether p by investigating the history of "p", the second attempts to find out which thing is n by investigating the history of "n".

According to the assertability theory of truth, the history of "p" is all you need in order to tell whether p: if "p" is assertable then p, if "p" is not assertable then not p. I demur. If "p" is assertable iff it is true, assertability is redundant. If "p" is assertable for any other reason (say, if "p" is polite, or popular, or politically correct, or firmly believed) its assertability is irrelevant to its truth. In the same way, according to the causal theory of reference, the history of "n" is all you need in order to identify n: trace "n" down the right causal chain to its first ancestor and you find n, the object dubbed by that ancestor. Again, I demur. If, on the causal theory, "n" dubs n iff "n" is intended (when competence conditions are satisfied) to refer to n, then the theory is redundant. If on that theory some other condition, say, a certain causal relation holding between "n" and n, is sufficient for "n" dubbing n, then the theory is false, for, as argued above, reference cannot be a certain natural causal relation.

Let me ask you a question: How many subsets are there in the set {Alpha, Beta, Gamma}? The answer ("8") is easy, so let me ask you another question: Did my first question make sense? "Of course," you say, "How else could I answer it?" But a causal theorist cannot say that. I never interacted with the objects Alpha, Beta, and Gamma and I cannot identify them in any world; I can neither lead you to them nor will I recognize them if I came across them. A causal theorist must, therefore, say that my words "Alpha, Beta,

"Gamma" name nothing, and since they are not definite descriptions they have no sense, either. How, then, did you understand me? Some philosophers reply that although I expressed no proposition, I did express an incomplete thought, for the other terms in my question are meaningful. But that cannot be right: replace the alleged meaningless part of my question by "blabla" and you get this rubbish: "How many subsets are there in the set blabla?" If that is all you could glean from my question, your ability to answer it is astonishing.

Another reply of causal theorists is that, though my words "Alpha", "Beta" and "Gamma" denote nothing (no interaction, no denotation), they are not rubbish, because they abbreviate some general propositions of set theory that contain no names. Adams and Stecker, who think that the term "Vulcan," purporting to denote a nonexistent planet, is meaningless, use this ploy to explain our (in their opinion, erroneous) intuition that "Vulcan does not exist" is true: "Vulcan does not exist," they say, is only shorthand for a negation of the set of propositions of the Vulcan lore, when that lore "includes all the descriptions that do not include the name 'Vulcan' but introduce the term."¹⁹ But if a sentence is shorthand for a group of others, it means whatever they mean. "TV", for example, is shorthand for "television", so these terms are synonymous. Thus, if "Vulcan does not exist" and "Alpha are included in {Alpha, Beta}" are shorthand for other, general, sentences, then "Vulcan does not exist" expresses some general statements of astronomy and "Alpha are included in {Alpha, Beta}" expresses some general statements of set-theory. Yet that is explicitly denied by Adams and Stecker, who write: "the information that nothing satisfies these descriptions cannot be the meaning of the sentence 'Vulcan does not exist' because that would commit one to a description theory of the meaning of names. As direct reference theorists, we have been convinced of the falsity of that theory."²⁰ I concur. But then "Vulcan does not exist" abbreviates no astronomical lore: it (truly) says of the possible planet Vulcan that it does not

19. F. Adams and R. Stecker, "Vacuous Singular Terms", *Mind and Language* 9:394, 1994.

20. *Ibid.*

exist; likewise "Alpha \in {Alpha, Beta}" does not express a general statement of set theory, but says of the possible thing Alpha that it is a member of the set that includes it and the possible thing Beta.

Counterattacking, actualists question the objecthood of Vulcan and of Alpha. A real planet, they say, is ontologically determinate; it has a specific climate, history, chemistry, and either does, or else does not, sustain life. Vulcan, however, is ontologically incomplete²¹ for only weight and orbit were attributed to it. What are its climate, landscape, history, and chemistry? Does it support life? Some theorists use this argument to question the very thinghood of fictional beings. If fictional beings have only those properties attributed to them in the text then they cannot have those properties either. *Hamlet* does not say whether Hamlet was tall. He is said to be a man, but every man is either tall or not tall; thus, if Hamlet is neither tall nor not tall, he is not a man. But if Hamlet has contradictory properties (being and not being a man) he lacks not only existence, but possibility, that is, thinghood, as well.

I therefore think that Vulcan, Hamlet and Alpha are no less ontologically complete than Earth, Shakespeare and the White House. Is Hamlet tall? In some worlds he is, in others he is not. Different legitimate interpretations of *Hamlet* portray different target-worlds of *Hamlet* wherein Hamlet has different properties. Ditto for Vulcan: Leverriere postulated its weight and orbit, but not whether there is life on it. Thus, in some worlds

21. Cf. Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, Yale University Press, 1980, pp. 175-202. In this paper I do not discuss Meinongian philosophers like Parsons (or Edward Zalta, *Abstract Objects*, Reidel, 1983; William Rapaport, *A Meinongian Theories and Russellian Paradox*, *Nous* 12:153-180, 1978, Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*; Cambridge University Press 1999, etc.), who hold that fictive names denote abstract objects of various kinds, for they do not deal with the problem resulting from the causal theory of reference. At any rate, their view is absurd. On Parsons's view Hamlet may both be and not be tall (*op. Cit.*, 183-4). On Zalta's view, Hamlet cannot be tall at all, only encode fatness@ (whatever that is; *op. Cit.* 13 ff.). Meinongians hold that Hamlet has only those properties attributed to him in *Hamlet*, so he was not born on any particular day of the week and he does not have any specific height. Such odd traits make Hamlet nonhuman, for human beings are born on a certain date and have a certain height. Would the people of Denmark love their prince so well (IV, vii, 16-25) had Parsons, Zalta, and Thomasson revealed the awful secret, that Hamlet is not a human being at all, not even a thing of this world, but an abstract object? Could Ophelia love a set-theoretical construct? I wonder.

Vulcan has life, in others it has no life. In worlds that are not Leverriere-target-worlds, Vulcan has other orbits and weights, too. The same holds for Alpha: its properties vary from world to world, but in each world where it occurs, it is an ordinary object, as ontologically complete as they are.

What if a novel *N* attributes both *F* and not-*F* to *n*? Such description is satisfied in no possible world. *N* has no target worlds, for no world can satisfy it. That, however, is as it should be, for *N* is intended to be unsatisfiable. *N* is not meaningless, however, since it has two maximal segments, one that includes all of *N* except the not-*F**n* passages and another that includes all of *N* except the *F**n* passages, and each such segment has target worlds wherein it is satisfied²². The heroic efforts of Parsons and others to have *N* satisfied after all are misguided, for unsatisfiability is essential to many artworks. Artworks that aspire to be absurd *may* succeed in being so! Take, e.g., Joyce's *Finnigan's Wake*, which contains ungrammatical sentences that, nevertheless, have a shade of a recognizable meaning. Surely no world can satisfy all of *Finnigan's Wake* or all of e.e. cummings' famous poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" or millions of similar poems and texts of modern fiction. Texts that cannot be fully satisfied in any world have satisfiable segments; the set of sets of worlds that satisfy those segments constitute the interpretation of the work in question.

Take the Cummings line quoted above. Its segments are "one lived in a pretty town", "how pretty is [that] town", "one lived in a pretty town", and several (not many) others. Each one of these segments is satisfied in some set of worlds. Each set is contentwise related to the other sets in the set of sets that constitutes the interpretation of the

22. A similar view is taken by Nicholas Wolterstorff in his *Works and Worlds of Art*, Oxford University Press 1980, pp 118-9.

text as a whole. The degree to which the text is meaningful depends on the number of these sets and on their interrelations; the less such sets, and the more interrelated they are, the more comprehensible the given text is.

V

Can we discover that nonexistent things are identical, say, as the morning star and the evening star were discovered to be one? Can what we thought are different possibilities be one? Yes indeed. Quine asks whether the possible fat man in the door is identical with the possible bald man at the door²³. Parsons, who construes "the fat man at the door" *a la* Russell, as denoting whoever satisfies the description "is the only possible fat man at the door", finds the question meaningless, for many possible individuals satisfy that description²⁴. I, on the other hand, find Quine's question perfectly cogent, and it is he, Quine, who could best answer it, for it is he who intended the said possible individuals. Did he intend to refer to two distinct individuals, or to a single individual that, in the target world of his article "On What There Is" is both fat and bald? Alas, Quine is no longer with us, so we shall never know.

Western readers of Russian novels often discover that what they thought are three different people are really one person, referred to by name and patronymic, then by nickname, and then by family name. Again, I once saw a production of *Hamlet* where prince Hamlet speaks the words of the Ghost. That interpretation presented a world where Hamlet *filis* and the ghost of Hamlet *père* are one. Call that world "WG". The director who interpreted *Hamlet* in that way may think he made an important discovery. Is young Hamlet identical with his father's ghost in some worlds in WH? I think not. Thus, to reject the said interpretation of *Hamlet*, as I do, is to hold that WG is not one of *Hamlet's* target worlds, WH. Another interpretation of *Hamlet* I reject is Olivier's, which shows Hamlet as a

23. In *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper, New York, 1953, p. 4.

24. Terence Parsons, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-8.

comely youth; in every world in WH, I insist, Hamlet is a thirty-year-old fat man²⁵. So I claim that WL, the world Laurence Olivier presents, is not in WH. Whether I am right is an empirical question that literary scholarship can decide.

Identity claims about real things have the same structure. In my view,²⁶ Identity is contingent. If I am right, then the debate between the Babylonian astronomer who identifies the morning star with the evening star, and his detractors, runs as follows. The astronomer admits that in some worlds Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct, but claims that the real world is not one of them. My above claims, denying that WG is a member of WH and that WL is a member of WH, have that logical form, too. They can be empirically researched, too, albeit not by checking the objects they refer to.

25. See *Hamlet*, Act V, scene i, lines 145-167; Act V, scene ii, line 288.

26. E.g., in my book *Types*, note 2 above.

Here is an argument I used many years ago²⁷. Before 1872 scholars debated whether Troy existed. Let Professor Affirmo say "Troy exists" and Dr. Nego yell back "No, it does not exist". Surely they disagree? Yet the Causal theory of reference must deny it. According to that theory Affirmo refers to Troy, for Troy did exist and his token is causally linked to it in the right way. Nego, on the other side, intends his token "Troy" to refer to nothing at all; he wishes to use it as a fictive name that has no reference,²⁸ hence (on the said theory) he does not intend it to refer to that real object with which the original token of "Troy" interacted in a dubbing-rite. The causal theory will say that Affirmo's token of "Troy" means Troy and Nego's token means nothing. Yet if Nego and Affirmo do not speak of the same thing, they do not disagree. That is outrageous. On my view both Affirmo and Nego refer to Troy, a great Hellenic city in Asia Minor that in all *The Iliad's* target-worlds is destroyed by the Achaeans under Agamemnon. Both Affirmo and Nego intend to refer to it, and since they both satisfy the competence conditions for referring, they do. What these scholars disagree on is whether Troy, which both refer to, occurs in W0 or not.

Let me end with a theological implication of my view. Moslems, Christians, and Jews say they all believe in the same God, though they disagree on what He is like and what He wants us to do. Now, most monotheists think that "God" was not coined in a dubbing-rite during which He causally interacted with His name. Causal theorists of reference must therefore deny that "God" is a name; instead, they must say that it is a general term or a definite description. Atheistic causal theorists will also reach that conclusion: since God does not exist, "God" is not a name but a telescoped definite description. Notoriously, however, the descriptions that Jews, Christians and Moslems give of God are quite different. Therefore, causal theorists must deny that by "God" all monotheists refer to the same being, since, on pain of contradiction, no being can satisfy conflicting descriptions. It follows that

27. See Edward Erwin, Lowell Kleiman and Eddy Zemach, "The Historical Theory of Reference", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 54:50-57, 1976.

28. Cf. Keith Donnellan, "Speaking of Nothing", *Philosophical Review* 83:3-31 (1974).

Moslems have no choice but to deny that Christians and Jews believe in God, Christians have to say that Moslem and Jews are idolaters, and Jews must say that about the others. That bewildering result may have grave repercussions. Luckily, on my view there is no problem. Whether you are a theist or an atheist, you may say that all monotheists believe in God, because they all intend to refer to *Him*, and since they satisfy the competence criteria (a matter of mastering language) that intention succeeds. Ecumenism is saved.

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