

Frege and Russell on Names and Descriptions

Naïve theories

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Talk outline

The Philosophy of Language

The Name Theory

The Idea Theory

Conclusion

The Philosophy of Language

- ▶ This is a course in the philosophy of language.
- ▶ We will be considering the phenomenon of *naming* that is central to language.
- ▶ In particular, we will look at the works of Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970).
- ▶ In so doing, we will be thinking about issues at the birth of analytic philosophy.
- ▶ I recommend Michael Potter's 'The Birth of Analytic Philosophy' as a good overview.

This course

► Our plan is as follows:

- Week 1 Problems in the philosophy of language. We will look at the problems that Frege and Russell were tackling.
- Week 2 Frege. We will look at one solution to these problems involving the sense/ reference distinction.
- Week 3 Russell. We will look at another solution to these problems involving the theory of descriptions.
- Week 4 Assessment. We will consider some classic objections to these theories and consider who was more successful.

Language

- ▶ Language is crucial to our living the sorts of lives we do.
- ▶ Language plausibly distinguishes us from non-human animals.
- ▶ Language seems to involve a kind of communicative miracle: just by making noises, I can bring you to have certain beliefs.
- ▶ I can tell you about people you may never have heard of, perhaps Gottlob Frege, and you understand them.
- ▶ I might tell you that Gottlob Frege invented modern logic, and you'll infer that *someone* invented modern logic.
- ▶ So not only have you *understood* the noises I've made but you've started to manipulate them yourself.

Language

- ▶ Philosophers of language study these remarkable features of language. They ask questions like:
 - Semantic** How do words mean what they do?
 - Epistemology** How can we come to *known* the meaning of an expression?
 - Communication** How do we succeed in conveying information with language?
 - Mind** What is the connection between language and mind?
 - Metaphysics** What can language teach us about the world?
- ▶ The dream of the philosophy of language is to answer these questions and explain how the concepts involved fit together.

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The Name Theory

- ▶ Let's start with the semantic question: how do words mean what they do?
- ▶ Here's a naïve first thought: words mean what they *name*, *denote* or *refer to*.
- ▶ So 'Kanye' means Kanye, 'Chicago' means Chicago and 'A Star is Born' means *A Star is Born*.
- ▶ No one has ever been fully committed to this theory.
- ▶ Bertrand Russell came close in *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903).

The Name Theory

- ▶ This seems like a plausible story about the semantic behaviour of *proper names*.
- ▶ The thought is that, in general, proper names refer to things in the world, and that's that.
- ▶ So, when I tell you that 'Kanye' refers to Kanye, I have told you all there is to know about the meaning of the name 'Kanye'.

The Name Theory

- ▶ The Name Theory starts here and tries to generalise to cover all meaningful expressions.
- ▶ Meaningful expressions refer to things in the world.
- ▶ So, when I tell you what an expression refers to, I have told you all there is to know about the meaning of that expression.
- ▶ Consider the sentence 'Kanye will be president'. We can break this down into the name 'Kanye' and the predicate 'will be president'.
- ▶ The predicate 'will be president' refers to things that will be president, or the property *will be president*, which all future presidents have.

In favour of the Name Theory

- ▶ The theory has a great deal of intuitive appeal.
- ▶ After all, a major purpose of language is to say things about the world.
- ▶ This thought is captured by the Name Theory. When I say 'Kanye will be president', I tell you something about the world.
- ▶ But the Name Theory has many shortcomings.

Informative identity

- ▶ One thing can have many names.
- ▶ Kanye West, for example, may be called 'Kanye West', 'Yeezus' or, respecting his latest wishes, 'Ye'.
- ▶ Consider the following sentences:
 - (1) Kanye West = Ye
 - (2) Kanye West = Kanye West
- ▶ Here, '=' expresses *strict* or *numerical* identity. This is the sense of *being the very same thing*. Every object is numerically identical with itself and with nothing else.

Informative identity

- ▶ Consider:
 - (1) Kanye West = Ye
 - (2) Kanye West = Kanye West
- ▶ Perhaps you didn't know that Kanye now wants to be called 'Ye'.
- ▶ In that case, when I told you (1), you learnt something.
- ▶ But you couldn't possibly learn anything from (2): it is trivial that everything is identical to itself.
- ▶ And yet 'Kanye West' and 'Ye' refer to *the very same person*.
- ▶ So, from the perspective of the Name Theory, there can be no difference here.

An example not about rappers

- ▶ In the ancient world, astronomers called the brightest star in the evening sky 'Hesperus' and the brightest star in the morning sky 'Phosphorus'.
- ▶ Ancient Babylonian astronomers discovered that Hesperus and Phosphorus were in fact the very same star.
- ▶ (Today, we know that Hesperus and Phosphorus aren't stars at all but the planet Venus.)
- ▶ Consider:
 - (1) Hesperus = Phosphorus
 - (2) Hesperus = Hesperus
- ▶ When the Babylonians discovered the truth of (1), it seems they learnt something.
- ▶ But the Name Theory again cannot accommodate this.
- ▶ If 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' co-refer, then (1) and (2) mean the same thing.

Empty Names

- ▶ In the 19th Century, French mathematician Urbain Le Verrier observed that Mercury wasn't orbiting the Sun as Newton's theory of gravity said it should.
- ▶ He conjectured that there was a planet between the Sun and Mercury that disturbed Mercury's orbit. He called it 'Vulcan'.
- ▶ We now know that Vulcan does not exist.
- ▶ The name 'Vulcan' therefore does not refer to anything. It is *empty, non-denoting or referent-less*.

Empty Names

- ▶ According to the Name Theory, meaning is reference, so a name with no referent is meaningless.
- ▶ But do we really want to call 'Vulcan' *meaningless*.
- ▶ Lots of clever astronomers said things like 'Vulcan will be passing between us and the Sun tomorrow'.
- ▶ And today, lots of clever astronomers might say 'Vulcan does not exist'.
- ▶ Do we really want to dismiss these as *nonsensical*?
- ▶ Something like 'lecture Tuesday on language philosophy the of is' looks like nonsense but the astronomical examples at least look grammatical.

Empty Names

- ▶ Empty terms are very common:
 - ▶ 'Vulcan'
 - ▶ 'Santa Claus'
 - ▶ 'The present King of France'
 - ▶ 'The largest prime number'
 - ▶ 'Theresa May's Brexit strategy'

Logical Words

- ▶ We've made life easy for ourselves so far by considering names and predicates, but the Name Theory talks about *all* expressions.
- ▶ Words like 'not', 'or' and 'all' are considered distinctively *logical*.
- ▶ If they refer, what could they possibly refer to?
- ▶ Worse, consider the quantifier phrase 'nothing'. If it is meaningful, then it must refer. So 'nothing' refers to something.

Logical Words

- ▶ Lewis Carroll exploits this point:

'I see nobody on the road', said Alice.

'I only wish I had such eyes', the King remarked in a fretful tone. 'To be able to Nobody! And at this distance too!' ..'

'Who did you pass on the road?' the King went on.

'Nobody', said the Messenger.

'Quite right', said the King: 'this young lady saw him too'.

The Unity of the Proposition

- ▶ Consider the sentence 'Ellen loves Portia'.
- ▶ The Name Theory tells us that this is a list of names, 'Ellen', 'loves' and 'Portia'.
- ▶ Now Consider 'Ellen, the relation of loving, Portia'.
- ▶ The Name Theory tells us that this is a list of names for the same things.
- ▶ So they are indistinguishable on the Name Theory. Intuitively, though, there is a big difference: the former conveys the world as being a certain way and the latter does not.

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The Idea Theory

- ▶ Here's another naïve theory.
- ▶ Maybe expressions don't refer to things in the world but to *ideas* in our minds.
- ▶ This was John Locke's theory in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).
- ▶ For Locke, perception is *indirect*. We do not *directly* perceive a table but rather a mental entity with some sensory qualities.
- ▶ These entities with which your mind can directly engage are *ideas*.
- ▶ The purpose of language is then to transmit ideas.

The Idea Theory

- ▶ Let's say I have an idea of a piano and I want you to have it too.
- ▶ I have the idea of a piano in my mind, which I have associated with the word 'piano'.
- ▶ By using the word 'piano', I am able to transmit this idea of a piano to you.

The Idea Theory

- ▶ The Idea Theory also has a good deal of intuitive appeal.
- ▶ First, it is plausible that words are linked to mental entities in some way.
- ▶ It also distinguishes language from mere noise: when Poly says 'Poly wants a cracker' she doesn't *mean* anything because there are no associated ideas.
- ▶ Second, it solves the problem of informative identities: it can be informative to learn that Nicki Minaj is Onika Maraj, since we can have different ideas associated with each.
- ▶ Third, it solves the problem of empty names: we may well have an idea of Santa Claus, even if there is no such person.

The Idea Theory

- ▶ But there is a major problem for the Idea Theory.
- ▶ Ideas are *private*.
- ▶ If we are to communicate, presumably we need the *same idea* of a piano.
- ▶ But what do I picture when I picture a piano? Is it grand, upright, electronic, baby grand? Is it being played by Mitsuko Uchida, Nick Cave, Brad Mehldau? Is it being played at all? Is it made by Yamaha, Steinway, Bechstein?
- ▶ If we abstract away from all of this, is there still an idea of a piano?
- ▶ The problems of logical words and the unity of the proposition are also unanswered.

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Summary

- ▶ In short, the naïve Name and Idea theories fail.
- ▶ That's to be expected: they were, after all, naïve.
- ▶ But they've helped to bring out the problems that a theory of naming must answer.
- ▶ Next week, we look at Frege, who takes some of each of the naïve theories and developed their insights into a much more sophisticated view.
- ▶ His view is certainly not naïve but might well be true.