



P. F. STRAWSON'S "ON REFERRING"

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STRAWSON'S CRITIQUE OF RUSSELL

- Two types of ways in which sentences can be significant
 - (1) “The first is that their grammatical form should be misleading as to their logical form, and that they should be analysable...as a special kind of existential sentence”
 - (2) “The second is that their grammatical subject should be a logically proper name, of which the meaning is the individual thing it designates”
- “The king of France is wise” falls under (1) as an existential sentence



STRAWSON'S CRITIQUE OF RUSSELL

- As an existential sentence, “The king of France is wise” entails three assertions:
 - (A) There is a king of France
 - (B) There is not more than one king of France
 - (C) There is nothing which is the king of France and is not wise
- Strawson agrees that these claims are necessary for the sentence to be true, but says that Russell does not provide a sufficient system for determining the truth value of the statement



WORDS AND MEANING

- Words define how an expression can be used
 - “To give the meaning of the expression...is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons” (327)
- Words themselves do not refer to anything, the crucial piece is their use



SIGNIFICANCE

- “The question whether the sentence is significant or not is the question whether there exist such language habits, conventions or rules [i.e. meaning] that the sentence logically could be used to talk about something” (329)
- Significance does not depend on actual usage, only on potential usage
 - “The table is covered with books”





TRUTH VALUE

- Truth value is context dependent
 - “The time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subjects which form the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both the speaker and those he is addressing” (336)
- Truth value is determined by a speaker’s *use* of the expression to refer to something, not the expression itself
 - “We use [an expression] truly or falsely when we use it to talk about some one” (330)
- Is “The king of France is wise” true or false?



REFERENCE

- Reference is based on context
 - “This” and “that”
 - Personal names
- Reference implies existence, but does not assert uniqueness
 - “To refer is not to assert, though you refer in order to go on to assert” (333)





REFERENCE

- “So the wholly important distinction we are required to draw is between:
 - (1) using an expression to make unique reference; and
 - (2) asserting that there is one and only one individual which has certain characteristics” (333)
- “The king of France is wise”
 - Russell: the use of “the” asserts the existence of one and only one king of France
 - Strawson: the speaker uses “the king of France” to make a unique reference



CONCLUSION

- Strawson prefers a more naturalistic approach to language
- Our use of language is more informative than the words themselves
- Context plays a key role in what language refers to

