SPEAKING OF NOTHING[1]

RUSSELL tells us in "On Denoting" to test our logical theories by their "capacity for dealing with puzzles."[2] In this paper I raise the question of how a theory of reference, one of recent origin, might handle one of the major puzzles Russell mentioned. The theory of reference that I have in mind—and one I subscribe to—I will call "the historical explanation theory." (It, or ones similar to it in important respects, has also been called the "causal theory." For various reasons, I prefer a different title.[3])

Among a number of puzzles mentioned by Russell, two stand out as more important than the others. One is the well-known problem of identity statements with which Frege begins his article, "On Sense and Reference,"[4] the question of how a statement of the form "*a* is identical to *b*," when true, can differ in "cognitive value" from a corresponding statement of the apparently trivial form, "*a* is identical to *a*." The second puzzle is the topic of this paper. In a large number of situations speakers apparently refer to the nonexistent. The most obvious example of this is, perhaps, the use of singular terms in negative existence statements—for example, "The discoverer of the philosopher's stone does not exist" or "Robin Hood did not exist." The problem is, of course, well known and ancient in origin: such statements seem to refer to something only to say about it that it does not exist. How can one say something about what does not exist? For a few philosophers, to be sure, these questions have led to attempts to provide the referent. But in general such attempts have been met with suspicion. Russell certainly thought it a merit of his theory of

[1] Earlier versions of this paper were read at a number of meetings and colloquia and several important changes have resulted from those discussions. I am particularly grateful for detailed comments by Tyler Burge.

[2] Reprinted in *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. by Marsh (1956), p. 47.

[3] Why I am reluctant to use the word "causal" may become somewhat clearer further on, but the main reason is that I want to avoid a seeming commitment to all the links in the referential chain being causal.

[4] *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. by Geach and Black (1952).

definite descriptions (and his fully developed views on singular expressions) that such apparent references to the nonexistent were explained without having to entertain the idea of referents of singular terms that are nonexistent.

Where the singular terms involved are definite descriptions, "On Denoting" provided a solution to the two puzzles mentioned that was at once a break-through in the treatment of these expressions and satisfying in the coherent explanation it gave. Russell's fully developed theory of singular terms, perhaps best represented in "Lectures on Logical Atomism,"[5] extends the proposed solution to ordinary proper names, for these turn out to be concealed definite descriptions. The view of "On Denoting" now could be made to cover most of the uses of singular terms in language as we actually speak it and, moreover, seemed to meet the test of solving the various puzzles about reference. But the fully developed view also introduced a category of singular expressions that were acknowledged to be rarely, if ever, found in everyday speech—what Russell called names in "the strict logical sense" or "genuine" names.

Genuine names and the motivation for giving pride of place to such exotic singular terms have special interest for the historical explanation theory, because while its treatment of ordinary singular expressions is radically different from Russell's it has some similarities to his characterization of genuine names.

The question posed, then, is how the historical explanation theory of reference can handle the puzzle that Russell's view has no difficulty with, the problem of apparent reference to the nonexistent.

I cannot in this paper plead the full case for the historical explanation theory, though I shall try to give its main features; so it may be best to consider it an exercise in the hypothetical: *if* the theory is correct what follows concerning apparent reference to the nonexistent?[6]

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[5] Reprinted in *Logic and Knowledge.*

[6] If we divide the theory into its negative aspects (see sec. III) and its positive (see sec. IV), what the theory denies and the reasons for doing so have been, perhaps, better delineated in the literature than the content of the positive theory. (This is certainly true of my own contributions.) My papers

I. Three Kinds of Apparent Reference to the Nonexistent

We need to keep distinct three situations in which apparent reference to the nonexistent occurs. The differences are important in their own right, but I need to call attention to them because one kind of situation will be excluded from consideration in this paper.

I will, in the first place, distinguish what I will call "discourse about fiction" from "discourse about actuality"; and, secondly, within the latter category, the use of "predicative" statements from the use of "existence" statements.[7] What is to be excluded from consideration here is an account of discourse about fiction. (This is not, of course, to say that such an account is not in the end needed.)

Under "discourse about fiction" I mean to include those occasions on which it is a presupposition of the discourse that fictional, mythological, legendary (and so forth) persons, places, or things are under discussion. I believe, for example, that said with the right intention, the following sentences would express true propositions: "The Green Hornet's car was called 'Black Beauty,' " "Snow White lived with seven dwarves," and "To reach the underworld, one must first cross the River Styx." (By the "right intention" I mean that the speaker wishes to be taken as talking about fiction, mythology, or legend.) At the same time I also believe it is true that neither the Green Hornet, his car, Snow White, nor the River Styx exists or ever has existed. These two beliefs, however, are entirely consistent. And therein lies the puzzle:

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dealing with various parts of the theory as I see it are: "Reference and Definite Descriptions," *Philosophical Review*, LXXV (1966), 281–304; "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again," *Philosophical Review*, LXXVII (1968), 203–215; "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," *Synthèse* (1970), reprinted in Davidson and Harman (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language* (Dordrecht, 1972). By others, Saul Kripke's paper, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, is the most important in that it gives not only arguments for the negative aspects of the theory, but also a positive account (that, however, I do not altogether agree with).

[7] The terminology, of course, is for convenience and not supposed to reflect a prejudgment that existence cannot be in some sense a genuine predicate.

how can there be true propositions that apparently involve predicating properties of what does not exist?

Discourse about actuality carries the presupposition that the speaker is talking about people, places, or things that occur in the history of our world. A puzzle arises when the speaker is unfortunate enough to use a singular expression, intending to attribute a property to something, but fails, in his use of that expression, to refer to anything. This very likely occurred, for example, some years ago following the publication of *The Horn Papers*,[8] that purported to contain the diary of one Jacob Horn and that would, if genuine, have shed light on the colonial history of Washington County, Pennsylvania. Many people believed them to be genuine, but, on the evidence, it seems likely that they are not and that Jacob Horn did not exist. There must have been many believers, however, who made statements using the name "Jacob Horn" with the intention of predicating various properties of a historical figure. For example, someone might well have said, "Jacob Horn wrote about Augusta Town and now we know where it was located." It would have been some sort of inconsistency—exactly what kind is another question—for such a speaker then to affirm the nonexistence of Jacob Horn. This contrasts with discourse about fiction—there one can, for example, consistently deny the existence of Snow White while also stating that she enraptured a prince.[9]

The puzzle about predicative statements, as I shall call them, in discourse about actuality with a singular expression and no referent is more subtle philosophically than the puzzle about fictional discourse. There is not the same possibility of stating something true. Nor can the speaker with consistency acknowledge the nonexistence of what he speaks about. To see how statements

[8] See Middleton and Adair, "The Mystery of the Horn Papers," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, IV (1947); reprinted in Winks (ed.), *The Historian as Detective* (New York, 1968).

[9] The denial of Snow White's existence, it should be noted, is in discourse about actuality, while the statement that she enraptured a prince is in discourse about fiction. (If the question of existence arose in discourse about fiction alone, Snow White existed, whereas Hamlet's father's ghost, again presuming we are talking about fiction, probably did not.) This does not disturb the point: no such contrast can be made out for Jacob Horn; if Jacob Horn did not exist then there are no true predicative statements to be made about him.

such as those made by believers in the authenticity of *The Horn Papers* can puzzle a philosopher requires the ability to see a difficulty in how one can even speak and be *understood* when using a singular expression with no referent.

The difference between discourse about fiction and discourse about reality, it is important to keep in mind, is a matter of presuppositions about the intent of the speech act. It is not that in the one fictional characters are involved and in the other real people, places, and things. A not too well-informed person might have taken (at least the first part of) the movie *Doctor Strangelove* for a documentary. His statement, "Doctor Strangelove, the top military scientist in the United States, is a psychopath," would then be a bit of discourse about reality, even though Doctor Strangelove is, in fact, fictional. On the other hand, this very same sentence used by someone having seen the whole movie would probably be a comment on the movie, a bit of discourse about fiction.

While I will need often to consider predicative statements about actuality, the problem I want to concentrate on concerns "existence" statements—those that have either the form "*S* does not exist" or the form "*S* exists," where "*S*" is a singular expression. Negative existence statements, unlike predicative statements, are true when there is no referent for the singular expression. If I speak the truth in saying, "Jacob Horn does not exist," I would be apparently referring to what does not exist. But even more paradoxically, the truth of what I say depends directly upon the nonexistence of a referent for "Jacob Horn." Moreover, this is discourse about reality; I do not, clearly, intend to talk about a fictional character. Negative existence statements, of all those mentioned, bring apparent reference to the nonexistent into sharpest focus.

It is of some importance to mention the difference between denying the existence of something altogether and denying its present existence or its existence at some point or during some period in time. To begin with we certainly want to distinguish between

(1) Napoleon no longer exists,

and

(2) Napoleon does not and never did exist.

The first statement is both true and not an apparent reference to the nonexistent in the sense we want. (1) contains a reference to Napoleon in the same way that "Socrates was snub-nosed" contains a reference to Socrates. (1) should, it seems, be put into the class of predicative statements, despite the fact that existence is involved. On the other hand, (2) is a paradigm of the kind of statement that generates the problem of apparent reference to the nonexistent.

What shall we say, however, about a statement such as

(3) Santa Claus does not exist?

Often, I believe, it expresses a statement of the same form as (2), an absolute denial of existence, not confined to any one period in time. But suppose, for example, that someone is unsure whether Jacob Horn ever did exist, but is certain that he does not now exist. He might express this by saying, "Jacob Horn does not exist." So, perhaps, sentences of the surface form of (3) are ambiguous. But what is the other meaning that they might have? The sentence given, in the imagined circumstances, seems to me to be equivalent to

(4) Jacob Horn does not now exist.

This is neither the absolute denial of Jacob Horn's existence nor the predicative assertion that Jacob Horn no longer exists. (4), I believe, amounts to the disjunction of the two: "Either Jacob Horn does not and never did exist or he did exist and does no longer." In which case, the dichotomy illustrated by (1) and (2) is still maintained. In what follows, however, it is the absolute denial of existence that will be of concern and any examples of the form "N does not exist" should be construed in that way.

II. A Theory Gone Wrong With Interesting Motives—Russell

Russell's theory of singular terms holds interest for the historical explanation theory, not only because of obvious oppositions on some key issues—several more recent discussions would serve that

purpose[10]—but also because certain problems and issues that evidently motivated features of Russell's theory that are nowadays generally ignored or thought obviously wrong are brought to the fore once again by the historical explanation theory. I believe that much of Russell's theory has been accepted by many philosophers with the thought that there was a certain excrescence that could be ignored. Russell's views on ordinary singular terms, definite descriptions, proper names in ordinary language have wide acceptance; his addition of "genuine" names to the ranks has generally been ignored as so much metaphysical meandering. I think there is no doubt that "genuine" names, as Russell characterized them, have no place in a correct theory of reference. But from the first, in "On Denoting," Russell contrasted his account of those singular terms for which his theory provided a way out of puzzles about reference with another kind of singular term, a "genuine" name, for which he seemed to feel there was a theoretical need. But, of course, "genuine" names, if they were to be included in the general theory, could not reintroduce the same puzzles. This, I think, accounts for some of the peculiar properties attributed to "genuine" names: for example, the distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description" that gave the result that we could only genuinely name something we are acquainted with in a very strong sense seems to have been introduced in part to make it impossible to assert negative existence statements using "genuine" names.

The reason this has interest for the historical explanation theory is that Russell's contrast, the radical difference between most singular terms in ordinary language and "genuine" names, is that the former have descriptive content and the latter do not. Given his view of singular terms with descriptive content, the puzzles about reference yield easily for them. He felt, however, some need to have singular expressions, nonetheless, that do not function in accord with his analysis of definite descriptions and ordinary proper names. The historical explanation theory denies that, for at least many uses of ordinary singular expressions, Russell's view is correct. In particular, it denies that ordinary proper names

[10] E.g., J. Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind* (1958), and *Speech Acts* (Cambridge, 1968), Ch. IV.

always have descriptive content. The question is, does this mean that perhaps ordinary singular expressions may fulfill the function that Russell thought only "genuine" names, with all their peculiarities, could? And, if so, how can the historical explanation view deal with the puzzles about reference?

What was the motivation for introducing "genuine" names? Russell often talks in ways that can seem nonsensical—that, for example, when a definite description such as "the author of *Waverly*" is involved, the denotation of the definite description, Scott in this case, is not a "constituent" of the proposition expressed. The implied contrast is that if "Scott" is a genuine name and were there in place of the definite description "the author of *Waverly*" then Scott would be a constituent. But it certainly sounds queer at first glance to find a flesh-and-blood person in a proposition!

Russell's analysis of statements containing definite descriptions and, by extension, ordinary proper names, shows, he believed, that such statements are not really *about*, do not really *mention*, the denotation of the description or the referent of the name. Russell emphasizes this again and again. "Genuine" names, on the other hand, can somehow perform the feat of really mentioning a particular individual. To try to put much weight on such terms as "about" would lead us, I think, into a morass. What it is for a statement to be *about* an individual, if that requires any attempt to define *aboutness*, is a question better avoided if we are ever to get on with the problem. (After all, Russell himself recognized a well-defined relationship that a statement containing a definite description can have to some particular individual—its denotation. It would be a delicate task to show either that in no sense of "about" is such a statement *about* the denotation of the definite description or that there is some clear sense of "about" in which it is not.)

But I believe we can say something useful about the reasons Russell had for talking in this way. On his theory of definite descriptions the singular expression, the definite description, is really a device that introduces quantifiers and converts what might seem at first sight a simple proposition about an individual into a general proposition. "The ϕ is ψ" expresses the same propo-

sition as "There is a ϕ and there is at most one ϕ and all ϕ's are ψ's"; and the latter clearly would express a general proposition about the world. Ordinary proper names, of course, function on his view in the same way, since they are in reality concealed definite descriptions. Now if we contrast these singular expressions with ones, if there are any, that do not introduce quantifiers, that when put as the subject of a simple subject-predicate sentence do not make the sentence express a general proposition, then I think there is a strong temptation to say that only the second kind of singular term can be used to really mention an individual.

Russell clearly believed that there must be the possibility, at least, of singular terms that do not introduce quantifiers; that seems in large part to be his reason for believing in "genuine" names. Whether or not there is some argument that shows the necessity of such singular terms, I believe that prior to theory the natural view is that they occur often in ordinary speech. So if one says, for example, "Socrates is snub-nosed," the natural view seems to me to be that the singular expression "Socrates" is simply a device used by the speaker to pick out what he wants to talk about while the rest of the sentence expresses what property he wishes to attribute to that individual. This can be made somewhat more precise by saying, first, that the natural view is that in using such simple sentences containing singular terms we are not saying something general about the world—that is, not saying something that would be correctly analyzed with the aid of quantifiers; and, second, that in such cases the speaker could, in all probability, have said the same thing, expressed the same proposition, with the aid of other and different singular expressions, so long as they are being used to refer to the same individual. To illustrate the latter point with a different example: if, at the same moment in time, one person were to say, "Smith is happy," a second "You are happy," a third "My son is happy," and a fourth "I am happy," and if in each case the singular expression refers to the same person, then all four have expressed the same proposition, have agreed with each other.

What I see as the natural pre-theoretical view might be captured as a certain way of representing what proposition is expressed. For example, the sentence "Socrates is snub-nosed" might

be represented as an ordered pair consisting of Socrates—the actual man, of course, not his name—and the predicate (or property, perhaps), being snub-nosed. (More complicated sentences, involving relations and more than one singular expression of this sort would be represented as ordered triplets, and so forth.) Now if someone were to say to Socrates, "You are snub-nosed," or Socrates were to say about himself, "I am snub-nosed," the proposition expressed would, in each case, be represented by the same ordered pair—propositional identity, given the same predicate, would be a function simply of what individual is referred to.

This way of representing propositions would, I think, meet with at least provisional approval by Russell, but only if it were restricted to those propositions expressed by statements containing "genuine" names. We might even say that the manner of representation gives a respectable sense in which an individual might be a constituent of a proposition. But my examples of statements for which this representation was suggested would, on Russell's view, be incorrect just because they involve singular terms from ordinary language. For Russell, they would be examples of sentences that express complex general propositions and, whatever our view of the nature of propositions, I do not think we would want propositional identity for general propositions to be a function of the individuals that happen to make the propositions true or false.

Russell pays the price, I believe, of giving up the natural view of many uses of ordinary singular terms, a price he is willing to pay—chiefly, perhaps, because he thus can dissolve puzzles about reference. The special properties of "genuine" names, on the other hand, are supposed to rescue them. The "natural" view, on the other hand, seems to generate Russell's budget of puzzles, in particular the one which is the concern of this paper. If I say, "Socrates is snub-nosed," the proposition I express is represented as containing Socrates. If I say, instead, "Jacob Horn does not exist," the "natural" view seems to lead to the unwonted conclusion that even if what I say is true, Jacob Horn, though nonexistent, must have some reality. Else what proposition am I expressing? The "natural" view thus seems to land us with the Meinongian population explosion.

Russell, of course, avoids this problem easily. Since the proper name "Jacob Horn" would, for him, be a concealed definite description, to say "Jacob Horn does not exist" is not to refer to some individual in order to say something about him, but merely to assert that a particular class of things, perhaps the class of writers of diaries about certain events in early Pennsylvania history, is either empty or contains more than one member. (So a singular nonexistence statement of this kind is on all fours with statements such as "There are no flying horses" or "There is more than one living ex-President." It does not mention a particular individual any more than these do.)

The issue has importance for the historical explanation view because it denies that many singular terms in ordinary language, in particular proper names, are concealed descriptions of the sort that Russell had in mind. "Homer," for example, is not a concealed description such as "the author of the Homeric Poems," to use Russell's own example. The question is, does the historical explanation view, if correct, support what I have called the "natural" view? In the next section this question will be considered.

III. The Historical Explanation View: Negative Aspect

I now want to begin to lay out the bare bones of the theory of reference I want to discuss. As I have said, I will not here argue for its correctness nor will I try to fill in all the gaps.

Russell and the majority of philosophers in contemporary times who have discussed (ordinary) proper names have held that by one mechanism or another they are surrogates for descriptions. For Russell, as I have mentioned, they are simply abbreviations for definite descriptions; for others—for example, Searle[11]—they are correlated with a set of descriptions and what one is saying in, say, a simple subject-predicate sentence employing a proper name is that whatever best fits these descriptions has whatever property is designated by the predicate. The descriptions, both on Russell's

[11] See references in n. 10.

view and on the looser view of Searle and others, which the proper name masks, are thought of as obtained from the people who use them—roughly speaking, by what they would answer to the question, "To whom (what) are you referring?" This view of ordinary proper names embodies what I have called the "principle of identifying descriptions."[12] The theory of reference I am concerned with holds that the principle of identifying descriptions is false.

What this means, to give an example, is that, supposing you could obtain from me a set of descriptions of who it is that I believe myself to refer to when I say, "Socrates was snub-nosed"—perhaps such things as "the mentor of Plato," "the inventor of the 'Socratic method,' " "the philosopher who drank the hemlock," and so forth—it is theoretically possible that I am referring to something about which no substantial number of these descriptions is true or that although there is something that fits these descriptions to whatever extent is required by the particular variation of the principle, that is not in fact the referent of the name I used.

On this theory, then, ordinary proper names are like Russell's "genuine" names at least in so far as they do not conceal descriptions in the way he thought. This is, I think, a virtue of the theory. As David Kaplan has remarked, there was always something implausible about the idea that a referent of a proper name is determined by the currently associated descriptions.

IV. The Historical Explanation Theory: Positive Aspect

The first tenet of the theory of reference I have been describing was negative—the view that proper names must have a backing of descriptions that serves to pick out their referents is false. The second tenet is positive, but more tentative. How is the referent of a proper name, then, to be determined? On Russell's view and variants on it, the answer to this question would be simple: the referent is that which fits the associated descriptions best, where

[12] In "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," *op. cit.*

"best" may be defined differently by different writers. As I see it, one of the main reasons a backing of descriptions for proper names is so attractive is that it furnishes a simple way of ascertaining what a speaker is saying, and of determining whether what he says is true or false (given that we are dealing only with assertions). We find, so to speak, that thing in the world which uniquely fits the descriptions and then see whether or not it has the properties ascribed to it. If proper names do not have a backing of descriptions, how do we decide whether or not, when someone says, for example, "Russell wrote 'On Denoting,' " he has said something true or false?

Putting existence statements aside, when a speaker says something of the form, "$\mathcal{N}$ is ϕ," where "$\mathcal{N}$" is a name and "ϕ" a predicate, we can say that in general the truth conditions will have the following form. What the speaker has said will be true if and only if (*a*) there is some entity related in the appropriate way to his use of "$\mathcal{N}$" in this sentence—that is, he has referred to some entity, and (*b*) that entity has the property designated by ϕ. (I say "in general" because there are difficulties for any theory of reference about uses of names for fictional characters, "formal" objects such as numbers, and so forth.) The question is, what is the "appropriate relation" mentioned in condition (*a*)? How, that is, does an entity have to be related to the speaker's use of the name "$\mathcal{N}$" to be its referent? The principle of identifying descriptions, were it only true, has a simple answer to this: the entity must have (uniquely) the properties or some sufficient number of the properties designated by the "backing of descriptions" for this use of the name "$\mathcal{N}$." Roughly speaking, and on the most usual view, it will be the entity that answers to the descriptions the speaker would (ideally) give in answer to the question, "To whom are you referring?"

But even without the arguments that, I believe, show the principle of identifying descriptions not only false, but implausible, putting the matter in this general way is somewhat liberating. It shows that what we need is *some* relation between the speech act involving the name "$\mathcal{N}$" and an object in the world—the right one, of course—but the relation supplied by the principle of identifying descriptions is now only a candidate for that office.

But if the principle of identifying descriptions is false, what then is the appropriate relation between an act of using a name and some object such that the name was used to refer to that object? The theory of reference I want to discuss has not as yet, so far as I know, been developed in such a way as to give a completely detailed answer. Yet there are positive things that can be said and enough, I believe, both to contrast it with the principle of identifying descriptions and to give us something like an answer to the original question: how will it handle apparent reference to the nonexistent in such statements as "Santa Claus does not exist"?

The main idea is that when a speaker uses a name intending to refer to an individual and predicate something of it, successful reference will occur when there is an individual that enters into the historically correct explanation of who it is that the speaker intended to predicate something of. That individual will then be the referent and the statement made will be true or false depending upon whether it has the property designated by the predicate. This statement of the positive thesis leaves a lot to be desired in the way of precision, yet with some clarifying remarks I think it has more content than might at first sight be supposed.

Suppose someone says, "Socrates was snub-nosed," and we ask to whom he is referring. The central idea is that this calls for a historical explanation; we search not for an individual who might best fit the speaker's descriptions of the individual to whom he takes himself to be referring (though his descriptions are usually important data), but rather for an individual historically related to his use of the name "Socrates" on this occasion. It might be that an omniscient observer of history would see an individual related to an author of dialogues, that one of the central characters of these dialogues was modeled upon that individual, that these dialogues have been handed down and that the speaker has read translations of them, that the speaker's now predicating snub-nosedness of something is explained by his having read those translations. This is the sort of account that I have in mind by a "historical explanation."

Several comments are in order here. First, it is not necessary, of course, that the individual in question be snub-nosed; obviously the speaker may have asserted something false about the referent

of the name "Socrates." Second, if we take the set of descriptions the speaker could give were we to ask him to whom he was referring, the historical explanation as seen by our omniscient observer may pick out an individual as the referent of the name "Socrates" even though that individual is not correctly described by the speaker's attempt at identification. For example, the speaker may believe that Socrates—that is, the person he refers to—was a philosopher who invented the Socratic method. But it is clearly imaginable that our omniscient observer sees that while the author of the dialogues did intend one of the characters to be taken as a portrayal of a real person, he modestly attributed to him a method that was his own brain child. And, in general, it would be possible to have the historical connection with no end to mistaken descriptions in the head of the speaker. The descriptions the speaker gives, however, may play an important role, though not the one given to them by the principle of identifying descriptions. The omniscient observer may see, for example, that the reason the speaker believes himself to be referring to someone who invented a certain philosophical method is that his present use of the name "Socrates" is connected with his having read certain translations of these dialogues. Or, to take a slightly different case, he may see that his descriptions come from a faulty memory of those dialogues, and so forth. The question for the omniscient observer is "What individual, if any, would the speaker describe in this way even if perhaps mistakenly?"

I have used the notion of an omniscient observer of history and, of course, we ordinary people cannot be expected to know in detail the history behind the uses of names by those with whom we converse. Nor do we often make the sort of historical inquiries which would reveal those details. We often assume, for example, that if another speaker's descriptions of the referent of a name he has used more or less jibe with descriptions we would give of a person, place, or thing that we believe ourselves to know about, then he is referring to that. Also, for example, the context of the use of a name may lead us to assume without question that the speaker refers to someone with whom we are both acquainted. But the historical explanation theory need not deny this or be troubled by it. All it needs to hold is that the *final* test for reference

is the kind of historical connection I have described, that the customary assumptions and use of indicators are in the end dependent upon being fairly reliable guides to the existence of such a connection.

What the historical explanation theory must attempt to establish is that when there is an absence of historical connection between an individual and the use of a name by a speaker, then, be the speaker's descriptions ever so correct about a certain individual, that individual is not the referent; and, on the other hand, that a certain historical connection between the use of a name and an individual can make the individual the referent even though the speaker's descriptions would not by themselves single out the individual. This job must be accomplished by building up examples in which these two points are made obvious. We might, for instance, try to show that the historical connection is necessary by constructing a situation in which, for instance, one person begins by assuming that another is referring to a friend of his, perhaps because the descriptions seem accurate, the context is appropriate, and so forth, and who then discovers that it is practically impossible for the speaker to have been acquainted with or otherwise related to his friend. In such an event, surely confidence that the speaker was referring to the friend would be shaken despite the apparent accuracy of description or appropriateness of context. But, as I have said, I cannot here undertake the full defense of the historical explanation theory.

There are, however, two further points of clarification that ought to be mentioned here. It should be obvious that I have only provided an example of what counts as a historical explanation rather than a formula for obtaining the referent of a particular use of a name. Even in the illustration several individuals entered into the account, only one of which was the referent. Of the individuals who are in some way or other part of the historical explanation of a use of a name, which is the referent? What kind of theory is this if it does not give us the means to make this determination?

In defense against this charge that the theory is excessively vague, it is helpful, I think, to compare it with another philosophical theory about a quite different problem. The causal theory of perception can be taken as holding that an observer, *O*, per-

ceives an object, *M*, only if *M* causes *O* to have sense impressions. The theory seems to me to have content and to be important, whether or not it is correct. For one thing, if true it means that certain other theories are mistaken. But the theory as stated does not, obviously, allow us to say which among the various causal factors involved in an observer having sense impressions is the thing he perceives; nor does it tell us which ways of causing sense impressions are relevant. Possibly no philosophical analysis can determine this, although in any particular case we may be able to say that this is or is not the right sort of causal connection. Analogously, the historical explanation theory lacks this sort of specificity. But for all that, if it is true, certain other theories, in particular the identifying descriptions theory, will be wrong and the theory does tell us something of importance.

Because there have sometimes been misunderstandings about this, I think I should point out that the history to which the historical explanation theory alludes is not the history of the use of a name. It is not the history of the use of, say, the name "Socrates" that is important. Socrates may not have been, as far as theory goes, called "Socrates"; corruption of names is just as possible as corruption of information. (The history of such a corruption, however, *might* enter into the historical explanation.) Nor, I think, should the theory be construed as holding that the historical connections end with some original "dubbing" of the referent. It may be that people, places, and things usually receive names by some such ceremony and that we generally use names (or corruptions of them) as a result of such a ceremony, but it is not a theoretical necessity that names enter our linguistic transactions in this way.[13]

What the historical explanation does, then, is to provide the

[13] That is to say, the first use of a name to refer to some particular individual might be in an assertion about him, rather than any ceremony of *giving* the individual that name. (In fact, my own name is an example: I discovered that colleagues were pronouncing my last name differently than my parents do—so, orally, they referred to me by a different name—and I let it stand. But I was never dubbed by that new name. I am sure that the first use of it was either an assertion, question, or whatever about me and not a kind of baptism. And I think it is probable that whatever audience there was knew to whom the speaker referred.)

relationship between the use of a referring expression and the referent which the principle of identifying descriptions presupposes could be provided only by some measure of correct descriptions of the referent known to the speaker. I think there are counter-examples to the principle of identifying descriptions[14] and, of course, if there *are* that defeats it straight off. Still a plausible, if not clearly correct, alternative theory in this case also acts as an objection. For one of the principle reasons that many philosophers have for adopting the principle of identifying descriptions is that they cannot see how there *could* be an appropriate relation otherwise that would pick out the referent of (as the main example) a proper name.

I have, in describing this theory of reference, talked about a "historical explanation." I hope it is obvious that "historical" is being used in the broadest sense possible; that all of what I have said could just as well be applied to cases in which one refers, by use of a name, say, to someone still extant, to someone who has just gone out of the room, or to someone presently in one's company. The "historical explanation," in other words, can involve as brief an interval of time as one pleases.

V. A Solution to the Puzzle Rejected

My problem, then, is to show how such a theory of reference can deal with simple existence statements expressed by the use of a proper name, the difficulty being that on this theory, proper names do not have a backing of descriptions and, in general, they function to refer via what I have called a historical connection with some individual. But a true negative existence statement expressed by using a name involves a name with no referent and the corresponding positive existence statement, if false, will also. But in other contexts, when a name is used and there is a failure of reference, then no proposition has been expressed—certainly no true proposition. If a child says, "Santa Claus will come tonight," he cannot have spoken the truth, although, for various

[14] See my "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," *op. cit.*

reasons, I think it better to say that he has not even expressed a proposition.[15]

One apparently possible solution to the problem must be rejected. Russell and others, as we have seen, thought of (ordinary) proper names as concealed definite descriptions; he held a version, that is, of the principle of identifying descriptions. Existential statements involving ordinary proper names were therefore no problem for him—they were really existential statements involving definite descriptions and could be analyzed in accordance with his theory of definite descriptions. The suggestion I want to look at is that while our theory tells us that names in predicative statements do not obey the principle of identifying descriptions and are not concealed definite descriptions, existential statements may represent a special case. Thus, so this suggestion would run, "Santa Claus" in "Santa Claus will come tonight" is not a concealed definite description, but *is* one in the special context of "Santa Claus does not exist" and "Santa Claus exists." This would, of course, immediately solve our problem, but unfortunately it is not a solution that our theory can accept. The difficulty is not that names would be treated as functioning differently in different contexts; in fact, as will become evident, my own view is that they do behave differently in existence statements. Rather, the trouble is that any theory that rejects the principle of identifying descriptions for predicative statements must also reject it for existence statements.

To simplify matters, let us restrict ourselves to Russell's version of the principle of identifying descriptions in which a name simply stands in place of some definite description. If we adopt the principle for existence statements involving names, this will come to saying that, for example, "Socrates did not exist" means the same thing as (expresses the same proposition as) some other sentence formed from this by replacing "Socrates" by a definite description —perhaps, say, the sentence, "The Greek philosopher who was convicted of corrupting the youth and drank hemlock did not

[15] Given that this is a statement about reality and that proper names have no descriptive content, then how are we to represent the proposition expressed?

exist." But, now, on any view we must, I think, accept the following:

(*E*) That Socrates did not exist entails that it is not true that Socrates was snub-nosed.

Our theory tells us that the second occurrence of "Socrates" in (*E*) is not a concealed definite description. But then neither can the first occurrence be one. For if we take some definite description such as the one suggested as what the first occurrence of "Socrates" stands for, rejection of the principle of identifying descriptions for the second occurrence means that it *could* be true that Socrates was snub-nosed even though no unique individual existed who satisfied that description. That is to say, if "Socrates" in "Socrates did not exist" is a concealed definite description, but is not in "Socrates was snub-nosed," then the antecedent of (*E*) could be true while the consequent is false. Since we want to accept the entailment expressed by (*E*) our theory cannot treat "Socrates" as a concealed description in existential statements.

This solution not being open to us, we cannot on the other hand go to the opposite extreme and handle existential statements involving ordinary proper names in the way Russell did for what he called names "in the strict logical sense." There simply are no meaningful existential statements involving these "genuine" names and so the problem does not arise about how to deal with them. But, of course, we cannot countenance this about ordinary proper names, for it does make sense to say, "Homer existed" or "Santa Claus does not exist."

VI. Truth Conditions and "Blocks"

What we need to do first is see what, on our theory of reference, the truth conditions are going to look like for existence statements involving names. In predicative statements, such as "Homer was a great poet," if everything goes well, there will be some individual related to this use of "Homer" "historically," as I have put it, and the statement will be true if that individual had the property expressed by the predicate and false otherwise. This, of course,

cannot be so for a negative existence statement such as "Homer did not exist." This statement would be true, in fact, just in case there is a failure of reference, not in the statement itself, but in other possible or actual predicative statements involving the name. That is, if there is no individual related historically in the right way to the use of "Homer" in, say, the statement "Homer was a great poet," no individual whose possession or nonpossession of poetic genius makes this true or false, then we can truly state that Homer did not exist.

Initially then the question comes to this: "What, on our theory, constitutes a failure of reference in a predicative statement involving a proper name?" (As we shall see there is more to the matter than just this.) Since the positive part of our theory, the part that attempts to say what successful reference to an individual consists in, has been, perhaps because of the nature of things, left more suggestive than in a rigorously formulated state, it cannot be hoped that we shall do much better with failure of reference. But we can say some things of a non-trivial nature.

Suppose a child who believed in Santa Claus now learns the truth, the truth which he expresses by saying, "Santa Claus does not exist." He comes to learn this, as usual, from cynical older children; what has he learned? Our account is that he has learned that when in the past he believed something, for example, which he would have expressed by saying, "Santa Claus comes tonight," and would have thought himself in saying this to be referring to someone, the historical explanation of this belief does not involve any individual who could count as the referent of "Santa Claus"; rather it ends in a story given to him by his parents, a story told to him as factual. I do not mean, of course, that the child would or could express the knowledge he has in his new state of disillusionment in this fashion—that would require him to know the correct account of reference. But if *we* are approaching the correct theory, then this is how we can state what he has discovered.

When the historical explanation of the use of a name (with the intention to refer) ends in this way with events that preclude any referent being identified, I will call it a "block" in the history. In this example, the block is the introduction of the name into the child's speech via a fiction told to him as reality by his parents.

Blocks occur in other ways. For example, children often invent imaginary companions whom they themselves come to speak of as actual. The block in such a case would occur at the point at which a name for the unreal companion gets introduced by the child himself via his mistaken belief that there is a companion to name. A somewhat different example would be this: suppose the Homeric poems were not written by one person, but were a patchwork of the writings of many people, combined, perhaps, with fragments from an oral tradition. Suppose, further, that at some point in time an ancient scholar for whatever reasons—he might have seen a name attached to some written version of the poems and supposed it to be the name of the author—attributed the poems to a single person he called "Homer." If this were the historical explanation of our saying, for example, "Homer wrote the *Iliad*," then the block occurs at the point at which this scholar enters the picture.

On theories that subscribe to the principle of identifying descriptions, examples of failure of reference such as occur in this last example would be treated as a failure to satisfy a uniqueness condition. The reason that Homer would not have existed given these circumstances is that no single individual satisfies the descriptions we associate with Homer (or satisfies a "sufficient" number, according to certain views). But according to our theory this is not the reason for failure of reference; it is rather that the history of our use of the name, a history with which we may not be familiar, does not end in the right way. One way to see that the opposing account, though plausible, is wrong is to think of the possibility of someone existing who *does* satisfy the descriptions we might supply of the referent of a name we use, but who has no historical connection with us whatsoever. Suppose, for example, that contrary to what we adults believe we know, there is, in fact, a man with a long white beard and a belly like a bowl full of jelly who comes down chimneys on Christmas night to leave gifts (the ones whose labels are missing about which parents worry because they don't know to what aunt the child should write a thank-you note). We must, of course, imagine that it is absolutely fortuitous that our descriptions of Santa Claus happen to fit so accurately this jolly creature. In that case I do not think that he *is* Santa

Claus. The fact that the story of Santa Claus, told to children as fact, is historically an invention constitutes a block even if the story happens to contain only descriptions that accurately fit some person.

VII. A Rule for Negative Existence Statements

Using the technical, but admittedly not well-defined, notion of a "block," we can now sketch the way the historical explanation theory may treat negative existence statements involving names. A similar treatment could then be given for positive existence statements.

I will suggest a rule, using the notion of a block, that purports to give the truth conditions for negative existence statements containing a name. This rule, however, does not provide an *analysis* of such statements; it does not tell us what such statements mean or what proposition they express. This means that in this case we are divorcing truth conditions from meaning.

With the deletion of some qualifications that would be needed to make it strictly correct, the rule can be expressed as follows:

> (*R*) If $\mathcal{N}$ is a proper name that has been used in predicative statements with the intention to refer to some individual, then ⌜$\mathcal{N}$ does not exist⌝ is true if and only if the history of those uses ends in a block.

The rule as stated obviously requires some modifications. For one thing we would need some way of distinguishing, for example, the denial of the existence of Aristotle the philosopher, from Aristotle the ship magnate. To accomplish this we must do two things: first, find a means of collecting together the uses of "Aristotle" in predicative statements that were, so to speak, attempts to refer to the philosopher, separating them from a similar collection of uses of the name that were attempts to refer to the ship magnate, and do this without, of course, assuming that any of these uses succeeds in referring. Second, we must be able to relate a particular negative existence statement using the name "Aristotle" to one such collection rather than any other.

The way of amending Rule (*R*) that seems to me in keeping with the historical explanation theory and to accomplish these tasks is this. Certain uses of the name "Aristotle" in predicative statements will have similar histories, histories that will distinguish them from other uses of the name. Each use of the name will, of course, have its own historical explanation, but these may, at a certain point, join up. So, in tracing back several uses of the name "Aristotle" by me and several uses by you, we may find a common root in certain ancient writings and documents, while other uses of the name by me or by you may have nothing in common with the history of the first set of uses. It is possible that the histories may join at what I have called a block. Another possibility, however, is that although different uses of the name end in different blocks, these blocks are themselves historically connected. This might occur, for example, for the use by different children of the name "Santa Claus." I have suggested that the block in this example occurs where the parents tell the children a fiction as if it were fact. The block, however, would be a different one for each child. Still the blocks themselves are historically related in an obvious way since the parents' deception is rooted in a common tradition.

Still another possible source of difficulty with Rule (*R*) as stated is that it makes use of prior instances of the name in predicative statements. Is it possible meaningfully to assert "N does not exist" when N has never been used in predicative statements (about actuality)? If it is, then Rule (*R*) would have to be amended in some way, perhaps by talking of potential or possible uses. But at the moment I am not sure how this would go and I will not attempt it.

Even without worrying about the vagueness of the idea of a "block," Rule (*R*) may look unexciting, but its consequences are interesting. In the first place its form is completely antithetical to the principle of identifying descriptions, for it has nothing to do with whether an individual of a certain description existed or not. Second, it does not involve our theory of reference in any difficulties: there is the connection with the notion of historical explanation and so it ties in neatly with the positive aspects of the view, but it has no Meinongian implications, no overpopulation

with entities whose existence is being denied. This result is bought, to be sure, at the price of making a name function differently in existence statements as opposed to predicative statements. But, as I have said, I think that this is not an unintuitive result.

While the above are important consequences of (*R*), what interests me about (*R*) is that it gives the truth conditions for statements that assert that some *individual* does not exist in terms of a linguistic failure—the failure of a name to refer on account of a "block." And it should occur to one that there may be something wrong with this. How, it might be asked, can Homer's existence or nonexistence be a matter of a fact about language, a fact about the name "Homer"? One is reminded, at this point, of a similar problem connected with the other puzzle about reference mentioned at the beginning of this paper. In "On Sense and Reference," immediately after propounding the puzzle about identity statements, Frege mentions a solution that he had formerly thought correct, but which he now repudiates just because it seems to involve turning identity statements, which apparently express facts about the world, into statements about a particular language.

Rule (*R*), in so far as it is supposed to express truth conditions for negative existence statements of a certain kind, seems objectionable for the same reasons. The crux of the problem in both cases seems to be this. We are inclined to say that the propositions expressed by us as "The Evening Star is identical with the Morning Star" and "Homer did not exist" can be the very same propositions that someone else may express using entirely different names. Therefore, how can we give a rule, such as (*R*), which makes the truth conditions of what we say depend upon facts about particular names?

The child who has become disillusioned expresses his new-found knowledge by saying "Santa Claus doesn't exist." A French-speaking child, with a similar history of being deceived by adults, might express his discovery by saying, "*Père Noël n'existe pas.*" Although the names are different, I believe we should want to say that the two children have learned the same fact and, on that account, that they have expressed the same proposition. Yet if we apply Rule (*R*) to each case it seems that the truth conditions

must be different; they involve a block in the history of the use of the name "Santa Claus" for the English-speaking child and a block for the French-speaking child in the history of the use of the different name, "Père Noël."

Perhaps we can see the problem more clearly by looking for a moment at predicative statements. If we consider a simple (grammatically) subject-predicate statement, such as "Socrates is bald," and think of this as divided into its referring element, "Socrates," and its predicative element, "is bald," then if a certain change in the predicative element—for example, from "is bald" to "is short"—results in a change in the truth conditions for the statement, we want to say that the result expresses a different proposition. In general only interchange of synonymous predicates will maintain the same truth conditions and the same proposition. *If* referring expressions such as "Socrates" *were* concealed descriptions—that is, introduced predicate elements into a statement—then the same could be said about them: substituting a different referring expression, unless it happened to conceal the same or synonymous descriptions as the one it is substituted for, would shift both the truth conditions and the proposition expressed (and, in fact, this is the heart of Frege's way of avoiding his puzzle about identity statements).

But our theory of reference denies that referring expressions such as "Socrates" conceal descriptions or introduce predicate elements. If we keep the predicative element the same and substitute a different referring expression—say, "Plato" for "Socrates"—then whether or not we have the same proposition expressed depends solely upon whether or not the same thing is referred to. And this in turn depends upon whether the historical explanation of the use of these two expressions traces back to the same individual. If you say "Henry is bald" and I say "George is bald" we express the same proposition if the person you referred to by using the name "Henry" and I by using the name "George" are the same person. But what you say is true if and only if the person you referred to—that is, the person historically connected—when you used the name "Henry" has the property of being bald; whereas what I say is true if and only if what I referred to by using the name "George" has the property of being bald.

The truth conditions are different because they must be stated in terms of what is referred to by different expressions, in the one case my use of the name "George" and in the other your use of the name "Henry." Yet we may express the same proposition.

So with predicative statements involving proper names, given the same predicate, sameness or difference of propositions comes down to sameness or difference of the referent of the names. It seems that if we try to state the truth conditions for a particular use of such a statement, we are not going to arrive at what we should like to call the proposition expressed. But although we thus are separating truth conditions from propositions expressed, the latter notion is still a fairly clear concept. It seems, however, that we cannot in the same way preserve a clear notion of what proposition is expressed for existence statements involving proper names.

Our problem arose because we wanted on the one hand to make it possible that one child saying "Santa Claus does not exist" may express the same proposition as another who says "*Père Noël n'existe pas.*" But, on the other hand, our explanation of the truth conditions for such statements in Rule (*R*) made them different for the two cases. We have seen, however, that if the historical explanation theory is correct, a difference in truth conditions without a shift in proposition expressed can occur in any case with predicative statements. This can occur when there is a difference in names used without a change in referent. So this seems to be a general feature of the theory's treatment of names. When we turn to negative existence statements and Rule (*R*), however, we cannot give as a criterion for propositional identity sameness of referent. For, of course, if true, the name in such a statement has no referent.

What we would like, still continuing with the example, is a reason for saying that both children express the same proposition that is at once in line with our theory and intuitively satisfying. I want to suggest that we may find such a reason once more by using the idea of a historical connection, that, in our example, it is the blocks in the historical explanation of the use respectively of the names "Santa Claus" and "Père Noël" that are themselves historically connected. Once again, I do not have the resources to

spell out a general principle for what this historical connection must be, any more than I did with the notion of a block itself. Yet in the example before us, and others one can think of, our inclination to say that people using different names express the same negative existence proposition seems to be a matter of historical connection between the blocks involved. In our example, it seems to me that the reason we think both children express the same proposition is that the story of Santa Claus and the story of Père Noël, the stories passed on to the two children as if they were factual, have a common root. And if there were not this common history, I think we should rather hold that the two children believed similar, perhaps, but not identical falsehoods, for example, when the one attributed gifts to Santa Claus and the other to Père Noël and that they expressed different truths when one said "Santa Claus does not exist" and the other said "*Père Noël n'existe pas.*"

VIII. Concluding Remarks

If this discussion has been on the right track, then at least the outline of a solution to some problems concerning nonexistence statements is available to the historical explanation theory. One point emerged in the course of the last sections. We can perhaps point to criteria for saying when two existence statements involving names express the same proposition, but these criteria take a different form from those for predicative statements involving names. In particular, it cannot be a matter of sameness of referent. For predicative statements we were able to suggest a way of representing propositions, as ordered n-tuplets, but no obvious way of representing propositions expressed by existence statements suggests itself. This does not seem to me to count against the theory, since the notion of a proposition is not, I think, a clear one that has established use outside of a theory. The fact that the representation suggested for predicative statements involving proper names has no counterpart for existence statements, however, may account in part for the fact that Russell took the alternatives for proper names to be either a Meinongian view or

a concealed descriptions view. For the representation of propositions suggested is, I think, essentially Russellian and either of these views of ordinary proper names would allow him to apply it to existence statements.

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