IV

NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

A. J. AYER

It is generally assumed that if we are to use language to make particular statements about the world, we must employ at least two sorts of conventions: demonstrative conventions which serve to correlate signs with particular objects, and descriptive conventions which mark out the ways in which these objects can be classified. More succinctly, we must have the means both of referring to individuals and of saying something about them.

In a natural language like English, the signs which do the work of referring are demonstrative such as the words «this» or «I», proper names like «London» or «Socrates» and definite descriptive phrases like «the author of Waverley» or «the man in the corner». The efficacy of demonstrative words like «this» depends upon their use in some physical context; they are, as it were, part of a gesture which picks out the object to which they refer. Such gestures have to be interpreted and can be misinterpreted. One way of guarding against their being misinterpreted is to couple the gesture with an individuating description.

Definite descriptive phrases may also be tied to a context. To understand the reference of an expression like «the man in the corner» one has to know the spatial position of the speaker. However, this dependence is not essential. In principle it can always be removed by enlarging the description. The function of a definite descriptive phrase is to identify an object by ascribing to it a property which it alone possesses.

Proper names like «London» or «Socrates» may be said to come midway between demonstratives and definite descriptions. Even when used in the presence of the object to which it refers a proper name is not a pure demonstrative. If 'N' is the name, to say «This is N» is not merely a way of saying «This is this». Neither is a proper name equivalent to a definite description. A statement of the form «N is the so-and-so» is never analytic. On the other hand it is not possible to grasp the reference of a proper name unless one is shown the object to which it refers, or can identify the object by some description, or at least can recognize it by its possession of some property

which could be uniquely described. We may say, therefore, that proper names do duty for demonstratives or descriptions, as the case may be, even though they are not logically equivalent to them.

It is characteristic of both proper names and definite descriptions that they can be significantly used and understood in the absence of the objects to which they refer. They can also purport to refer to objects which do not exist. In other words, it is not a necessary condition of their meaningful employment that there should in fact be anything which they are used to denote.

It was the problem of showing how a referential expression could be meaningful even though it had no denotation that led Russell to his Theory of Descriptions. His technique was in effect to make even definite descriptive phrases non-referential. For what we were taken to mean by ascribing a property f to an object which we identified as the one which possessed the property g was just that there was some object x which alone possessed g and which also possessed f. What we are left with is an indefinite existence statement: our attempt to refer to a particular object is transformed into the claim that some unidentified object is the only one to possess a certain property. If we are asked what is this object x which alone possesses the property g and answer by supplying some further identifying description, or by employing a proper name which does duty for such a description, the effect will be not to pin down the subject of our statement, but only to enlarge the predicate. We shall merely be adding to our statement that there exists an object x which is the one and only thing that has g, and which also has f, the further information that x is the one and only thing that has some other property h. It is clear from this that if we are to find any values for the variable x, they will have to be designated by pure demonstratives, that is by signs which simply point to the objects that they denote without in any way describing them. We can understand, therefore, why the atomic sentences in Russell's system are obtained by combining predicates with logically proper names.

But now it may be asked whether we really need to fall back upon logically proper names. If we have a description which only one object satisfies, then any object which is found to answer to this description will be uniquely identified. In that case, it may be argued that we do not require any more definite way of referring to individuals than is provided by the existentially quantified variable. If I understand him rightly, this is the view taken by Professor Quine in his *Word and Object*. He casts it in the form of a proposal to eliminate singular terms.

Though the point is arguable, I agree with Professor Quine that this proposal can be carried through. However, this still leaves the question why it should be made. It can hardly be claimed that there is any practical advantage in employing a language without singular terms. What theoretical issue is at stake ?

I think that the answer is to be found in the belief that what can be shown can also be said; or, to speak a little more precisely, that it must be possible to make explicit everything that in the ordinary way we are left to pick up from the context. This amounts to claiming that all that should really be necessary for understanding whatever a given language has the resources to communicate is the knowledge of the rules which govern it: the identities and the spatio-temporal positions of the persons who employ it need not come into the picture. Devices such as the use of tenses or pronouns, or words like «here» and «now», or ordinary proper names, have only the virtue of economy; they enable us to indicate what we should otherwise have to go to some trouble to spell out. But the important point is that what they are used to indicate could always be spelled out. The role that these indexical signs play in the process of communication is not essential.

Again, I agree with this thesis. I suppose that the main reason why such demonstrative expressions have been thought to be essential is the belief that without them our language would offer us no anchor in reality. It would not tell us where to look in order to find out whether a given statement was true. But the answer to this is that we already have an anchor if our language is such that its rules allow us to correlate its predicates with types of empirical situations. It is true that the claim that a certain description is uniquely satisfied cannot be conclusively established; so that in deciding when to accept a statement which includes a uniqueness rider, we shall have to rely upon conventions which will fall outside the rules of the language itself. But then it is also true that we have to rely on such conventions in order to interpret the use of demonstratives. Such difference as there is on this score would appear to be only a difference in degree.

Another point which should not be overlooked is that the anchor which the use of demonstratives affords us is a shifting anchor. For the reference of words like 'here' and 'now' varies from person to person and from moment to moment. Consequently, if all referential statements have ultimately to be reduced to statements which indicate the spatio-temporal position of the speaker, it will usually not be possible for the same referential statement to be expressed by different speakers, or by the same speaker at different times. In practice this will not be a great handicap to communication: it will not

be hard to supply the extra premisses which will secure identity of reference. But it does mean that the guarantee of uniqueness of reference, which the use of demonstrative is intended to secure for us, is less straightforward than it is often taken to be.

My own view is that if we think we need such a guarantee of uniqueness, the best procedure might be simply to forge one. Having identified various things, or events, as standing in various spatio-temporal relations to one another, we can then give the whole system a fictitious point of origin. The uniqueness of the things which we have identified is then guaranteed by the fact that if anything else is found to answer to the same description it is just denied the postulated relation to the point of origin. The name or description by which the point of origin is itself referred to is not taken seriously. That is to say, nothing will be allowed to count as a failure in its reference or as a misplaced success. If we find that something does answer to the description, but that it stands in the wrong relation to the other identified events, we shall simply allow it to take its place in the system, without ceasing to regard the point of origin as unique.

We can, indeed, find an illustration of this in our actual system of dating. It is now generally agreed that if a person answering sufficiently to the description of Jesus Christ existed at all, he was born in the year 4 B. C. On the face of it, this hypothesis is self-contradictory, but we do not so regard it; neither do we infer from it that it is, for instance, false that the battle of Waterloo was fought in the year 1815 A.D. since it was in fact fought not in the 1815th but in the 1819th year of the series which started in the year in which Christ was born. The reason for this is that once we have got the system working, the relation of its constituents to the alleged common point of origin is not treated as a question of fact, but as a matter of convention. What remains as a question of fact is the relation of the constituents to one another.

Discussion

Prof. L. J. RUSSELL

1. I think Professor Ayer's main thesis is contained in his statement that «What can be shown can also be said». His basic principle is that if we can get a predicate (simple or complex) which enables someone to identify an object as the only object possessing the predicate, then this predicate will serve to mark out the object uniquely, without any need to use demonstratives, or singular terms of any kind. And he holds that in principle this can always be done.

2. I am not sure how much this comes to.

Let me begin by distinguishing between (1) singular terms referring to objects which can, and (2) singular terms referring to objects which cannot, be in principle presented in sense perception.

M. Macmillan is an example of (1), Julius Caesar of (2).

As regards (2) it seems clear that there is no alternative but to accept a thesis similar to Professor Ayer's: Whatever can be known about Julius Caesar *must* be said. Though it is a great help to have medals, portraits, statues, books written by him, even an acquaintance with the localities in which he lived and worked.

I do not want to go so far as to say that the name «Julius Caesar» is merely a label which we attach to a bundle of predicates for we do think of Julius Caesar as a person, and it is the attempt to realise him as a person that gives significance to the predicates. But we have no means of identifying him, except through the predicates attaching to him: the name *is* a label attached to the predicates. And this is true of all objects which cannot be presented in sense-experience.

We are left then with objects which can be so presented.

Here it seems to me that so long as such an object has never been presented to me in sense-experience, I am no better off in regard to it than I am in regard to Julius Caesar.

Bertrand Russell distinguished between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description: I want to speak simply of acquaintance and description, because a great deal of what we get in both ways is hardly knowledge. But acquaintance is I think our best and most satisfactory way of getting convincing identification of an object, however much this identification may be safeguarded by description. I think «identification» here means something rather different from what it means in the case of objects which cannot be presented in sense experience.

I point out someone to you, and mention his name. If the person is already known to you by description, labelled with his name, then the sense-experiences you get may give the name and the description a new significance. The name is no longer just a label for a description. It gets a new colouring; I am inclined to say that a new dimension is added to it. This kind of identification of an object is not possible in the case of objects belonging to the past.

3. I think that descriptions by themselves may enable us to identify an object, actually present in sense-experience, as the only object to which the descriptions apply, but I agree with Professor Ayer that this can be precarious. And I think that it is only certain kinds of descriptive material that enable us to do it.

A large number of unique specifiers are of no help at all here,

taken by themselves. Consider «the first man to run a mile in four minutes». This by itself, is useless as an identifying mark, in the case where we know that this individual is one of the persons actually present. It will be a help, if we know other things about Roger Bannister — especially his personal appearance so; but it will be these other things which give us our identifying clues.

«The mother of so and so». This is unique, but by itself, even in the presence of the lady, is in no better case. The «tallest man in Europe in 1960» is in even worse case, because, however uniquely it specifies, the particular individual specified by it is unknown.

So that I think it is not so much unique specifiers in themselves that are the greatest help for identification, but rather specifiers that are unique in a particular spatio-temporal context. «The man in the corner — the one in the red coat». Many people wear red coats; but only one in the corner does.

4. One of the points which Professor Ayer makes seems to me to involve an important bridge between what can be shown and what can be said.

He says that «to understand whatever a language has the resources to communicate, all we need is a knowledge of the rules of the language».

He also says that among these rules are rules correlating the predicates of the language with types of empirical situations.

Now these correlations depend on gestures, and it seems to me that they embody the results of the gestures, so that it is not surprising, if when the correlations have been learned, the gestures can be dispensed with, and the language by itself can serve to enable us to pick out, and in this sense identify, particular individuals.

That is the first bridge. There is a second bridge, I think, in the scheme of spatio-temporal ordering made by geographers, historians and astronomers. Professor Ayer does not refer explicitly to this scheme, but it is at the back of what he says on his last page.

My point is a simple one. It is that we can understand reference to objects within scheme so as to pick them out for purposes of identification only because the scheme enables each individual to fix his «here-now» of sense experience within the scheme so as to relate everything which falls within the scheme to his actual empirical position. That is how we can get to the man in the corner from the objective space-time scheme needed by scientists and historians.

I do not think that what I have said is in disagreement with Professor Ayer's thesis, but it may serve to show that the thesis is not as revolutionary as it might appear to be.

Le problème est de réduire au minimum les catégories sémantiques de termes non-logiques nécessaires pour qu'un langage puisse servir à communiquer les informations relatives au monde de l'expérience. Les autres usages du langage, en particulier les usages «performatifs» ne sont pas envisagés ici.

Russell, par sa théorie des descriptions, avait réussi à dispenser des noms propres, pour ne retenir que les variables pour individus et les noms de prédicats (à un ou à plusieurs arguments) — et, bien entendu, les constantes logiques et les quantificateurs.

Quant aux termes servant d'index (démonstratifs, termes égocentriques), dont la signification est essentiellement liée au contexte extralinguistique concret, Quine a montré que leur élimination est toujours possible, à condition d'avoir un cadre de référence intersubjectif et stable.

M. Ayer ajoute à ceci que ce cadre de référence peut avoir un caractère provisoire et qu'il peut devenir en quelque sorte mythique ou artificiel.

Il faut noter qu'on conserve encore deux catégories sémantiques (pour termes non-logiques ou référentiels), puisqu'à côté des symboles pour prédicats on utilise des variables pour individus. Cependant, si la nécessité de ces variables suppose qu'on doive pouvoir distinguer dans la réalité plusieurs «individus», le fait qu'il n'est plus nécessaire de se référer à un individu déterminé par quelque index paraît, à M. Ayer, dispenser de la notion de «substance à la Locke», se rapportant à un inconnaissable qu'il faut montrer sans qu'on puisse le déterminer uniquement par des prédicats.

Carnap (*Logische Aufbau der Welt*) a proposé un langage où les symboles pour individus correspondent à des données d'expérience concrètes (fort complexes, mais traitées comme inanalysables) bien localisées dans le temps (*Elementarerlebnisse*). Il doit alors utiliser un unique signe pour un prédicat binaire (non-logique), ce qui maintient en définitive deux catégories sémantiques de symboles non-logiques. Le système soulève deux difficultés de principe (*Companionship* et *Imperfect community*).

Goodman (*The Structure of Appearance*) a proposé un système analogue, mais inverse, où les noms pour «individus» se rapportent à des entités que l'on traiterait traditionnellement comme des abstraits (*Sense qualia*).

La 2ème difficulté (*Imperfect community*) est ici surmontée, mais la 1ère (*Companionship*) subsiste. De plus la relation non-logique fon-

damentale de «coprésence» (*Togetherness*) reste assez obscure et n'est pas encore convenablement axiomatisée. Le système continue à employer 2 catégories de symboles non-logiques. De plus, sa puissance d'expression n'a pas encore été montrée adéquate à tout le domaine de l'information scientifique. (L'incertitude sur la suffisance d'un langage du premier ordre n'est pas encore levée).

La logique combinatoire cherche à éliminer les variables pour individus à quantifier. Mais elle se voit obligée, sous peine d'inconsistance, de réintroduire une diversité de catégories de symboles. (Il faut distinguer certaines familles d'entités, les «catégoriales» et les autres, ou les «canoniques» et les autres; et ceci amènera nécessairement une distinction de catégories sémantiques).

Tels sont les principaux résultats techniques auxquels M. Ayer s'est référé dans son exposé et sur lesquels nous marquons notre complet accord. Nous avons simplement souligné plus nettement les limitations de ces travaux. Ils se heurtent à des difficultés qui pourraient être insurmontables.

Le problème est de déterminer la portée philosophique que ces résultats peuvent avoir.

En ce qui concerne le problème des «constituants» de la réalité, l'analyse d'un langage dans lequel peuvent être exprimées les informations qui concernent cette réalité doit évidemment être complétée par une étude de la manière dont les formes ou les expressions («sentences») de ce langage peuvent être mises en connexion avec les données de l'expérience, et donc du (méta-)langage où les règles de cette mise en correspondance peuvent être formulées. Cette partie du travail n'a pas été fort poussée encore et elle semble devoir mener à des difficultés sérieuses.

De toute façon il faudra au moins une référence, laquelle peut être globale, au «donné total de l'expérience», lequel est ici supposé intersubjectif et unique. Sans doute ceci peut être un présupposé inexprimé; c'est du moins une condition nécessaire à tout fait de communication entre deux personnes réalisée par l'intermédiaire d'un agent physique capable de les relier. Mais il faudrait voir si cette condition est suffisante.

En tout cas, nous croyons que cela a déjà d'importantes conséquences philosophiques. Cela nous conduit à nous étonner de l'étrange liaison qui semble s'opérer dans l'esprit de M. Ayer entre son attitude délibérément empiriste et la faveur qu'il montre envers la thèse leibnizienne de l'identité des indiscernables, laquelle est d'inspiration rationaliste.

Il nous semble par ailleurs que l'étude devrait être élargie aux usa-

ges *performatifs* du langage, qui introduit dans celle des actes personnels, domaine qui paraît bien irréductible à celui des «choses», mais fait sans doute une partie importante (ou du moins un aspect important) de la réalité.

Plus radicalement, nous nous demandons comment une analyse du langage, même étendue au langage où peuvent s'exprimer les règles de la connexion des signes avec le donné d'expérience, peut nous livrer des lumières sur la nature ontologique des constituants derniers de la réalité.

Pourquoi à des catégories distinctes de mots du langage (ou d'«idées» de la pensée humaine) doivent nécessairement correspondre des catégories distinctes d'éléments «constituant» le réel ? C'est précisément ce qu'entendait nier la théorie aristotélicienne de l'abstraction. Il est vrai que cette théorie engage une épistémologie de type «réaliste» (qui est d'ailleurs la négation de la théorie dite «réaliste» dans la querelle des universaux). Mais ici nous entrerions dans un débat sur l'épistémologie et sur l'ontologie proprement dites.

Bornons-nous à dire que tout ce que nous ont appris les travaux techniques de l'analyse linguistique et sémantique auxquels se réfère la communication de M. Ayer nous paraît laisser intacts les problèmes fondamentaux de l'épistémologie critique et de l'ontologie.

Prof. FINDLAY

It seems to me that Professor Ayer's interesting proposal is open to one serious objection: that it prejudges the issue of the Identity of Indiscernables. If all we can say is that properties A, B, C, D, etc... are jointly manifested, there is nothing to guarantee unique instantiation, unless this principle is true. Now it seems clear to me that, at a certain level of abstraction, we can see this principle is to be false. e.g. in the case of symmetrical universes. If we imagine a wall-paper universe in which exactly similar individuals, similarly surrounded, are repeated at regular intervals in space and time, a reference which follows Professor Ayer's proposal will always apply to an infinity of cases. I am myself far from accepting mere imaginability as a criterion of real possibility and am inclined to think that, at a sufficiently deep level of reflection, the Identity of Indiscernables may be seem as true. But I do not think a language should be so constructive as to decide this difficult issue in advance. Professor Ayer can of course say that if every reference has this sort of infinite applicability it does not

matter: no one cares if what he says applies to countless other remote cases provided that it can be uniquely applied in the context of his actual experience. The objection of principle, seems to me, however, to remain.

Prof. A. J. AYER

1) First a minor point. In maintaining the thesis that everything that can be shown can be said, I place no restrictions on the method of making statements. I should treat portraits, medallions and so forth as propositional functions. When they are interpreted as statements they are taken to assert that there exists something which physically corresponds to them.
2) I do not think that the distinction which Professor Russell has drawn between objects which we can hope to meet with in sense experience, and those which we cannot because they are in the past, has much bearing on my thesis. It is perfectly true that I can be introduced to Roger Bannister and not to Julius Caesar, but this does not affect my general contention that statements of the form «This is A», where «A» is a stand-in for a proper name, can be paraphrased by substituting for the proper name a description which applies uniquely to the individual in question, and by substituting for the demonstrative a description which identifies the spatio-temporal context. I must make it clear that I am not aiming at synonymity. The most I claim is that the paraphrase is adequate, in the sense that there is no information conveyed by the referential statement which cannot be conveyed by its non-referential counterpart. In general the non-referential statements will have to contain more information because everything that we ordinarily pick up from the context has to be spelled out: my contention is only that it need not contain less.
3) I agree with Professor Russell that most of the definite descriptive phrases which we use do not contain predicates which are uniquely satisfied by the individuals to which they refer. The uniqueness, as he says, is supplied by the setting. My point, with which I think he does not disagree, is that if we took the trouble we could make this explicit.
4) The most important point which Professor Russell has made is that I need semantic rules for my predicates, and he suggests that these rules embody gestures, in the sense that we have to show people how to employ them. I am not sure that the actual employment of gestures is strictly necessary, but certainly one has to ac-

quire the use of some predicates by being shown specimens of the things to which they apply. This fact is not damaging to my thesis, insofar as it can still be maintained that there is no need for ostensive signs within the language, but Professor Russell may be right in saying that it lessens its interest.

In reply to Professor Dopp

1) Professor Dopp says that I have not proved my thesis. It is true that I have not proved it formally, and indeed I am not sure what a formal proof of it would consist in. The most that can be done in a situation of this kind is to show that the thesis applies to what might be thought to be the most difficult cases and then challenge anyone to produce a counter-example. If Professor Dopp will produce his counter-example, I will do my best to deal with it.
2) Professor Dopp is right in saying that I have considered only the narrative and not, for example, the performative use of language. Though I haven't worked it out, I think that my thesis could be extended to cover this also. It would mean replacing personal pronouns by indefinite descriptions, with or without a uniqueness rider, and of course using the existential quantifier. The effect would be that the description of the performance would have to count as part of the performance, but I do not think that is a fatal objection.
3) I agree also with Professor Dopp in being doubtful about the feasibility of taking the further step of eliminating even the quantified variable and making do with a purely predicative, that is combinatorial, language. If this were feasible, it would be a vindication of Berkeley's thesis that things are bundles of qualities. I feel that it ought to be feasible, but it has not in fact been done and there may be good reasons why it can't be.
4) I cannot agree with Professor Dopp that linguistic theories of this kind have no ontological implications. Surely we learn something about the structure of the world, if we discover that it can be adequately described in this or that fashion. Indeed I don't know what ontological questions are if not the question whether we may or must employ such and such categories. The answer to them may, I think, be arbitrary in the sense that it may come to the point where we simply have to choose, on pragmatic grounds, between different conceptual systems.

In reply to Professor Findlay

I agree with Professor Findlay that the purely predicative language which I envisaged would presuppose the identity of indiscernibles and I agree with him that the fact that it prejudges this question may be one of the objections to it. On the other hand this objection does not apply to my thesis, so far as I actually took it in my paper. We can leave the question open by refusing to accept Russell's definition of identity, that is by allowing the possibility that $(\exists x)\ (\exists y)\ (\varphi x = \varphi y.\ x \neq y)$. This would be a purely logical, or metaphysical, possibility. As Professor Findlay himself admits, even if there were values of x and y for which it were true, there could be no practical means of discovering them.

In reply to Professor Hyppolite

I am interested to learn from Professor Hyppolite that the views which I have been putting forward bear an affinity to some of the early views of Hegel. This does not altogether surprise me as I had already noted a resemblance between them and the position taken by the English neo-Hegelian, F. H. Bradley, in his *Principles of Logic*.

In reply to Professor Perelman

1) I cannot accept Professor Perelman's suggestion that my approach to this problem has been syntactical. This may be true of Professor Quine, who has his own way of eliminating singular terms, but my concern has been wholly with semantics.
2) I should also like to make it clear that I am not questioning the particularity of our actual experiences, nor denying the existence of concrete extra-linguistic facts. I am only denying the necessity of getting this concreteness into the language in the form of indexical signs. In other words, I am maintaining that the concrete facts can be described in a purely abstract language.

In reply to Professor Passmore

1) When I said that the answers to ontological questions might be arbitrary, I was not of course implying that it was an arbitrary question how many glasses there were on this tray. What I had in mind was that there might be different conceptual systems, with different fundamental categories, which were all adequate for the

description of the world in which we find ourselves. I do not, for example, agree with Mr. Strawson that we are bound to take physical objects as our primary particulars. An alternative, which I believe to be feasible, is to have a system in which regions of space-time are the only individuals. Another possibility, which may or may not be feasible, would be to dispense with individuals altogether and «construct» everything out of qualities, whether physical or sensory. You will find an attempt to develop a system of this kind in Goodman's *Structure of Appearance*. Since they all describe the same world, these systems may be said to be models of one another, but they do differ radically and, in one sense of the term, the choice between them is arbitrary.

2) A feature of my language, since it is non-indexical, is that the truth of the statements which are made in it is independent of the places and times at which they are made and of the identities of the persons who make them. It follows, as Professor Passmore has pointed out, that it does not offer a translation of a statement like «We met at Oberhofen two years ago», but only a paraphrase. Professor Passmore is wrong, however, in saying that I do not mean my paraphrases even to preserve the truth-values of the statement they paraphrase. If cases can be found in which not even the truth-value is preserved, my thesis is refuted. But I hope that such cases cannot be found.