SINGULAR TERMS AND TRUTH-VALUES

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A frequent interpretation of Strawson's "On Referring" ([1]) has it that Strawson shows or attempts to show that there are statemens made in certain circumstances that are neither true nor false. The circumstances in question are those in which some singular term occurring in the sentence used to make the statement does not have a referent. ([2]) I propose to refer to this view as the 'Truth-Value Gap Thesis' (*TVG*). I believe there is both a mistaken and confused thesis here; mistaken because the *TVG* is false; confused because the TVG is not clearly Strawson's view.

Strawson's remarks in "On Referring" suggest *two* quite distinct views, only one of which is the *TVG*. Let *S* be a sentence containing at least one singular term used as a referring expression. Then the two views are:

(I) If *S* is assertively uttered on some occasion, then a necessary condition for the statement thus made to have a truth-value is that the singular terms refer.

and (II) If *S* is assertively uttered on some occasion, then a necessary condition for there being a statement made is that the singular terms refer.

These two positions are not only quite different, they are logically incompatible. For suppose that *S* is assertively uttered and the singular term does not have a referent. According to (I), there *is* a statement, but the statement is neither true

([1]) *Mind*, 59, 235 (July 1950): 320-344; reprinted in *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, ed. A. G. N. FLEW, 21-48. Page references to this paper will here refer to the Flew volume.

([2]) For a few examples we cite the following: L. LINSKY, "Reference and Referents", in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. Charles C. CATON, pp. 74-89; K. DONNELLAN, "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *The Philosophical Review* (1966), 281-304; and D. ODEGARD, "On Closing the Truth-Value Gap", *Analysis* (October, 1964), 10-12.

nor false. From (II), on the other hand, it follows that *no* statement has been made. And this is quite interesting, for only (I) is anything like the *TVG*. If Strawson's position is really (II), rather than (I), then nothing Strawson says entails there are statements that lack truth-values when the singular term fails to refer. A result would be that the most frequent interpretation of Strawson is outright mistaken. Now I do not mean to say that (II) really is Strawson's position, but only that certain things Strawson says suggest a view like (II), rather than (I). He says, for instance, that we must distinguish referring from asserting (stating), and then goes on to say that "to refer is not to assert, though you refer *in order* to go on to assert» (p. 38). This clearly suggests, I believe, that a necessary condition for my having made a statement at all is that I refer to some person or thing. And this suggests a view such as (II), not (I). But let us suppose that while Strawson is not too clear himself, his frequent interpreters are correct in taking (I) or the *TVG* to be his real position. The purpose of the following remarks is to show why I think (I) is mistaken.

Following K. Donnellan, (³) we distinguish two uses of definite descriptions, the attributive use and the referential use. In the attributive use, the speaker uses the description itself to say something of or about the thing in question, while in the referential use the description (merely) picks out the thing the speaker goes on to say something of or about. Now in the case of definite descriptions, the *TVG* amounts to something like the following:

(1) If someone says that Θ is Ψ the statement has no truth-value if there is no Θ..

But if we are to distinguish the attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions, (1) is misleading by speaking of *the* statement made by someone's saying the Θ is Ψ. Consider, for instance, the sentence:

(A) The man who won at Riverside in 1965 is married.

(1) suggests that (A) can be used to make exactly one statement, but once we distinguish the two uses of 'the man who won at

(³) "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *op. cit.*

Riverside in 1965' (A) can be used to make either statement S_1 or S_2.

S_1: There is someone who is both the man who won at Riverside in 1965 and is married.

S_2: There is someone, namely the man who won at Riverside in 1965, who is married.

S_1 attributes two properties to someone, while S_2 attributes a single property to someone. Hence, S_1 and S_2 are different statements, and it only creates confusion to speak of *the* statement someone makes by assertively uttering (A). But we can understand (1) if we simply bear in mind the two uses of definite descriptions. In the case of (A), for example, if there is no man who won at Riverside in 1965, then (1) has it that *both* S_1 and S_2 are neither true nor false. And this is an important point, for if (1) says that both S_1 and S_2 lack truth-value when there is no man who won at Riverside in 1965, this conjunctive claim is false if either S_1 or S_2 has truth-value. Now Donnellan argues that S_2 is true (under certain conditions), but agrees that S_1 is, perhaps, neither true nor false. This is a mistake, I believe, for there is a simple way to show that S_1 is false, hence has truth-value, when there is no man who won at Riverside in 1965. But why does Donnellan think that S_2 can be true ?

Donnellan has us suppose that I say S_2 when the description 'the man who won at Riverside in 1965' fails to fit anything, e.g. either there was no race at Riverside in that year or, if there was, two men tied for first place. Suppose, too, that I say this while pointing to Jim Hall and it is clear to everyone around that I was pointing to Jim Hall. Now Hall is married. Donnellan argues that here I have said something true of Jim Hall, even though I used a description that does not fit Hall. Now I have considerable doubts about this. It is true that if I said something true of Jim Hall, and Hall is the person referred to by S2, then I said something true in saying S2. It is not clear, however, that in saying S2 I can refer to Jim Hall if Hall did not win at Riverside in 1965. Donnellan seems to confuse S2 with the different statement S3.

S3: There is someone, namely Jim Hall, who is married.

S3 is true, but this hardly shows that *S2* is true when there is no winner at Riverside in 1965. But Donnellan would have it that if I say *S2* while pointing at Jim Hall, I have in effect said something like the true statement *S3*. This is suspect at best. Of course, anyone who says *S2* could have intended to say something like *S3*, but in the above case it remains true that *S2*, and not something like *S3*, was said. And when Hall did not win at Riverside in 1965, it is difficult to see how I could refer to Hall in saying *S2*. Donnellan thinks otherwise. But Strawson surely understands *referring* in such a way that if I use a description Θ to refer to *x*, then *x* fits the description Θ. Since Hall does not fit the description in *S2*, it follows that *S2* does not refer to Hall. If I have not referred to Hall in saying *S2*, then *S2* no more says something true of Hall than it says something true of any other man who I might mistakingly believe to be the winner of the race at Riverside. In short, in order to show that I could say something true by saying *S2* when the description fails to fit anything, Donnellan must show that *S2* can yet refer to someone who is married. In Strawson's sense of 'refer', however, if the description in *S2* does not fit anything *S2* does not refer to anything. So, either Donnellan has not shown that *S2* can refer to someone when nothing fits the description, or he is using 'refer' in some other sense than the one intended in (1). In either case, it is clear that Donnellan has failed to show that *S2* could have truth-value when nothing fits the description. I do not mean to say that *S2* does lack truth-value when nothing fits the description, but only that Donnellan has not shown otherwise. Indeed, I am free to leave the question of *S2*'s truth-value open here. For my concern is to show (1) false. And this can be done by showing that *S1* surely does have truth-value, whether or not *S2* does.

Suppose I say *S1* when there is no winner at Riverside in 1965. According to (1), *S1* is neither true nor false. This is surely wrong. In saying *S1* I am saying that there exists someone who has two properties, one of which is the property of having won at Riverside in 1965. And if there is no winner at Riverside in 1965, in saying *S1* I have said *falsely* that someone has a property, said falsely because this is a property that does not

belong to anything. Hence, *S1* is false if there is no winner at Riverside in 1965. But every sentence of the form "The Θ is Ψ" can be used to make a statement of the form "There is something that is both Θ and Ψ". And when there is no Θ, every such statement is false. Hence, (1) il false.

In conclusion, I have attempted to discredit a certain view generally attributed to Strawson. First, it is by no means clear that Strawson really holds such a view, for what he says suggests two quite different views, only one of which is anything like the *TVG*. Secondly, the question of whether Strawson holds this view or not aside, the *TVG* is plainly false.

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