

ON SENTENCES REFERRING

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Donald Davidson (¹) and John Wallace (²) have both used versions of an argument deriving from Frege to show that if sentences are taken to have a certain sort of relation to extra-linguistic entities then all true sentences have that sort of relation to the same entity. Jaegwon Kim has given a theory of events in which sentences are said to refer to, describe, specify, or express events; these relations between sentences and the world are just the sort that the Davidson-Wallace argument is deployed against. In defense of his theory, Kim (³) has argued that the assumptions made by the Davidson-Wallace argument are not justified. I should like to argue that Kim's attack on the assumptions is not sufficient to avoid the consequences of the Davidson-Wallace argument, and, in answer to an objection that might be raised, argue that the Davidson-Wallace argument cannot be applied to Davidson's own theory of concrete events.

The general form of the Davidson-Wallace argument, suggested by Ernest Sosa in correspondence, is as follows. Suppose that it is maintained that there is a relation R such that it holds between a sentence and some entity x and which is such that it satisfies the following principles:

- 1) If sentence S bears relation R to entity x and sentence S' is logically equivalent to S, then S' bears R to x;
- 2) If sentence S bears R to x and sentence S' is obtained from S by substituting some expression for a correferential expression in S, then sentence S' bears R to x.

Consider the following sequence, where p and q are any distinct true sentences:

- 3) p;
- 4) $\hat{x}((x = x) \ \& \ p) = \hat{x}(x = x)$;

5) $\hat{x}((x = x) \ \& \ q) = \hat{x}(x = x)$;

6) q .

By principle (2), (4) and (5) bear R to the same entity, for (5) is obtainable from (4) by substitution of correferential expressions, viz., ' $\hat{x}((x = x) \ \& \ q)$ ' for ' $\hat{x}((x = x) \ \& \ p)$ ', which are correferential by virtue of the fact that p and q were assumed to be true. Furthermore, (3) and (4) bear R to the same entity, and (5) and (6) also bear R to the same entity, in virtue of (1) and the fact that (3) and (4), and (5) and (6), are logically equivalent. Notice that in this general form, the argument holds of whatever relation is taken to hold between sentences and some extra-linguistic entity, so long as that relation satisfies (1) and (2). Thus, it may be held to militate against any theory that maintained that there is a relation of, e.g., representation or expression, between propositions and sentences, or one that held that sentences and events are related by the relation of reference, description, or expression. There are two ways in which one might seek to avoid the force of this argument: by holding, as Kim does, that (1) and (2) do not apply either to English or to the specific sentences which are said to have relation R to an extralinguistic entity; or by maintaining that this argument has considerable force against the theories of those that use the argument against others.

II

Kim's first argument against (1) consists in an attack on the unrestricted use of that principle. For Kim, those sentences which refer to, describe, or pick out events are those which "attribute an empirical property (or relation) to a concrete object (or ordered set of objects) at a time"; this is not intended as an exact criterion for what Kim calls event-describing sentences, but rather as a rough and ready rule for picking out such sentences. Kim's intuitions tell him that, of the following sentences, the first pair refers to the same event while the second pair refers to different events:

7) Socrates dies;

8) Xantippe's husband dies;

- 9) John becomes a father;
- 10) John's first child is born.

I restrict myself in what follows to the notion that sentences are said to refer to, rather than describe or pick out, events for two reasons. First it seems to me that we are clearer about the relevant characteristics of what I call "ordinary referring expressions" than about those of the sorts of expressions that are said to pick out or describe. Second, and more importantly, it seems to me that the ordinary notion of referring or something very much like it is what Kim has in mind as the relation between sentences and events. It might be said that this suspicion on my part is to avoid the "interesting" view that there is some special relation between sentences and events and opt for the "uninteresting" view that the relation is, for Kim, a reference or reference-like relation. But, if Kim does not hold the view I am attributing to him, then there are a number of interesting consequences. First, the Davidson-Wallace argument becomes irrelevant to Kim's view of events, so there is little point in Kim's concern with it. Again, it would seem that Kim owes us some clarification of the relation between sentences and events; what he has said, so far as I know, is just that principles (1) and (2) do not apply to the relation yet the relation is sufficiently similar to literal reference that it might be called reference. Finally, if the relation is not reference or some "picturing" relation, then it seems tenuous at best to argue from the grammatical form of sentences to the "structure" of events, as Kim does. (7) and (8) are said to refer to the same events because the same property is attributed to the same person; (9) and (10) refer to different events, despite the fact that they are logically equivalent, because they attribute different properties to different individuals. As is clear from these examples, and from the criterion of event-describing sentences mentioned above, the subject-predicate form has much to do with which event, if any, is picked out by a sentence. In general, transformations that preserve logical equivalence cannot be counted on to preserve grammatical form. But, Kim continues, if a given transformation does not preserve

the grammatical form of the sentence, and our (or at least Kim's) intuitions as to which event is being picked out depend heavily upon the subject-predicate grammatical form of event-describing sentences, then that transformation which does not preserve grammatical form may not yield a sentence which refers to the same event as the original. In fact, the transformation may take the sentence out of the class of event-describing sentences altogether. Thus, we have no right to say that (3) and (4) pick out the same event, particularly since (4) is not in the (rough) class of event-describing sentences, even if we assume that (3) is. This argument clearly depends upon Kim's intuitions as to the subject-predicate form of sentences, namely that only subject-predicate sentences pick out events.⁽⁴⁾ But surely, if this argument is to have much force, it must be based on more than mere intuitions, unless Kim is willing to claim that it is merely a fact, apparent to all except perhaps those who defend the Davidson-Wallace argument, that only subject-predicate sentences pick out events. I find Kim's intuitions implausible, particularly when they are compared with what we know about ordinary referring expressions, i.e., proper names and definite descriptions. First, it is clear that a proper name and a definite description, although of differing grammatical form, may pick out the same individual; if sentences are to be referring expressions analogous to names and definite descriptions, it would seem that it could be the case that sentences of different grammatical forms might pick out the same event. Second, one of the ways in which we see if an expression is referential or not is to examine those contexts in which it may meaningfully appear; thus, if we have an expression 'e' which we know to be referential, and we find we can substitute another expression 'e₁' is referential as well. The only context that comes to mind that might work for the class of sentences that Kim wants to single out is that where we have two sentences filling the blanks of the connective "The fact that ... causes it to be the case that ..."; if it were to turn out that only sentences which Kim has singled out could be substituted here, then there might be some grounds for singling them out. But this supposed connective will not do, for consider:

11) The fact that the temperature is below 32° causes it to be the case that if there is precipitation there will be snow. The sentence following the second 'that' in (11) is, of course, not of the subject-predicate form. Third, we have a straightforward way of saying in our language that two ordinary referring terms are correlative, namely identity sentences. We do not have an analogous way of saying that two sentences are correlative, i.e., a way in which we use rather than mention the sentences; Kim, of course, cannot accept the obvious use of logical equivalence as the sentential analogue of identity, for that would be to accept (1). It might also be noted that, if one were to take the analogy strictly, the "identity" connective ought to be completely extensional. These considerations serve, I think, to cast doubt on Kim's intuitions that subject-predicate sentences alone refer to events as well as the intuition that sentences refer at all. Of course, such considerations are not answers to intuitions, but rather, serve to weaken intuitions; one always has the privilege of differing intuitions.

Kim's second argument is directed against the use of (1) even where (1) is restricted to event-describing sentences. Consider the following pairs of event-describing sentences, each of the pairs being logically equivalent:

- (12) Archie married Edith;
- (13) Edith married Archie;
- (14) Xantippe's husband died;
- (15) Xantippe became a widow.

Kim claims that (12) and (13) are not correlative because of the explanatory (and perhaps causal) asymmetry between them, i.e., to explain why Archie married Edith is not to explain why Edith married Archie. (14) and (15) do not refer to the same event if we accept the seemingly acceptable convention that the location of events is determined by the location of the individuals that make them up. Again, I do not find these purported counter-examples convincing. In the case of (12) and (13), if explanation by reasons is merely a variety of causal explanation and causal explanation depends, at least in part, on how we describe the events to be explained, as Davidson claims, ⁽⁵⁾ then there is no reason based upon the supposed

explanatory asymmetry between (12) and (13) to suppose them to refer to different events. Again, the convention concerning location is not so clearly acceptable as Kim takes it to be. For example, which individuals take part in and what is the location of the event described by:

(16) General Smith overthrew Dictator Jones while Jones was out of the country ?

Finally, if events are the extra-linguistic entities which Kim takes them to be, there is no reason to suppose that the sentences that refer to them are the only determinants of which individuals take part in them; it might be the case that both Xantippe and Socrates take part in the event described by (15) although only the former is mentioned. One might also argue against both of Kim's attacks on (1) that the sentences which he holds to be logically equivalent, i.e., the pairs (7)-(8), (9)-(10), (12)-(13), and (14)-(15) are not logically equivalent at all. Although this would be a short way of dealing with Kim's counter-examples, I find it unappealing in light of the elucidation that can be reached by taking them seriously. These supposed counter-examples, then, depend upon accepting Kim's notion of how and what sentences are related to events; the argument depends upon what it is trying to defend for its plausibility.

If Kim's arguments are not sufficient to show that (1) is not an acceptable principle and yet, I suspect, the arguments I have used in reply to Kim are not sufficient to do more than gain an impasse with Kim, what might be said in favor of (1) ? The plausibility of (1) lies with a consideration I raised above in comparing ordinary referring expressions with sentences; there I noted that while we have no way of saying that two sentences refer to the same entity without mentioning the sentences, we do have a way of doing so for ordinary referring expressions. In order that we make the analogy between sentences and other referring expressions as strong as possible, we ought to have some way of saying that sentences refer to the same entity without mentioning those sentences.

It is clear that material equivalence will not do at all, for then any two true sentences will refer to the same event. To accept logical equivalence would be to accept (1).

Stronger, intensional connectives will serve to break the analogy down, for we do not need such a strong connective for definite descriptions and names; such connectives would probably serve only if we were willing to say two sentences refer to the same event if and only if they mean the same thing, which would clearly be unacceptable to Kim. Perhaps the way to make (1) clear in its ambitions is to make explicit the implicit antecedent thus:

(17) If S' bears R to some entity, and if S bears R to x and

S' is logically equivalent to S , then S' bears R to x .

The plausibility of (1) (and, of course, of (17)), then arises from the whole idea of sentences referring and the analogy one would like to maintain between sentences and other referring expressions. Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Frege in his formal language used '=' both as the sign for identity and for material equivalence; it might be suggested that the resulting ambiguity in '=' is the, or at least a, reason Frege supposed that sentences had a reference as well as a sense.

Besides the above attempt to argue that (1) is not an acceptable principle, Kim wants to restrict the range of application of (2). Consider the following sentences:

(18) Charlie is the fastest man on the team;

(19) Charlie is the best player on the team.

Assuming that Charlie is both the best player and the fastest man on the team, (2) tells us that (18) and (19) refer to the same event. But, points out Kim, there is an explanatory, and perhaps a causal asymmetry between (18) and (19), for (18) may be used to explain (19) but not vice versa. Kim's suggestion is to use Wiggins' distinctions between genuine and non-genuine reference and identity statements. 'The fastest man on the team' and 'The best player on the team' are then said not to be making genuine reference in (18) and (19), and one restricts (2) to those sentences in which the substitutions are of only those terms making genuine reference. Again, Kim says that genuine identity statements are not event describing; this appears to be in line with his rough criterion for event describing sentences. In application to Davidson's argument, this move will be used to argue that, even is (1) is acceptable, the

move from (4) to (5) is not justified since $\hat{x}(x = x \ \& \ p)$ and $\hat{x}(x = x \ \& \ q)$ fail to make genuine reference in these sentences. Considerations analogous to those brought against Kim's criticism of (1) may also be brought against his criticisms of (2). First, there is the question of his example; I find it unconvincing for the same reason I found his purported counter-examples to (1) unconvincing, namely, there is at least one alternative theory (Davidson's) which shows the asymmetry to be no argument against identity. It must be noted that this consideration alone is only sufficient to gain an impasse with Kim's view, since Kim may continue to maintain his example in the face of merely an opposing theory. Again, if we consider the analogy between sentences and other referring expressions, e.g., definite descriptions, we find that in the case of definite descriptions such as 'the present King of Greece' we may substitute for terms which do not make genuine reference, in this case 'Greece,' and there is no change of reference. If, then, sentences are to be referring expressions, there would seem no reason to restrict possible substitutions in the way Kim suggests. This latter consideration, I would suggest, also lends plausibility to (2) in the same way that the above analogy to identity sentences containing ordinary referring expressions lent plausibility to (1); in each case, the principle concerned is plausible because there is an analogy between it and principles which are appropriate to our usual English referring expressions. These considerations, then, seem to me to point out that if one accepts that sentences are really referring expressions, there is considerable plausibility in (1) and (2); if this is the case, then Davidson's argument also becomes quite plausible, and argues a good case against taking sentences as referring expressions.

In defense of Kim, one might reply to my arguments that all Davidson's argument shows is that (1) and (2) are not applicable to English, no matter what their plausibility when applied to some formal languages. This reply, I think, would be misplaced, for my arguments are based upon the analogies between ordinary referring expressions and what we should say about sentences if we were to take them seriously as refer-

ring expressions; and the characteristics of what I have called ordinary expressions are the characteristics that they have in English, and are used in analogy to ordinary English sentences which are supposed by Kim to be referential. My argument, then, is that if sentences in English are taken as referring expressions, and if there are certain rules or characteristics that apply to other English referring expressions, then the same or analogous rules and characteristics ought to apply to sentences, or at least to those sentences which are taken as referential.

III

Two objections one might propose to the Davidson-Wallace argument take the form of trying to apply that argument to the theory of events that Davidson is trying to defend. First, one might argue that the concrete event theorist will want to say that sentences may *describe* events. In this case, where $R =$ description and 'x' ranges over concrete events, it is plausible to say that (1) and (2) will apply; clearly, the consequence will be that all true sentences describe the same event. The second argument is that the analogous consequence will follow if we take $R =$ making true and 'x' ranging over concrete events, namely, that all true sentences are made true by the same event. If these sorts of counter-examples to the Davidson-Wallace argument work, then the concrete event theorist will be inclined to say that the argument does not work because, e.g., (1) and (2) fail to hold of the relations making true and describing, just as Kim attempts to do with respect to the relation, whatever it is, that he wants to say holds between sentences and events.

The first argument is based upon a misconception of the concrete event theorist's position, for the concrete event theorist, i.e., Davidson, does not want to maintain that sentences ever describe events. Thus, although

(20) This bleeding of Hamlet occurred
contains an expression, a demonstrative-descriptive phrase, i.e., 'this bleeding of Hamlet', which does describe an event, the

sentence *as a whole* does not describe an event, except, perhaps, in the highly problematic sense in which

(21) Hamlet bled

describes or is "about" Hamlet. This is Davidson's point that once we see the logical form of event sentences, i.e., once we cast those sentences in a notation which displays the truth conditions of the sentence in a more perspicuous way than does English, we see that the sentences that purportedly describe events do not do so. Thus, if we recast the sentence which serves as one of Kim's examples of an event describing sentence into the more perspicuous notation of quantification theory, i.e., we recast (7) ("Socrates dies") as

(21) (Ex) Dying (Socrates, x),

we see that the sentence does not describe a single event at all, but rather contains an expression, 'Dying (Socrates, x)' which gives rise to a description of a particular event i.e., (ιx) (Dying (Socrates, x)), but which might serve as a description of more than one event. The concrete event theorist then wants to maintain that in no case does a sentence describe an event, although there are some cases in which a sentence may contain an expression that does describe an event. Thus, just as we wish to make a distinction between sentences that are, in some sense or other, "about" and those expressions which describe material objects, so the concrete event theorist wishes to make a distinction between those sentences which are "about" events and those non-sentential expressions which describe events.

The second argument, it seems to me, has more initial plausibility than does the first; its initial plausibility lies in the hoary philosophical theory that sentences are true just in case they "correspond" to the world, just in case there is something in the world that "makes true" the sentence. This sort of theory seems to be based on the notion that since it is sentences (or statements or propositions or utterances, pick your theory) which are true, and we do not speak equivocally when we say that two sentences are true, there must be something out there in the world that makes them true by being in some one simple relation to the true sentences. The implicit suggestion here is

that there must be this simple relation between sentences and the world or our sentences will never be forced into the needed confrontation with the world. It seems to me that there are two courses that might be adopted here. First, one might, like Kim, deny that (1) and (2) hold of the relation of making true; thus, it might be said, we can see that (3) and (4) are not made true by the same entity, since that would be counter-intuitive. However much this might appeal to one initially and agree with common intuitions, it seems a weak proposal to me, in that it does depend solely on our intuitions or, at best, on our intuitions and our theory. That is, if we accepted this route of escape, we would be in no better a position than Kim is with respect to my counters to his appeals to intuitions and theory; we would merely be maintaining a different theory and would have reached an impasse. The second reply would be to propose a theory that did justice to our common intuitions that sentences must face a confrontation with the world and yet which avoided the problems the traditional theories of correspondence have in the face of the Davidson-Wallace argument. This latter course is one in fact taken by Davidson (*), who denies that there is some simple relation that holds just between sentences and the world which is the ground of truth. Rather, he maintains, there is the relation Tarski used between language and the world, namely satisfaction, which is such that it is defined for both open and closed sentences and the truth making relation is a special case of this more general relation. It turns out on this theory that in an analogous way to the usual sorts of correspondence theories there is just one relation between true sentences and the world, that of being satisfied by every sequence. However, the instructive and interesting, as well as ultimately saving, point about Davidson's approach is that while the result is the same, the routes by which the result is reached differs for different sentences, since different open sentences are satisfied by different sequences and different closed sentences are constructed from different open sentences. It is this crucial change from the usual theories of correspondence between language and the world, from the theories that maintain that the truth making relation is one

between *sentences* and the world, that enables the concrete event theorist to avoid the consequences of his own argument.

IV

What puzzles me about Kim's defense of the view that (at least some) sentences in English refer to or describe events is why he defends the view at all. It seems to me that he might as well or better defend a view which took gerundives or sentence nominalizations as expressions referring to events. He might then say that a gerundive refers to an event if and only if that gerundive is the nominalization of an English E-sentence, where an E-sentence is a member of the class of sentences Kim now calls event-describing. He then would be able to say, I take it, all that he has said so far and appears to want to say about events without having to defend the position that sentences are referring expressions. I would suggest then that while Kim's theory as it presently stands is weak, due to the central position of the thesis that sentences refer, there is a relatively unradical change that he might make in his theory to avoid this central difficulty.

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FOOTNOTES

(¹) (1) pp. 694-695; (2) pp. 91-92; (3) pp. 752-753; (4) pp. 305-306.

(²) p. 146.

(³) (6).

(⁴) (6), pp. 204-5, 209.

(⁵) (1) pp. 697 ff.

(⁶) (3) pp. 756 ff.