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BRIAN LOAR ON SINGULAR TERMS

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For a hundred years description theories have been the ruling theories of proper names. In the last ten years a movement that rejects such theories has been gathering strength: it claims that the referent of a name is not determined by the descriptions associated with the name but by causal connections of a certain sort. Brian Loar has recently defended the ruling view against this revolution.¹

Ruling classes, in philosophy as much as in society, typically discredit revolutionists by misrepresenting them. That is the first step in Loar's defense: he incorrectly attributes to the new movement an implausible theory he calls 'the radical two-use theory'. The theory is a straw man. I will show this in Section I. Second, against the background of apparent revolutionary failure that this attribution creates, Loar offers a new description theory. In Section II I will show that this new theory is as much open to objection as the classical ones, if not more so.

I

The radical two-use theory has three theses. The works cited by Loar² as the basis for the theory are Keith Donnellan's 'Reference and definite descriptions'³ and 'Proper names and identifying descriptions',⁴ and Saul Kripke's 'Naming and necessity'.⁵ Oddly enough none of the three theses that constitute the theory are to be found in any of these works.

Two of the theses are as follows: (i) Donnellan's distinction between *referential* and *attributive* uses of definite descriptions is extended to *all* singular terms; (ii) a causal theory of reference is given for all referential uses.⁶ The works cited do not support the attribution of either of these theses to Donnellan, and show clearly that the attribution of either to Kripke would be mistaken.

In 'Reference and definite descriptions' Donnellan describes a distinction

between referential and attributive uses of *descriptions* but does not apply the distinction to other singular terms. He does not offer a causal theory of the referential uses.

In 'Naming and necessity', Kripke offers a causal theory of *names* but does not extend this to other singular terms. He expresses skepticism about Donnellan's distinction in several footnotes.⁷

In 'Proper names and identifying descriptions' Donnellan offers a causal theory of names but also does not extend this to other singular terms. The closest he comes to such an extension is his remark in a footnote that a referential definite description is a 'close relative' of a proper name.⁸

Though (i) and (ii) are not to be found in Donnellan or Kripke, perhaps Loar is right in attributing them to the new movement: they may seem a natural development of views that are to be found in Donnellan and Kripke. For, *some* names seem tied to descriptions, and a Donnellanish distinction amongst pronouns and demonstratives seems plausible. We apply Donnellan's distinction across the board to singular terms and arrive at (i). *How* does a referential use identify its referent? The question cries out for an answer. The causal theory of names suggests one: referential uses are causally linked to their objects in a certain way. We have arrived at (ii). Certainly this development of the ideas of Donnellan and Kripke seemed natural to me, and I made it in 'Singular terms'.⁹

I have no objection, therefore, to the attribution of (i) and (ii) to the movement, though I assume others would have. I object strongly, however, to the attribution of the third thesis.

The third thesis in the two-use theory (iii), is:

the semantical content of a referential utterance of '*t* is *G*' is, in an abstract way, identified with the ordered pair $\langle G, x \rangle$, where *G* is the predicated property and *x* the referent to *t*.¹⁰

Kripke and Donnellan do not talk of 'semantical content'.¹¹ Nor do I. What does Loar mean by it? He says initially that it is the utterance's 'possible world truth-conditions'. If this were all there were to it the attribution of this further thesis might seem in order: it would capture the Kripkean view that a name is a 'rigid designator': the object in any possible world which is relevant to the truth conditions of an utterance containing the name is the name's referent in the actual world. However Loar's expression, 'semantical content', invites another, stronger, interpretation of the quoted passage. According to this interpretation, *there is nothing more to 'the meaning of*

a name' (or any other referential use) than its referent; there is nothing semantically significant about it except that. So interpreted the two-use theory is too implausible to be attributed to anybody without evidence. Loar accepts the invitation of his own terminology and does so interpret the theory.

The problem with such a theory has been obvious since Frege: it makes it impossible to explain the differing 'cognitive values' of ' $a = a$ ' and ' $a = b$ '. If Kripke is right about names being rigid designators then one way in which statements like these containing names have been thought to differ turns out to be illusory: it has been thought that whereas ' $a = a$ ' is *necessarily* true ' $a = b$ ' is only *contingently* so. However the two-use theorist would be committed to something much stronger: a pair of true statements of this form containing referential terms would not differ in any semantically significant way; they would be 'synonymous'. Such a view has plausibility only if ' a ' and ' b ' are Russellian 'logically proper names'. It has no plausibility at all as a view of ordinary proper names (as Russell well knew), let alone referential descriptions. And, of course, the two-use theory is supposed to be a theory of such ordinary terms.

Thesis (iii) must be dropped: a causal theorist must put more into the meaning of a name than its referent. I have claimed that Frege was right in supposing that what matters to the meaning, or semantic significance, of a name is its *mode of presenting the referent*. I have claimed further that *this mode is the name's underlying causal network* which, if the name is not empty, is grounded in its referent. The theory I have urged is in fact an amended two-use theory obtained by replacing (iii) by this claim.¹²

That (iii) is understood by Loar in the strong way is shown by two of the four 'serious problems' he finds with the two-use theory. His third problem is that the theory:

implies that a *sufficient* condition of understanding a referential utterance of ' t is G ' is merely correctly identifying the referent of t and the property expressed by G .¹³

He rightly argues against this claim of sufficiency concluding as follows.

It would seem that, as Frege held, some 'manner of presentation' of the referent is, even on referential uses, essential to what is being communicated.¹⁴

I agree. Understanding a referential use of a name involves linking it in a certain way to the right causal network, the network that constitutes the manner in which the name presents the object. The required linking

associates the name with the hearer's set of beliefs (and other thoughts) involving the name, and grounded in the right object; those beliefs are part of the causal network.¹⁵ So my amended two-use theory does not imply the above sufficiency claim. Nor would the two-use theory if (iii) concerned only 'possible world truth-conditions' (the amended theory would near enough entail such a theory). Only if (iii) is understood as the strong thesis about the meaning of a name could the two-use theory have that implication.¹⁶

Loar's second problem also concerns understanding. He rightly points out that a hearer can understand a referential utterance even though deceived about the existence of the referent.

But on the two-use theory the non-existence of the referent should make all the difference.¹⁷

Once again this is so only if the two-use theory includes the strong version of (iii). The problem does indeed seem insoluble for that two-use theory. However, for the amended theory, the non-existence of the referent does not make 'all the difference' to understanding because it is consistent with the hearer linking the referential use to the right causal network; even 'empty' referential terms have networks.

I do not suggest that these brief remarks here should remove all worries occasioned by these two problems: lots more needs to be said. The point is rather that Loar has incorrectly, and without proper basis, attributed to the new movement a theory for which these problems *are so serious as to seem insoluble*. In my view the two problems are quite soluble for the amended two-use theory. So also are the other two problems Loar raises.¹⁸ This is not the place to attempt to show this.¹⁹ However there should be no presumption that the *real* alternatives to Loar's description theory cannot solve these four problems.

II

Loar's theory of names is part of a complicated theory of all singular terms involving two distinctions, one between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* uses, and another between *generalizing* and *identifying* uses.²⁰ So far as I can see, we can abstract from these complications. Loar regards the paradigm uses of names as intrinsic and identifying. What follows is a discussion of his theory of those names.

First, Loar claims that a speaker's use of a name, *N*, refers to *x* only if *x* instantiates some identifying individual concept which is intrinsic (= essential) to what he means.²¹ This is like the classical description theories: the required concept is picked out by an identifying description the speaker associates with *N*. The special feature of Loar's theory is that the required concept will include, for each speaker, *being called N*.²² It is this feature that I shall object to.

The appeal of Loar's theory to someone wanting to save description theories in the face of criticisms by Kripke and Donnellan is clear enough. These criticisms have shown how little the user of *N* may believe about its referent – how *ignorant* he may be – and how many of his central beliefs about the referent may be false – how much in *error* he may be. Yet it is very plausible to claim that users of *N* all believe that its referent *is called N*; and that belief is true. It may not seem difficult then to build an *identifying* concept around this for each speaker. (Some building is required because typically more than one object is called *N*.) The arguments from ignorance and error against description theories still apply but they are not nearly so persuasive.

Kripke placed the following condition on a description theory of names:

(C) For any successful theory, the account must not be circular. The properties which are used in the vote [to determine the name's referent] must not themselves involve the notion of reference in a way that it is ultimately impossible to eliminate.²³

An obvious violation of condition (C) would be provided by a theory that offered as the identifying description associated with a name *N* by a speaker, 'the object I refer to by *N*'. A more interesting violation would be provided by a theory that allowed the following sort of 'reference borrowing'. Speaker *a* associates the identifying description, 'the object *b* refers to by *N*'; *b* associates 'the object *c* refers to by *N*'; *c* associates 'the object *a* refers to by *N*'. We have come a full circle. We have not explained what determines the referent of *any* of these uses of *N*. A satisfactory description theory that allows for reference borrowings of this sort *must require that some lender can manage reference on his own*.

Though Loar makes no mention of Kripke's condition (C), he seems to be aware of it: he briefly considers and rejects the charge that his theory is circular.²⁴ The briefness of this consideration is surprising given Kripke's detailed discussion of (C)²⁵ and given that Loar's theory is, on the face of it at least, inconsistent with that discussion.

To see this consider what it is for x to be called N . Loar has two relations in mind. First it is for x to be (commonly) *referred* to by N . Second, it is for x to have been dubbed N . That dubbing has taken place if a decision or agreement has been made known to use N to *refer* to x .²⁶ We can sum this up: x 's being called N amounts to *a community's present practice of referring to x by N , a practice that may be dependent on a past one.*

Consider first a present practice that is not dependent on a past one. Suppose that the concept a speaker adds to *being called N* to make an identifying concept is F ; so the full concept is *the F called N* . Given what we have just discovered about being called N , Loar's theory tells us that the speaker of N referred to x because it is an F that the members of his community (a community he must be able to identify) are in the practice of referring to by N . In virtue of what is it x that they are in the practice of thus referring to? Loar tells the same story for each one of them. Each one refers to x only because everyone does. We have no *independent* route to x . This sort of community reference borrowing is no better than the individual borrowing we considered earlier. It violates (C) and is circular.

The situation is not significantly better if the speaker's borrowing takes us back to a past practice of referring to x by N . (In one respect it is worse: the speaker, or one of his fellows, will have to be able to identify the relevant past community, a task that is likely to prove harder than that of identifying the present one.) We do not have immediate circularity in this case because the present community is dependent on the past one but not vice versa. For this reason Kripke seems to regard it as not a violation of condition (C).²⁷ Nevertheless it is just as objectionable unless we are given some way of eliminating the notion of the *past community's reference*.²⁸ We need to be told in virtue of what it was x that the *past* community referred to by N .²⁹ Loar tells us only that each member of it referred to x because all the others did. The circularity has reappeared but in this case it is in the past. This is what we should expect, of course, because there was a time when the past community was a present one like the community above, entirely dependent on its own resources. Reference borrowing from the past simply transfers the problem.

This point about circularity in a theory of a community's reference, whether the present community or the past one on which the present one depends, seems obvious enough. However it is clearly not obvious to Loar. A simple example may help to make it so. Take a community of five each of

whom refers to a certain raven by the name 'Oscar'. Suppose that there is no earlier community from which the community borrows this reference. How does Loar's theory explain the reference? Essential to what each of the five means by the name is the concept *the raven called 'Oscar' by this community*, a concept instantiated only by Oscar. Now the concept raven is instantiated by all ravens. For the theory to be satisfactory it must include something that picks Oscar out from amongst all ravens. *Being called 'Oscar'* does this only by making use of the very relationship we are trying to explain. We want to know what makes each of the five's use of 'Oscar' refer to Oscar. Part of the answer is that Oscar is an object the other four refer to by 'Oscar'. But it is the reference of each of the five to Oscar we are trying to explain. *We have been given no way of determining which raven the five do call 'Oscar'*.

Loar has not offered a satisfactory theory of reference. Perhaps his theory can be amended to avoid the circularity. That remains to be seen. A difficulty is that attempts to do so are likely to run foul of the usual arguments from ignorance and error. I shall not rehearse those arguments but will briefly indicate the difficulty.

Loar's first move to avoid the circularity seems clear enough: *some* members of the community on which we all ultimately depend must be able to refer to *x* by *N* without relying on the community. How is that requirement to be filled out?

An easy way would be to say that the community rests on *all* those who do not rely on reference borrowing; on *all* those who have an identifying concept which does not include *being called N*. But this easy way leads to disaster. Amongst those courageous enough, or foolhardy enough, to 'go it alone' will be many who are simply *wrong* about *x*; no single answer will emerge, let alone a correct one. The theory would be open to the arguments from ignorance and error.

The theory must somehow specify *the experts*. How is that to be done? The theory can't, on pain of circularity, say that they are *the people who are expert about what N refers to*. It seems that the theory must require that the members of the community identify the experts. But then we can forget about the community altogether. We are back to reference borrowing from individuals (the experts). That theory must, of course, avoid violating condition (C) (*a* thinks *b* is the expert, *b* thinks *c* is, and *c* thinks *a* is). Still there is the problem that a member of the community may not know the

experts; or he may know one but not have an identifying individual concept of him except one that involves *is called* and so raises the same problems; or he may *misidentify* the expert; or he may identify the expert but the expert be *wrong* about the referent. A description theory owes us a solution to these problems of ignorance and error.

I shall conclude with some tentative remarks in diagnosis. At one point Loar contemplates, but finally rejects, the view that the identifying concept may not be *sufficient* for reference (not, of course, on the ground of circularity): a causal condition may have to be added.³⁰ The discussion suggests that it is *inconceivable* to Loar that a causal chain could be part of the semantical content of a name. Why is this? I suspect it is because of his Gricean interest in *what the speaker means*. It is taken for granted that what he means must be 'descriptive'. Why this prejudice for description over what we might call 'demonstration' or 'designation'? I would say that if a member of the above small community says 'Oscar is black' he is likely to mean simply, *Oscar is black*. He might mean this and yet be able to tell us nothing more about his meaning than that he does mean this. How is it possible that he could mean simply this? His 'communicative intentions' might be linked to a causal network involving others in the community and grounded in Oscar. The network embodies the community's *convention* of referring to Oscar by 'Oscar'. So speaker meaning is to be explained partly in terms of conventional meaning. No good Gricean can accept this line of thought, for it is a central tenet of Griceanism that speaker meaning explains conventional meaning. One way to resist is to assume from the start that speaker meanings *must* be 'descriptive'.

So I see Loar's attachment to description theories as going with his Gricean approach to semantics as a whole. My attachment to causal theories goes with a different approach. A decision about names must be closely connected to a decision about semantics in general.³¹ I suspect that it would be most helpful at this time to focus on that connection in discussing names. Nevertheless there is clearly still a need for discussion focussed more directly on differing opinions about names. My aim here has been to show that Loar's paper has two important defects as a contribution to this discussion: it misrepresents the opposing view and largely ignores a central criticism.³²

NOTES

¹ Brian Loar, 'The semantics of singular terms', *Philosophical Studies* 30 (1976), pp. 353–377.

² *Ibid.*, p. 376, Notes 5 and 6.

³ Keith S. Donnellan, 'Reference and definite descriptions', *Philosophical Review* (1966), pp. 281–304.

⁴ Keith S. Donnellan, 'Proper names and identifying descriptions', in: *Semantics of Natural Languages*, Davidson and Harman (eds.) (Reidel, 1972), pp. 356–379.

⁵ Saul Kripke, 'Naming and necessity', in: *Semantics of Natural Language*, Davidson and Harman (eds.) (Reidel 1972), pp. 253–355, 763–769.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 355–356. Loar is cautious about (ii), saying that a causal theory 'normally' accompanies the two-use theory. Certainly the 'abnormal' view is unsatisfactory for it promises no plausible *theory* of referential uses. And a causal theory (of names only) is the most prominent positive thesis of two of the three works Loar cites.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 343, Note 3; p. 346, Note 22; pp. 348–349, Note 37.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 378, Note 8.

⁹ Michael Devitt, 'Singular terms', *Journal of Philosophy* (1974), pp. 183–205. So far as I know this is the only work in which even (i) is to be found, though Steven Boër and William G. Lycan come close to it in 'Knowing who', *Philosophical Studies* 28 (1975), pp. 299–344 (see particularly p. 319); they do not mention (ii). I have since modified my views but still subscribe to some version of (i) and (ii); see my *Designation* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming), Secs. 2.5–2.7.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 355. Loar says later that this is "the chief philosophical interest of causal theories of referring" (p. 368).

¹¹ In another paper (not cited by Loar), 'Speaking of nothing', *Philosophical Review* (1974), pp. 3–32, Donnellan flirts dangerously with what he calls 'a natural view' which is like Loar's third thesis: a predication is thought to 'express a proposition' like the above semantical content (see pp. 11–12 particularly). However, given (i) that he concludes the paper with some (appropriately) skeptical remarks about the notion of a proposition (p. 32, particularly), and (ii) that he does not seem to assign the notion any theoretical role, his commitment to the 'natural view', and the point of any such commitment, are left indeterminate.

¹² 'Singular terms', *loc. cit.*, p. 204.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 357.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 357.

¹⁵ 'Singular terms', *loc. cit.*, pp. 189–190, see also pp. 201–203 where *misunderstandings* are discussed. I discuss understanding in more detail in 'Semantics and the ambiguity of proper names', *Monist* (1976), pp. 404–423 (see particularly pp. 410–411).

¹⁶ Strangely enough, in relating causal theories of reference to the two-use theory, Loar says: "the content of what is said, believed or intended is supposedly often a matter of extra-mental causal connections" (*op. cit.*, p. 356), but he never discusses the theory as if that were part of it.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 356.

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¹⁸ One of these problems, his fourth, seeks to show that "the difference between paradigm referential and paradigm attributive utterances is more a matter of degree than the radical two-use theory can make sense of" (*op. cit.*, p. 357). I discuss this problem briefly in 'Singular terms', *loc. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ I do attempt to show it in *Designation*, forthcoming. In it I develop what I have here called the amended two-use theory. The matters discussed in the pages cited in Notes 9, 12, 15 and 18 above are taken up in more detail. So also is the problem of 'empty terms' touched on above. Loar's first problem is that the two-use theory is committed to the

unacceptable view that it is 'a synchronic accident' that one expression should have two uses (*op. cit.*, p. 356). Kripke makes a similar criticism of Donnellan in 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference', in: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume II: Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, French, Uehling, and Wettstein (eds.) (University of Minnesota, 1977), pp. 255–276. I discuss this criticism in 'Donnellan's distinction', forthcoming.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 362–363.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 366–367. I am ignoring appearances of the name within opaque contexts.

²² *Op. cit.*, pp. 370–371.

²³ 'Naming and necessity', *loc. cit.*, p. 283.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 371.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 283–286, 297, 766–768. See also Donnellan's 'Proper names and identifying descriptions', *loc. cit.*, part VI.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 367–369.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 766.

²⁸ If we are not given this we *do* seem to have a violation of (C) despite what Kripke says. (C) requires not only that the account not be circular but also that the notion of reference be ultimately eliminable.

²⁹ In virtue of what was *Jonah* the Biblical referent of 'Jonah' as Loar claims (*op. cit.*, p. 372)?

³⁰ *Op. cit.*

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 367–369.

³¹ I attempt this in: *Designation*. It can be seen there that I do not regard the above method of resistance as effective.

³² My thanks to Hartry Field and Bill Lycan for comments on a draft which have led to marked improvements in this paper.