II.—PROPER NAMES

By John R. Searle

Do proper names have senses ? Frege [1] argues that they must
have senses, for, he asks, how else can identity statements be
other than trivially analytic. How, he asks, can a statement of
the form a = b, if true, differ in cognitive value from a = a ?
His answer is that though " a " and " b " have the same referent
they have or may have different *senses*, in which case the state-
ment is true, though not analytically so. But this solution
seems more appropriate where " a " and " b " are both non-
synonymous definite descriptions, or where one is a definite
description and one is a proper name, than where both are proper
names. Consider, for example, statements made with the follow-
ing sentences :

(*a*) " Tully = Tully " is analytic.
But is
(*b*) " Tully = Cicero " synthetic ?
If so, then each name must have a different sense, which seems at
first sight most implausible, for we do not ordinarily think of
proper names as having a sense at all in the way that predicates
do ; we do not, *e.g.* give definitions of proper names. But of
course (*b*) gives us information not conveyed by (*a*). But is this
information about words ? The statement is not about words.

For the moment let us consider the view that (*b*) is, like (*a*),
analytic. A statement is analytic if and only if it is true in
virtue of linguistic rules alone, without any recourse to empirical
investigation. The linguistic rules for using the name " Cicero "
and the linguistic rules for using the name " Tully " are such that
both names refer to, without describing, the same identical
object ; thus it seems the truth of the identity can be established
solely by recourse to these rules and the statement is analytic.
The sense in which the statement is informative is the sense in
which any analytic statement is informative ; it illustrates or
exemplifies certain contingent facts about words, though it does
not of course describe these facts. On this account the difference
between (*a*) and (*b*) above is not as great as might at first seem.
Both are analytically true, and both illustrate contingent facts
about our use of symbols. Some philosophers claim that (*a*) is

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[1] *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by
Geach and Black, pp. 56 ff.

fundamentally different from (b) in that a statement using this form will be true for any arbitrary substitution of symbols replacing " Tully ".[1] This, I wish to argue, is not so. The fact that the same mark refers to the same object on two different occasions of its use is a convenient but contingent usage, and indeed we can easily imagine situations where this would not be the case. Suppose, e.g. we have a language in which the rules for using symbols are correlated not simply with a type-word, but with the order of its token appearances in the discourse. Some codes are like this. Suppose the first time an object is referred to in our discourse it is referred to by " x ", the second time by " y ", etc. For anyone who knows this code " x = y " is trivially analytic, but " x=x " is senseless. This example is designed to illustrate the similarity of (a) and (b) above ; both are analytic and both give us information, though each gives us different information, about the use of words. The truth of the statements that Tully = Tully and Tully = Cicero both follow from linguistic rules. But the fact that the words " Tully = Tully " are used to express this identity is just as contingent as, though more universally conventional in our language than, the fact that the words " Tully = Cicero " are used to express the identity of the same object.

This analysis enables us to see how both (a) and (b) could be used to make analytic statements and how in such circumstances we could acquire different information from them, without forcing us to follow either of Frege's proposed solutions, i.e. that the two propositions are in some sense about words (Begriffsschrift) or his revised solution, that the terms have the same reference but different senses (Sinn und Bedeutung). But though this analysis enables us to see how a sentence like (b) could be used to make an analytic statement it does not follow that it could not also be used to make a synthetic statement. And indeed some identity statements using two proper names are clearly synthetic ; people who argue that Shakespeare was Bacon are not advancing a thesis about language. In what follows I hope to examine the connection between proper names and their referents in such a manner as to show how both kinds of identity statement are possible and in so doing to show in what sense a proper name has a sense.

I have so far considered the view that the rules governing the use of a proper name are such that it is used to refer to and not to describe a particular object, that it has reference but not sense. But now let us ask how it comes about that we are able to refer

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[1] W. V. Quine, From a Logical Point of View, esp. chap. 2.

to a particular object by using its name. How, for example, do
we learn and teach the use of proper names ? This seems quite
simple—we identify the object, and, assuming that our student
understands the general conventions governing proper names,
we explain that this word is the name of that object. But unless
our student already knows another proper name of the object,
we can only *identify* the object (the necessary preliminary to
teaching the name) by ostension or description ; and, in both
cases, we identify the object in virtue of certain of its character-
istics. So now it seems as if the rules for a proper name must
somehow be logically tied to particular characteristics of the
object in such a way that the name has a sense as well as a
reference ; indeed, it seems it could not have a reference unless it
did have a sense, for how, unless the name has a sense, is it to be
correlated with the object ?

   Suppose someone answers this argument as follows : " The
characteristics located in teaching the name are not the rules for
using the proper name : they are simply pedagogic devices
employed in teaching the name to someone who does not know
how to use it. Once our student has identified the object to
which the name applies he can forget or ignore these various
descriptions by means of which he identified the object, for they
are not part of the sense of the name ; the name does not have a
sense. Suppose, for example, that we teach the name ' Aristotle '
by explaining that it refers to a Greek philosopher born in
Stagira, and suppose that our student continues to use the name
correctly, that he gathers more information about Aristotle,
and so on. Let us suppose it is discovered later on that Aristotle
was not born in Stagira at all, but in Thebes. We will not now
say that the meaning of the name has changed, or that Aristotle
did not really exist at all. In short, explaining the use of a name
by citing characteristics of the object is not giving the rules
for the name, for the rules contain no descriptive content at all.
They simply correlate the name to the object independently of
any descriptions of it."

   But is the argument convincing ? Suppose most or even all
of our present factual knowledge of Aristotle proved to be true
of no one at all, or of several people living in scattered countries
and in different centuries ? Would we not say for this reason
that Aristotle did not exist after all, and that the name, though
it has a conventional sense, refers to no one at all ? On the above
account, if anyone said that Aristotle did not exist, this must
simply be another way of saying that " Aristotle " denoted no
objects, and nothing more ; but if anyone did say that Aristotle

did not exist he might mean much more than simply that the name does not denote anyone.[1]   If, for example, we challenged his statement by pointing out that a man named " Aristotle " lived in Hoboken in 1903, he would not regard this as a relevant countercharge.   We say of Cerberus and Zeus that neither of them ever existed, without meaning that no object ever bore these names, but only that certain kinds (descriptions) of objects never existed and bore these names.   So now it looks as though proper names do have a sense necessarily but have a reference only contingently.   They begin to look more and more like shorthand and perhaps vague descriptions.

Let us summarise the two conflicting views under consideration : the first asserts that proper names have essentially a reference but not a sense—proper names denote but do not connote ; the second asserts that they have essentially a sense and only contingently a reference—they refer only on the condition that one and only one object satisfies their sense.

These two views are paths leading to divergent and hoary metaphysical systems.   The first leads to ultimate objects of reference, the substances of the scholastics and the *Gegenstände* of the *Tractatus*.   The second leads to the identity of indiscernibles, and variables of quantification as the only referential terms in the language.   The subject-predicate structure of the language suggests that the first must be right, but the way we use and teach the use of proper names suggests that it cannot be right : a philosophical problem.

Let us begin by examining the second.   If it is asserted that every proper name has a sense, it must be legitimate to demand of any name, " What is its sense ? "   If it is asserted that a proper name is a kind of shorthand description then we ought to be able to present the description in place of the proper name. But how are we to proceed with this ?   If we try to present a complete description of the object as the sense of a proper name, odd consequences would ensue, *e.g.* that any true statement about the object using the name as subject would be analytic, any false one self-contradictory, that the meaning of the name (and perhaps the identity of the object) would change every time there was any change at all in the object, that the name would have different meanings for different people, etc.   So suppose we ask what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying a particular name to a particular object.   Suppose for the sake of argument that we have independent means for locating an object ;   then what are the conditions for applying a name to

[1] *Cf.* Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* para. 79.

it ; what are the conditions for saying, *e.g.* " This is Aristotle "?
At first sight these conditions seem to be simply that the object
must be identical with an object originally christened by this
name, so the sense of the name would consist in a statement or
set of statements asserting the characteristics which constitute
this identity. The sense of " This is Aristotle " might be,
" This object is spatio-temporally continuous with an object
originally named ' Aristotle ' ". But this will not suffice, for,
as was already suggested, the force of " Aristotle " is greater than
the force of " identical with an object named ' Aristotle ' ", for
not just any object named " Aristotle " will do. " Aristotle "
here refers to a particular object named " Aristotle ", not to any.
" Named ' Aristotle ' " is a universal term, but " Aristotle ", is a
proper name, so " This is named ' Aristotle ' " is at best a necessary
but not a sufficient condition for the truth of " This is Aristotle "?
Briefly and trivially, it is not the identity of this with any object
named " Aristotle ", but rather its identity with Aristotle that
constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth
of " This is Aristotle ".

Perhaps we can resolve the conflict between the two views of
the nature of proper names by asking what is the unique function
of proper names in our language. To begin with, they mostly
refer or purport to refer to particular objects ; but of course
other expressions, definite descriptions and demonstratives,
perform this function as well. What then is the difference
between proper names and other singular referring expressions ?
Unlike demonstratives, a proper name refers without pre-
supposing any stage settings or any special contextual conditions
surrounding the utterance of the expression. Unlike definite
descriptions, they do not in general *specify* any characteristics
at all of the objects to which they refer. " Scott " refers to the
same object as does " the author of *Waverley* ", but " Scott "
specifies none of its characteristics, whereas " the author of
Waverley " refers only in virtue of the fact that it does specify a
characteristic. Let us examine this difference more closely.
Following Strawson [1] we may say that referring uses of both
proper names and definite descriptions presuppose the existence
of one and only one object referred to. But as a proper name
does not in general specify any characteristics of the object
referred to, how then does it bring the reference off ? How is a
connection between name and object ever set up ? This, which
seems the crucial question, I want to answer by saying that
though proper names do not normally assert or specify any

[1] " On Referring ", MIND, 1950.

characteristics, their referring uses nonetheless presuppose that the object to which they purport to refer has certain characteristics. But which ones ? Suppose we ask the users of the name " Aristotle " to state what they regard as certain essential and established facts about him. Their answers would be a set of uniquely referring descriptive statements. Now what I am arguing is that the descriptive force of " This is Aristotle " is to assert that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true of this object. Therefore, referring uses of " Aristotle " presuppose the existence of an object of whom a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true. To use a proper name referringly is to presuppose the truth of certain uniquely referring descriptive statements, but it is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed. And herein lies most of the difficulty. The question of what constitutes the criteria for " Aristotle " is generally left open, indeed it seldom in fact arises, and when it does arise it is we, the users of the name, who decide more or less arbitrarily what these criteria shall be. If, for example, of the characteristics agreed to be true of Aristotle, half should be discovered to be true of one man and half true of another, which would we say was Aristotle ? Neither ? The question is not decided for us in advance.

But is this imprecision as to what characteristics exactly constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying a proper name a mere accident, a product of linguistic slovenliness ? Or does it derive from the functions which proper names perform for us ? To ask for the criteria for applying the name " Aristotle " is to ask in the formal mode what Aristotle is ; it is to ask for a set of identity criteria for the object Aristotle. " What is Aristotle ? " and " What are the criteria for applying the name ' Aristotle ' ? " ask the same question, the former in the material mode, and the latter in the formal mode of speech. So if we came to agreement in advance of using the name on precisely what characteristics constituted the identity of Aristotle, our rules for using the name would be precise. But this precision would be achieved only at the cost of entailing some specific predicates by any referring use of the name. Indeed, the name itself would become superfluous for it would become logically equivalent to this set of descriptions. But if this were the case we would be in the position of only being able to refer to an object by describing it. Whereas in fact this is just what the institution of proper names enables us to avoid and what distinguishes proper names from descriptions. If the criteria for

proper names were in all cases quite rigid and specific then a proper name would be nothing more than a shorthand for these criteria, a proper name would function exactly like an elaborate definite description.   But the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lie precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to agreement on what descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object.   They function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions.   Thus the looseness of the criteria for proper names is a necessary condition for isolating the referring function from the describing function of language.

To put the same point differently, suppose we ask, " Why do we have proper names at all ? "   Obviously, to refer to indivi- duals.   " Yes, but descriptions could do that for us."   But only at the cost of specifying identity conditions every time reference is made : suppose we agree to drop " Aristotle " and use, say, " the teacher of Alexander ", then it is a necessary truth that the man referred to is Alexander's teacher—but it is a contingent fact that Aristotle ever went into pedagogy (though I am suggest- ing it is a necessary fact that Aristotle has the logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to him : any individual not having at least some of these properties could not be Aristotle).

Of course it should not be thought that the only sort of loose- ness of identity criteria for individuals is that which I have described as peculiar to proper names.   Referring uses of definite descriptions may raise problems concerning identity of quite different sorts.   This is especially true of past tense definite descriptions.   " This is the man who taught Alexander " may be said to entail, e.g. that this object is spatio-temporally con- tinuous with the man teaching Alexander at another point in space-time : but someone might also argue that this man's spatio-temporal continuity is a contingent characteristic and not an identity criterion.   And the logical nature of the connection of such characteristics with the man's identity may again be loose and undecided in advance of dispute.   But this is quite another dimension of looseness than that which I cited as the looseness of the criteria for applying proper names and does not affect the distinction in function between definite descriptions and proper names, viz. that definite descriptions refer only in virtue of the fact that the criteria are not loose in the original sense, for they refer by telling us what the object is.   But proper names refer without so far raising the issue of what the object is.

We are now in a position to explain how it is that " Aristotle " has a reference but does not describe, and yet the statement " Aristotle never existed " says more than that " Aristotle " was never used to refer to any object. The statement asserts that a sufficient number of the conventional presuppositions, descriptive statements, of referring uses of " Aristotle " are false. Precisely which statements are asserted to be false is not yet clear, for what precise conditions constitute the criteria for applying " Aristotle " is not yet laid down by the language.

We can now resolve our paradox : does a proper name have a sense ? If this asks whether or not proper names are used to describe or specify characteristics of objects, the answer is " no ". But if it asks whether or not proper names are logically connected with characteristics of the object to which they refer, the answer is " yes, in a loose sort of way ". (This shows in part the poverty of a rigid sense-reference, denotation-connotation approach to problems in the theory of meaning.)

We might clarify these points by comparing paradigmatic proper names with degenerate proper names like " The Bank of England ". For these latter, it seems the sense is given as straightforwardly as in a definite description ; the pre-suppositions, as it were, rise to the surface. And a proper name may acquire a rigid descriptive use without having the verbal form of a description : God is just, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., *by definition* for believers. Of course the form may mislead us ; the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, etc., but it was nonetheless the Holy Roman Empire. Again it may be conventional to name only girls " Martha ", but if I name my son " Martha " I may mislead, but I do not lie.

Now reconsider our original identity, " Tully = Cicero ". A statement made using this sentence would, I suggest, be analytic for most people ; the same descriptive presuppositions are associated with each name. But of course if the descriptive presuppositions were different it might be used to make a synthetic statement ; it might even advance a historical dis-covery of the first importance.

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