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Abstract

A well-known critique of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, offered by P.F. Strawson, is that a central tenet of Russell's theory, the claim that any particular utterance of a sentence with a non-referring definite description will be either true or false, is mistaken. Strawson provides a similarly well-known argument in support of this claim which at least in part rests on an analysis of such utterances as implying or presupposing, rather than asserting, parts of the logically existential proposition that Russell takes such sentences to be. For Strawson, propositions such as 'the x is p' instead presuppose 'there is an x' rather than commit to the truth of that proposition. And fulfilling this presupposition is a necessary condition for any such proposition to have a truth value at all. In this paper, I aim to challenge Strawson's analysis and will argue that (i) we ought to take such utterances to really be asserting the logically existential proposition Russell analyzes them as, and thus that (ii) the utterances of sentences with a non-referring definite description do have truth values. I argue that taking these sentences to be presupposing certain propositions, rather than asserting them, better takes into account certain principles about which utterances ought to be declared false by an agent given their knowledge of other propositions.

Introduction

A well-known critique of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, proffered by P.F. Strawson, is that a central tenet of Russell's theory, the claim that any particular utterance of a sentence with a non-referring definite description will be either true or false, is mistaken. Strawson provides a similarly well-known argument in support of this claim which at least in part rests on an analysis of such utterances as implying or presupposing, rather than asserting, parts of the logically existential proposition that Russell takes such sentences to be.[1]

In this paper, I aim to challenge Strawson's analysis and will argue that (i) we ought to take such utterances to really be asserting the logically existential proposition Russell analyzes them as, and thus that (ii) the utterances of sentences with a non-referring definite description do have truth values.

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[1] There are other topics at issue in this dialectic—such as the adequacy of Russell's analysis of definite descriptions in the case of what have been termed incomplete descriptions. Such issues will not concern us here, but for the entire dialectic, see Russell ("On Denoting", 482-490); Strawson (328-335); and Russell ("Mr. Strawson on Referring", 385-389).

I will proceed as follows. In Sect. 2, I provide the relevant background on Russell and Strawson's analyses of sentences and utterances containing definite descriptions. In Sect. 3, I explicate Strawson's main argument. In Sect. 4, I motivate an alternative account to Strawson's and argue that such utterances do have truth values. In Sect. 5, I briefly discuss some objections to my account before providing concluding remarks in Sect. 6.

Relevant Background: Russell and Strawson

Consider the sentence 'the present king of France is wise'. Russell emphasizes that though it is grammatically of the subject-predicate form, it is not logically as such, and instead should be analyzed as the following existential claim: 'there exists a present king of France, there is one and only one present king of France, and it is wise' ("On Denoting" 488). This reduction of the sentence to an existential claim allows Russell to say that both 'the present king of France is wise' and its counterpart 'the present king of France is not wise' are false, since they are conjunctions with at least one false conjunct, and thus that more generally the proposition 'it is not the case that the present king of France is wise' is what is true.

Strawson, on the other hand, makes a few important distinctions that lead him to reject Russell's conclusion. Namely, Strawson differentiates between a sentence, the *use* of a sentence, and the *utterance* of a sentence (325). An utterance of a sentence is the actual action of its being uttered by a speaker, and the use of a sentence characterizes the different ways in which speakers might utter the sentence. It is difficult to spell out precisely what kind of entity a sentence (*qua* a sentence) is for Strawson—the important point is just that speakers make varying uses and utterances of the same one sentence. Two men uttering 'the present king of France is wise' in different eras of the French monarchy would be making two different uses, and utterances, of one and the same sentence, presumably one of which would be false and the other true. It is for this reason that Strawson regards sentences as not having truth values—they are not the kind of entity that is true or false. Speakers can make various utterances of the *same* sentence which may be true or false, but it is spurious to assign the sentence *itself* any truth value. The sentence is just what is used to make true or false utterances.

Strawson's Argument

With these distinctions in place, we can now move forward in establishing Strawson's argument. First, Strawson (329) takes Russell to be committed to the following:

(C) Anyone now uttering 'the present king of France is wise' would be making an assertion that is true or false.

More generally, Russell is committed to the claim that *any* utterance of that sentence will either be true or false. This is because, for Russell, to assert 'the present king of France is wise' is just to assert the aforementioned existential claim. And since, on the occasion of any particular utterance, it is either the case or not the case that there is a present king of France, at any occasion the utterance will either be true or false.

This is precisely what Strawson proceeds to argue against. His argument can be characterized as follows:

Imagine a man were to ask you: 'is the present king of France wise?'. Would your answer be either 'yes' or 'no'? It appears neither is the appropriate answer to give. This is because 'the question of whether his statement was true or false simply *didn't arise*, because there was no such person as the king of France' (330, emphasis in original). His asking this question indicates, or implies, that the man already believes there is a present king of France. As such, your answering the question in the affirmative or negative would seem to imply that you agree.

In other words, an utterance of the sentence 'the present king of France is wise' *presupposes* that there is a present king of France. It does not *assert* this claim, as Russell thinks it does. This explains why neither an affirmative nor negative answer to the question is appropriate. The utterance is not an utterance of the existential claim 'there is a present king of France and he is wise', but is rather an utterance which presupposes the former conjunct and foregrounds the latter in the question. As such, if utterances are what have truth values, then it appears a present utterance of 'the king of France is wise' does not have a truth value at all, for it can only arise to the level of being true or false when it correctly refers to someone. That is, only when its presupposition is true can it then be judged as a true or false utterance. Thus, a present utterance of 'the present king of France is wise' is neither true nor false.

Challenging Strawson's Argument: An Alternative Account

There are two principal claims in Strawson's analysis, or account, of utterances of non-referring definite descriptions that I wish to challenge. First, that such utterances presuppose certain information. Second, that such utterances are neither true nor false.

To challenge the first claim, I wish to advance an alternative account of the utterance 'the present king of France is wise'. On this account, when such an utterance is made, it is asserted that there is such a person as the king of France and they are wise. The utterance *logically* implies (entails) the entire existential claim Russell explicated in his Theory of Descriptions. However, when we are asked the question 'Is the present king of France wise?' it is important to realize that we are *not* being asked the following question: 'Is it the case that: the present king of France is wise?'. I am inclined to think the answer to *that* question is clearly in the negative. The utterance does not describe a state of affairs that obtains, for the world is not such that there is a present king of France. What question, then, are we being asked by the man who inquires 'is the present king of France wise'? To my mind, we are actually being asked: 'Which of the following is true: 'there is a present king of France and he is wise' or 'there is a present king of France and he is not wise'?'. The answer to this question, of course, is *neither*. But that we answer 'neither' to *this* question should not be evidence for the claim that the utterance 'the present king of France is wise' *itself* is neither true nor false. This point is particularly pertinent. It needn't be the case that asking the question 'is the present king of France wise?' should amount to a question about the proposition 'the present king of France is wise' rather than the disjunctive proposition outlined above. If I am asked if it is the case, or if it obtains, that 'the present king of France is wise', certainly I ought to reply that it is not the case, or it does not obtain, that 'the present king of France is wise'. This is the proper test for whether such an utterance has a truth value, since this question asks directly about the proposition 'the present king of France is wise'. If Strawson wishes to argue that questions concerning the truth value of non-referring definite descriptions yield neither 'yes' or 'no' as answers, surely clarifying our question with 'is it the case that…'

ought not alter our answer. That it does, to my mind, favors the view that the man's question is not a question about the proposition 'the present king of France is wise' at all, and thus is not of any relevance to Russell's theory.

One might wonder at this point whether there is really any substantive difference between these two accounts. On Strawson's, the conjunct 'there is a present king of France' is taken to be presupposed by the speaker, while on this alternative, both conjuncts are asserted, but the speaker seems to simply be asking whether he ought to negate the conjunct about the king's being wise. What difference could come of moving our analysis from the sentence to the question? Other than the fact that these accounts will differ with respect to whether the utterance has a truth value, I will now argue that there is at least one principled reason to prefer the alternative account over Strawson's.

Imagine a visitor comes to your house and remarks: 'I noticed you have a red air filter on the roof of your house. But I have recently cracked my glasses. Is my utterance that 'the air filter of your home is red' a false one?'. You are newly moved into this house and have never once considered whether your house has an air filter. Whether it does is completely unbeknownst to you—you are agnostic about this fact. And, as you know, the visitor has on rare occasion had faulty perceptual faculties and thus his proclamation that he saw an air filter does not move your agnosticism. However, despite being newly moved in, you are aware of this fact: no object in the house can be red, as the previous owner thoroughly despised the color and made sure no object in the house was red. What should you say to the visitor? It appears the appropriate answer would be in the negative: it is false that the air filter of your home is red, and you should answer as such. In other words, you know the visitor's utterance expresses a falsehood. It seems specious to say to the visitor 'I am not sure whether your utterance arises to the question of truth or falsehood, for I am not sure whether there is an air filter'.

Yet, if we are to take seriously the claim that utterances of the form 'the x is p' presuppose rather than assert 'there exists an x', and thus that if it is not the case that x exists, then the utterance 'the x is p' is devoid of any truth value, it seems we should tell the visitor that we are just not sure if his utterance 'the air filter is red' amounts to being false, for we are not sure whether there is an air filter. But this does not appear to be correct—irrespective of the actual facts surrounding the existence of your air filter, we ought to be able to say that the visitor's utterance is plainly false.

To add to this intuition, imagine your housemate was unaware of the fact that no object in the house could be red. For them, there is indeed uncertainty about whether the visitor's utterance is false. However, if Strawson's account is correct, you too are uncertain about whether the visitor's utterance is false. But how could this be the case, given that you have epistemic access to information that makes it impossible for the visitor's utterance to be true? Strawson's account may entail denying a plausible version of the principle of epistemic closure, that if an agent *A* knows a fact F, and knows that F entails the impossibility of p, *A* knows that p is false. But surely it is absurd to suggest that if an agent were to learn F they would not obtain a belief about the falsity of p. It seems nonsensical to say to your housemate 'by the way, no object in this house could be red, but that will not assist us in determining whether what the visitor is saying is false'.

However, on the view that to utter 'the x is p' is just to utter that 'the x exists and x instantiates p', it can be said that the utterance of the visitor is undoubtedly false. For, irrespective of the verdict on the conjunct 'the x exists', it is known that it is not the case that 'x instantiates p', and so the conjunction of the two must be false. Insofar as this conjunction is not being asserted by the speaker, and thus their utterance is not necessarily true or false, the above problems arise. Thus, we ought to prefer an account on which this conjunction is being asserted by the speaker.

I have provided two reasons to think that to utter 'the present king of France is wise' is to utter the existential claim Russell had in mind, and thus that the utterance always has a truth value. First, when it is clearly asked 'Is it the case that the present king of France is wise?' I am inclined to answer that this is not the case, which is just to say that the utterance is false. Second, if utterances of definite descriptions presuppose parts of the existential claim Russell had in mind rather than asserting them, then in cases where we are agnostic about those parts presupposed by the utterance, our conviction of the falsity of other parts will not be sufficient for a conviction that the utterance is false. But this is surely absurd, and as such, we ought to think of the utterance as the assertion of a conjunction instead.

Objections

One objection to the challenge I have put forth to Strawson's account of utterances is to note that whilst agents such as the one who owns the house and is aware of the fact that no object can be red cannot be certain that the visitor's utterance is false, they *can* be certain that the visitor's utterance cannot be true (it is either an utterance with no truth value or one that is false).

While this is true, it misses the point of motivating the alternative account to Strawson. Indeed, the house owner can be certain that the visitor's utterance cannot be true. But the question asked of the owner is whether the utterance is false. And, at least intuitively, given that the agent is aware of information that makes it such that the utterance cannot be true, they ought to be symmetrically certain that the utterance is false. That there is this asymmetry is precisely a reason to prefer the account on which the visitor's utterance is really an assertion of a conjunction, which would maintain the intuitive symmetry. In the words of Strawson, when we tell a man who proclaimed that the present king of France is wise that there is no king of France, 'we should certainly *not* say we were *contradicting* the statement that the king of France is wise. We are certainly not saying that it's false. We are, rather, giving a reason for saying that the question of whether it's true or false simply doesn't arise' (330, emphasis in original). That is precisely my point: it seems obvious that we ought to be able to contradict the visitor's utterance in the case of the red air filter. Yet on Strawson's account we cannot, and certainly this is problematic.

Another objection against the alternative account might proceed as follows: the man who asks 'Is the present king of France wise?' appears to have asymmetric belief states. Namely, he believes that 'the present king of France exists' but does not believe, or is at least agnostic about, the claim 'he is wise'. This appears to be evidence for the account on which his utterance is presupposing that the present king of France exists, and evidence against the account on which the utterance is an assertion of both claims.

Much of the same analysis applied before applies here. It is true that when the speaker asks this question it appears as though he has asymmetric belief states. However, this is because the question being asked is *not* 'Is it the case that the present king of France is wise?' but rather 'Which of the following is true: 'there is a present king of France and he is wise' or 'there is a present king of France and he is not wise'?'. And, like before, it is when he is asking *this* question that the asymmetric belief states arise. Clearly, if the speaker were asking the former question, then it is not the case that they believe that the king of France exists but doubts whether he is wise. If we are being asked about the truth of the entire utterance, it becomes clear the entire utterance is what the speaker is agnostic about, not merely one of its conjuncts.

Conclusion

In total, Strawson's critique of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, at least in part, rests on the claim that it is false that any particular utterance of a sentence with a non-referring definite description will have a truth value. This claim comes out of his analysis of utterances as implying or presupposing, rather than asserting, various content. I hope to have challenged this analysis by providing and motivating an alternative account which denies this presupposition.

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