

# Making Sense of Reference: On Whether Predicates Refer

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The question at hand is whether or not predicates refer. In other words, to use an example from Searle, in the sentence “Sam is drunk,” do the words “is drunk” pick out some thing (or entity) in the same way that “Sam” does? Frege’s response to this question is: Yes, predicates refer to *concepts* in the same way that proper names refer to *objects*. But Frege says that concepts are irreducible, and hence all he can really do to define a concept is to tell us that it is the reference (Bedeutung) of a predicate (something like a function). While he may not be asking too much of us in requesting that we entertain the notion of simple entities in our metaphysics, one is sure to become easily and quickly frustrated by the apparent fact that it is impossible to speak of actual concepts whatsoever, in virtue of their “predicative nature.” That is, because a concept can only function as the reference of a predicate, and not of a proper name, as soon as an individual makes an attempt to report on this or that particular concept, she finds that she is indeed not talking about a concept at all, but an object. This is the difficulty Frege draws our attention to when he says, “the concept *horse* is not a concept.” Well okay, but it seems rather odd.

Frege provides us with a “hint,” or a metaphor to help us understand concepts: they are unsaturated, or incomplete, meaning (so far as I can tell) that concept words (predicates) never fully refer unless and until they are somehow complemented or escorted by a proper name. In other words, while a proper name refers of its own accord with no trouble, a predicate does not. Hence, the only way to appropriately refer to a concept is to predicate that concept of a proper name whose own reference (Bedeutung) falls under it. Does this lead to a great deal of difficulty in talking about concepts? Yes, of course. But that is not grounds for claiming that they do not exist. It is just an inescapable fact that we have to accept in virtue of the kind of thing concepts are and the way language works. In any case, the sense of the words “the concept *horse*” is probably very much like the sense of the predicate “is a horse;” it is a sort of quirk that they do not have the same reference; so long as we do not begrudge a pinch of salt, we should be able to take Frege’s point for what it is.

Searle begrudges a pinch of salt. More precisely, he thinks the assertion “the concept *horse* is not a

concept” reflects a deep and irreconcilable contradiction, not just an “awkwardness of language,” as Frege suggests. He thus accuses Frege of equivocating with the word “concept” in order to accommodate two mutually exclusive philosophical ideas about language, one being that the function of predicates is different from the function of subjects, the other (which Searle says is false) being that predicates refer. Since it is logically impossible, on Searle’s view, that both of these should be true, part of Frege’s theory must be rejected, and the part that he opts to reject is just the part that maintains that predicates have a reference.

To state his case even more plainly, Searle derives a *reductio ad absurdum*, given two basic premises he says Frege accepts, from the thesis that predicates refer. These premises are (1) that the paradigmatic cases of reference are those which involve names of objects<sup>[1]</sup> and (2) that any two expressions that have the same reference can be substituted for one another without loss of truth (Leibniz’s Law). If these premises are true, it would seem that sentences containing a subject and a predicate can be reduced to mere lists (which, of course, results in a violation of the Leibniz’s Law) by substituting for the predicate a proper name with the same referent. However, as we have already seen, Frege makes it clear that on his view, only predicates, and not proper names, are capable of referring to concepts, and so we cannot really be certain that Searle has proven anything new through this endeavor.

Anyhow, Searle says that there are only two ways around this reduction to absurdity: Either one has to (1) concede that the sense of “refer” in the case of predicates is not the same as in that of proper names (in which case the thesis that predicates refer doesn’t amount to much) or (2) take the position that the things predicates refer to are “peculiar” in the sense that it is impossible to use proper names (singular referring expressions) to refer to them. Frege, according to Searle, takes the second route. But while it does seem true that much of Frege’s reasoning involves accepting the idea that concepts are unwieldy things (route 2), I am not sure that the two routes Searle posits are perfectly discrete. On the face of it, one non-hazardous account of the situation might be that *for the very reason* that the things that predicates and proper names refer to are not the same sorts of things, the sense (or, perhaps more precisely, the *way*) in which they refer *has to be* somewhat different. Put another way, the reference of a predicate is unsaturated, hence language is used to refer to it in a different way than that of a proper name. Moreover, I’m not altogether persuaded that this account would result in “a surrender of the thesis at issue,” as Searle suggests.

Language is often mysterious, awkward, hard (if not impossible) to break down. What is meant does

not always have to be what is said. Imagine the following example : I am writing a philosophy paper in the study, and you are watching television in the adjacent family room. Suddenly, you hear a loud crash coming from the study, and you yell out “What fell?”. I might respond by saying, “The thing that fell is a clock that my grandmother gave me for Christmas last year,” but because I do not need to explain to you that the subject of my utterance is the thing that fell, I could easily leave the singular referring expression out of the sentence and shout back only the words “A clock that my grandmother gave me for Christmas last year,” without losing the thought. But if I do that, have I referred to the thing that fell? It would seem more accurate to say that *you* referred to the thing that fell, when you asked me what it was. But if that is the case, do my words have a sense only, and no reference? And if so, why does it seem to be the case that I have used language to pick out something very specific, so specific, in fact, that *you* should henceforth have no problem describing, in Fregean terms, certain “marks” of the thing I have picked out (e.g. hands, a face, an ability to designate time, and so forth), although you may never once have laid eyes upon the thing that fell? To be honest, I can’t say for certain that I know the answers to these questions, or even if I am asking the *right* questions, but it does seem to me that a Fregean interpretation of my utterance is *plausible*, at least. That is, I can find no wholly compelling reason to reject the notion that, in this hypothetical instance, by uttering the words “a clock that my grandmother gave me for Christmas last year,” I have indeed referred to a concept under which the thing that fell—to cut a long story short—falls.

But if we are going to accept Frege’s unparsimonious account, with its peculiar entities that defy description, we have an obligation to provide some explanation as to why Searle’s more common sense one is inadequate, and that is what I shall attempt to do before concluding this essay. To begin, let us turn to what Searle says is an obvious *non-sequitur* in an argument used by followers of Frege to show that predicates refer. The argument in question goes roughly that if a predicate is true of two things, then there is a property that both of those things have. In other words, if for example Lucy is hungry and Sue is hungry, then there is something that Lucy and Sue both have: the property of hunger. Thus, the expressions “Lucy is hungry” and “Sue is hungry,” or alternatively, “Lucy and Sue are both hungry,” refer to that property. But Searle wants to say that just because I have made an utterance that commits me to the existence of something (in this case, hunger), it does not follow that I have referred to the thing whose existence I have committed to through my utterance.

Now, perhaps I am not that creative, but there are very few instances I can think of in ordinary

language where one does *not* have to refer to something in order to commit to its existence, and they seem to me exceptions that are easy to explain. One such exception would involve cases similar to the clock example above, where one may talk about something that has already been referred to in antecedent discourse. In answering your question, “What fell?” with, “A clock that my grandmother gave me for Christmas last year,” I have committed to the existence of the thing that fell without directly referring to it. But one may still harbour the intuition that I have somehow referred to it *indirectly* by means of the relationship of what I have said to the larger stretch of discourse in which my remark is nested. Anyway, it is clear that the thing that fell *has been referred to* by you, and that without your direct reference I could not have committed to its existence in saying what I said.

The only other case of this kind that I can think of would be one in which, by referring to something, I commit myself to the existence of a higher-order entity where the existence of the former entails the existence of the latter. For example, if I say “yellow exists” (withholding for the time being the question of whether or not it does), then surely I have committed myself to the existence of colour. But this is not surprising in the least! It is no big leap to say that in referring to yellow I have referred *indirectly* to colour and hence am committed to the existence of both; all that is involved here is taxonomy. It is only because I can assertively utter “Yellow is a colour,” that any commitment I make to the existence of yellow commits me likewise to the existence of colour.

It seems to me, then, that Searle’s *non-sequitur*, if indeed it is a *non-sequitur*, is not at all obvious. In fact, I am rather inclined to think that intuition favors the idea that, under normal circumstances, if I have made an utterance that commits me to the existence of something, then I have referred to that thing, just as the (Fregean) argument in question presumes. Now, it may not be certain whether predication should count as a normal circumstance, given the lengths to which we have had to go to attempt to figure it out here, but nevertheless, I think it is fair to expect Searle to give an account of why, in the case of predication, he thinks it is possible to commit to the existence of things (which he admits predication does) without referring to them. In other words, he should be able to *explain* it, as we have attempted to do with the two examples above. The fact is however, that he doesn’t explain it, at least not to my satisfaction, and it is this fact that, in effect, renders his description of how predication is able to do what it does at least as disappointing and mystery-laden as Frege’s ever was. In the end, no matter how you look at it, we are left

with a hole, and it is one that—despite their cumbersome nature—concepts seem to fill at least as well as anything else.

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[1] It is unclear to me whether Frege would in fact accept this premise without condition.

[2] I've hijacked this example from: Vygotsky, Lev S. *Thought and Language*. Trans: Alex Kozulin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1984. (pp. 220-224) and modified it to suit my own purposes.