SECTION B

LANGUAGE
CHAPTER SEVEN
REFERENCE, TRUTH, AND FICTION
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1. The Axiom of Existence

One of the oldest problems in philosophy is also one of the most debated topics in the philosophy of language today. In its current form, which can be credited to John Searle, it is called the problem of negative existential propositions. The problem is to answer correctly the questions, Are sentences like (1) and (2) meaningful? If so, are they true or false? And if they are true, how is this possible, given what they say?

(1) Sherlock Holmes does not exist.
(2) Santa Claus does not exist.

The answers to these questions and the justifications given for them are too numerous and complex to catalog, and for the most part, it is unnecessary to do so because they all seem to rely upon a false view of referring. For the philosophers who think that negative existential propositions are puzzling, the intuition about referring is this: Proper names need to hook on to or to attach to something in the world in order to be meaningful. If (at least some) words did not hook up with objects in the world, then sentences would signify nothing; they would have no content. If they had signified nothing and had no content, then they could not express truths either.

Among direct reference theorists, who, I believe, are currently the dominant group, the intuition is expressed in the view that the meaning or the semantic content of a proper name is the object the name refers to.1 This is the view of Wittgenstein in his Tractatus: “A name means

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