ON REFERENCE AND PREDICATION

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In a recent article Keith Donnellan offers an interesting solution to a traditional puzzle, or problem, which he states in the following way:

In a large number of situations speakers apparently refer to the nonexistent. The most obvious example of this is, perhaps, the use of singular terms in negative existence statements – for example, "The discoverer of the philosopher's stone does not exist" or "Robin Hood did not exist." The problem is, of course, well known and ancient in origin: such statements seem to refer to something only to say about it that it does not exist. How can one say something about what does not exist?

In the following discussion I outline a theory of reference and predication which incorporates a solution to this problem. Much of what I have to say by way of a solution and about the notion of reference is consistent with Donnellan's views, but the outline of a theory offered here goes a bit further in clarifying the notion and results in truth conditions for negative existence statements which have significant advantages over those proposed by Donnellan. Donnellan takes the particular examples of negative existence statements which he discusses to be predicative statements, but without giving any general conditions for what counts as such. For heuristic purposes, let us adopt an inadequate but useful account of this notion of a predicative statement. It will enable us to give a somewhat fuller account of the nature of the problem under consideration.

The problem arises for one who accepts the following views on predication: a predicative statement is one in which a speaker concatenates (in speech or writing, with correct syntax) a proper name or definite description, used with the intention of referring to some individual, with a verb phrase, used with the intention of predicating something (let us suppose a property) of that individual. A predicative statement is true just in case the speaker succeeds in referring to some* individual and the individual exemplifies the predicated


*This account leaves open the possibility of intending to refer to one individual but succeeding in referring to another, yet making a true statement. If we are to avoid a theory in which meaning is wholly a function of the speaker’s intention, then it may be we must countenance the situation in which one responds truly, "That may be what
property. A speaker may succeed in referring to an individual only if that individual exists.

It follows from this view that it is impossible to truly predicate of an individual that it does not exist, for true predication requires both successful reference and the nonexistence of the individual referred to, whereas successful reference requires in turn the existence of the individual referred to. The impossibility involves what the medievals termed *contradictio in adiecto*. If the predication were true the individual in question would have to exemplify the incompatible properties of existence and nonexistence.

This becomes a problem, or puzzle, only when one reflects on the fact that the assertion that Santa Claus does not exist seems to be both a predicative statement and obviously true. A solution to the problem as I have presented it might consist in an examination of the speech act in which one asserts that Santa Claus does not exist and giving truth conditions according to which the assertion might be true, and thus not require both the existence and nonexistence of any individual. Donnellan proposes truth conditions for negative existence statements including proper names as follows:

(R) If N is a proper name that has been used in predicative statements with the intention to refer to some individual, then ∼N does not exist* is true if and only if the history of those uses ends in a block.*

“Santa Claus” satisfies the antecedent of (R). A child who (under the appropriate circumstances) says e.g. “Santa Claus comes tonight” is using the proper name “Santa Claus” in a predicative statement with the intention to refer to some individual. Thus when the child who believed in Santa Claus later learns the truth and expresses it by saying “Santa Claus does not exist”, his assertion is true just in case his earlier use of the proper name “Santa Claus”, and the history of all similar uses, ends in a block. The technical notion of a block is necessarily and admittedly not well defined, but is clear enough in the case of Donnellan’s particular example: The child has a belief which he expresses by saying “Santa Claus comes tonight”. If we look for a historical explanation of this belief, we find that it does not involve any individual who could count as the referent of “Santa Claus”, but ends in a story told to him by his parents. When the historical explanation of the use of a name (with the intention to

you meant to say, but what you said was . . .” Thus a speaker might intend to predicate something of one individual but succeed in predicating it of another. (“Succeeds” is somewhat inappropriate in this instance, since whereas reference succeeds in that it takes place, it does not succeed in hitting the mark.) If on the other hand we do not wish to countenance this as a possibility, we may replace “some individual” with “the intended individual” in the specification of truth conditions. None of this is critical to the main points of discussion in what follows.

2. Ibid., p. 25.