

REFERRING TO GOD AND OTHER DUMMY REFERENTS

K. D. Kragen

Syracuse, New York

May 1989

Abstract

The present study arises out of the issue of referring to God (and to immaterial entities generally), in the context of the problem of religious pluralism or the problem of conflicting truth or belief claims among theists and religious traditions. In the process of examining various descriptivist theories of reference, causal theories of reference, and direct reference theory, I distinguish three modes of discourse—reality discourse, fictional discourse, and subjunctive discourse—on the basis of which general religious discourse becomes more plausible. Subjunctive or metaphysically indefinite discourse is then seen as the basis for a particular subjunctive mechanism of referring, and thus what I call the "presuppositional-categorical theory of reference" (or PCTR). The PCTR describes a central linguistic mechanism for *public* discourse about God, immaterial reality, and other metaphysical subjects. By helping to disambiguate religious discourse, the PCTR can assist in the ongoing debate over problems of religious pluralism.

Contents

Introduction

I. Alston's Theory Of Direct Reference

ii. I. M. Crombie And The "Category Of The Divine"

iii. Keith Donnellan's Distinction Between Reality Discourse And Fictional Discourse

Iv. Proxi-Referents, Subjunctive Discourse, And God

V. Conclusion

Notes

Bibliography

Introduction

Must one have a referent or have successfully referred, before one can make predication of *that* referent? Must one have a specific referent in order to avoid the dreaded "failed reference" which threatens to cast much public discourse into the pit of meaninglessness? Or, on the other hand, can one presuppose a reference-category, a "proxi- or dummy-referent," without first meeting some necessary conditions for referring or reference fixing. Is it not conceivable, even reasonable, that we actually attend to the business of referring more precisely *after* making predications, especially in situations having to do with making reference to God, or immaterial or abstract entities? Would not this approach be one of *seeking* or *getting at* a referent over time by means of extensive or investigative predication? Yet, one might object, does not such an approach essentially end up the same as "reference by description," what Kripke calls the "cluster concept theory of proper names"?

Observing that communication concerning divine and metaphysical reality often takes place in the absence of specific referent-subjects, I develop "the presuppositional-categorical theory of reference" (or PCTR), distinguishing it from descriptivist theories of reference (DTR), and comparing it to William P. Alston's theory of "direct reference" and Colin McGinn's "spatio-temporal context" theory of reference. Strictly speaking, I am not proposing a *new* theory of reference, but rather a deemphasis of reference in certain linguistic contexts.¹

Initially, the PCTR goes as follows. (1) We can make predications, speak predicatively and descriptively without making reference to a specific object by merely utilizing a generally established, presupposed category under which a referent may eventually be identified or considered. The eventual referent need not necessarily fall under the original presupposed category, which may prove inadequate or misconceived. (2) I. M. Crombie's "category of the divine" is a paradigm case of a presupposed categorical proxi-referent.² (3) There are three

¹ In giving his account of a contextual (spatio-temporal) theory of reference, Colin McGinn writes, "Causal inertness is generally supposed to constitute a criterion for being an abstract entity. According to a causal theory of reference, therefore, reference to the abstract is impossible. I think this is a *virtue* of the causal theory: it is indeed problematic how our use of numerals (say) could relate to mathematical entities subsisting in the abstract platonic heaven. The question for me, then, is whether the contextual theory preserves this virtue" ("The Mechanisms of Reference," *Synthese*, v. 49, Holland, 1981, 174). Now I am not sure McGinn's "virtuous" theory applies to the rendering of immaterial entities (e.g., God) likewise "referentially problematic," but it would seem so. It is precisely this bias against immaterial referential-contexts which I seek to counter with my PCTR.

² In grammar there is what has sometimes been called the dummy subject (of which this very sentence gives one example). Consider, e.g., the sentence "There is that which we commonly call 'God': 'there' is called the dummy subject in that it cues one to look for the subject of the sentence elsewhere, in the predicate position after the verb, and in a way this *dummy subject* stands proxy for the true *subject* of the sentence (this is distinct from an understood subject such as in the parental sentence "[you] Go to your room right now!"). Thus, with a dummy subject construction, on a transformational grammar analysis, you would have a *TG-rule* for moving a noun-phrase from the predicate side of the verb over to the place where the dummy subject is standing proxy, as a kind of place holder (not merely *x*).

As this grammatical form is to language, so is the "proxi-reference" (of the presupposed-categorical theory of reference) to the linguistic act of referring. Yet there is a difference. In proxi-referring, the actual subject may not be as readily available as in a grammatical dummy subject. That is, whether there even is an actual subject or not may not be a present concern; or to put it another way, the question of the ontological nature of the thing referred to may be left *indefinite* for purposes of public discourse, and, in this sense, proxi-referring avoids the problem of failed reference.

Analogous to a dummy subject, the presuppositional-categorical proxi-reference is a kind of *place holder* (genus or kind) for some more full-blown referent (particular). The work it does can be seen in cases (1) where there is

possible modes (or *attitudes*) of public discourse: *reality discourse*, *fictional discourse*, and what I call *subjunctive discourse* (or metaphysically indefinite discourse). Each mode of discourse possesses respective linguistic mechanisms for the purpose of discriminating which mode of discourse is being utilized by a particular speaker at a given time.

I. Alston's Theory Of Direct Reference

In discussing his notion that, when referring to God, direct reference is more fundamental than descriptive reference, Alston concludes that, first, descriptivist reference almost always presuppose prior references; and second,

the use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus. For I refer descriptively by taking myself to be speaking of *whatever* uniquely satisfies certain predicates. And how could I understand that notion of something's satisfying a predicate without already having made some singular references, or at least having acquired the ability to do so? If any use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus, that presupposed referential capacity must be a capacity to refer in some other way. [William P. Alston, "Referring to God," Unpublished paper, Syracuse University, 10]

Alston then goes on to consider mechanisms of direct reference which function as the most basic referential apparatus, specifically in cases of referring to God.

Tying together the direct reference mechanism with a Kripkean chain of usage *reference maintenance*, Alston lays out a third way (distinct from descriptivist theories and from strict causal-genetic theories) in which direct reference is seen as more fundamental than reference by description:

[1] First, genetically...it does seem to me that descriptivist reference always, or virtually always, presupposes prior reference; second, and more crucially, the use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus [a logical priority]. [Alston, "Referring to God," 10]

[2] Even where both descriptivist and direct reference are available and even where they are both employed, it is direct reference rather than the associated descriptions, that determines the existence and the identity of the referent. [*Ibid*]

[3] Where the direct reference mechanisms are in place they will determine reference unless the subject makes special efforts to counteract this.... That is, I take it that direct reference is the natural, baseline mode of reference; it takes place 'automatically' without the need for any deliberate intervention. Whereas descriptivist reference requires more active involvement on the part of the subject, it does not strictly require anything as explicit as a consciously formed resolution,

clearly no normative set or cluster of descriptions, any one of which can be said to supply a uniquely referring expression for purposes of picking out or fixing the reference, (2) where a direct reference mechanism is unavoidable due to its private indexical restrictions in terms of public communication, and (3) where it seems a fact of *linguistic behavior* and common discourse that there are cases subject to 1 and 2, but which nonetheless still occupy large stretches of human linguistic and perceptual experience (broadly understood).

but it at least requires some more implicit version of that. Since most of us most of the time take the path of least resistance, most of us most of the time will be making direct reference to what we are talking about. It is only in rather unusual and special circumstances that the descriptive mode will win a contest for referent determination [an historical priority]. [*Ibid*, 14]

For the individual in direct or immediate perceptual-experiential contact with divine reality, indexical reference fixing does seem most basic. But, in terms of public discourse, in certain instances anyway, the Kripkean chain of usage account of reference maintenance does not give the whole story.

In considering a third, 'categorical proxi-reference' as an alternative to an Alston-Kripke account, an initial motivation comes from one possible conclusion of Alston's views: that pagans and animists end up "worshiping the true God" while "just getting most of the description and predications of God wrong" (Alston, "Referring to God," 17-18). Or as Alston explains,

Consider, then, a Christian and a Hindu worshipper of Vishnu. Here, although there may be a few putatively identifying descriptions in common, the great mass of them will be radically different and mutually incompatible. (Let's assume this, anyway, for purposes of this discussion.) Even on the Searlean variant, they cannot be referring to the same deity.... Either they are referring to different deities (objects of worship), or, on monotheistic assumptions, at least one of them fails to refer to anything. And yet it seems clear to me that, for all that, they *might* be referring to the same God. If the two religious traditions were both initiated, and are both sustained, by effective contact with the one true God, then the one true God is what is worshipped in both traditions, however incompatible their characterizations of Him. [*Ibid*, 17]

It does seem clear that we can't fall back onto a descriptivist mechanism for fixing the reference of statements about "God," that in most cases "the use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus," "that descriptive reference always, or virtually always, presupposes prior reference" (*Ibid*, 10).

While accepting Alston's notion of direct reference, a strict theological objection can be made to his move from (1) "referring to the same God," to (2) "then the one true God is what is worshipped in both traditions," by distinguishing between the conditions *for referring to God* (*vis-a-vis* direct reference and chain of usage reference-maintenance), and the conditions *for worshipping the 'referent God'*. Thus, (1) the "referring" conditions are necessary but not sufficient for "worshipping," such that (2) there is a necessary added condition for "worshipping," above and beyond having made the correct reference and having had direct experiences. An added condition, for example, could include having to meet certain demands required by the deity. Such demands might include (for the trinitarian-Christian tradition) having a *special* sort of "existential commitment" to the true God, and a more specifically cognitive worshipping condition requiring some basic and true, propositional or predicative content involved in the mental state or activity of the worshipper—"worshipping *in spirit* and *in truth*." (Alston has subsequently acknowledged the validity of this point.)

However, I am more concerned with specifically linguistic objections or alternatives to Alston's theory of direct reference. I believe that Crombie's "category of the divine" exemplifies an alternative to Alston's direct reference, and, along with Donnellan's distinction between

"discourse about reality" and "discourse about fiction," one can construct a more predicative and less reference-dependent approach to religious discourse, avoiding the pitfalls of failed or indeterminate reference. I am thinking specifically of cases where, (1) indexicality of reference demands some further mechanism for public discourse, and (2) where an *historical chain of usage* does not seem to give the best account of what goes on among language speakers in certain contexts. It will help at this point to briefly elucidate Crombie's notion of the "category of the divine."

II. I. M. Crombie And The "Category Of The Divine"

Responding to Anthony Flew's "challenge to theism," Crombie examines "the logical structure of belief" rather than the origin of belief, construing the structure of religious belief in terms of three categories or stages. First there's the category of *undifferentiated* theism (the "logical mother"), a "natural non-logical/non-analytical theism" which appears to evolve in response to general religious experiences (comparable to Rudolf Otto's "*mysterium Tremendum*" or "Wholly Other"³) and leads toward religious belief. Explains Crombie, "among the elements in experience which provoke this belief or attitude, perhaps the most powerful is what I shall call a sense of contingency" (from 1955 symposium "Theology and Falsification," in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion*, John Hick, ed., 1964, 450). Other elements in experience mentioned by Crombie are moral, aesthetic, and specifically religio-mystical types of experiences (which tend to parallel the classical "proofs" of natural theology). These experiences lend themselves, therefore, to general theistic interpretations. In making such interpretations,

all that is necessary is that [one] should be honestly convinced that..., theistically, [one] is in some sense facing them more honestly, bringing out more of what they contain or involve than could be done by interpreting them in any other way.
[*Ibid*, 451]

This first point concerns religious beliefs which, while yet not "logically" defensible, may be seen as *understandably* convincing for the individual. And concerning discourse about such beliefs, Crombie states, "in every case such language..., while it is not to be taken strictly [literally, or non-symbolically], seems to him [the believer] to be the natural language to use" (*Ibid*). Again, these experiences "induce us, not to make straightforward statements about the world, but to [*figuratively*] strain and distort our media of communication in order to express what we make of them" (Crombie, 453).

The second category is the specific commitment (the "logical father") of active belief in God. Grounded in the more general presupposition of "the category of the divine" derived from the "logical mother," this move consists (for the Christian theist anyway) "in the interpretation of certain objects or events as a manifestation of the divine" (*Ibid*, 454), and moves from the realm

³ See Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), where he begins, "it is salutary that we should be incited to notice that religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised in any series of 'rational' assertions; and it is well worth while to attempt to bring the relation of the different 'moments' of religion to one another clearly before the mind, so that its nature may become more manifest. This attempt we are now to make with respect to the quite distinct category of the holy or sacred" (4). Again, "The 'holy' in the fullest sense of the word is a combined, complex category [for Otto, *a priori*, while for Crombie, *a posteriori*], the combining elements being its rational and non-rational components" (112). "We have considered 'the holy' on the one hand as an *a priori* category of mind, and on the other as manifesting itself in outward appearance. The contrast here intended is exactly the same as the common contrast of inner and outer, general and special revelation" (175).

of *natural theology* to the realm of revelational authority. This second sort of interpretation is understood in terms of "what seems the most convincing account" of such *theophanic* objects or events; "without the notion of God [the presupposed category of the divine] we could interpret nothing as divine, and without concrete events which we felt impelled to interpret as divine we could not know that the notion of divinity had any application to reality" (*Ibid*).

The third category is the practice of the religious life (the "extra-parental nurture"), which picks up where the initial commitment leaves off. However, Crombie's focus is on the *parentage* of religious belief, i.e., the first two categories. Concerning this parentage one might ask, "from where do the *personalist* characterizations of God in religious discourse derive—from the 'logical mother,' or the 'logical father,' or from both?"

I have already hinted at my answer by correlating Crombie's distinction between his "logical mother" and "logical father" with the Christian-theistic distinction between general revelation (natural theology) and special revelation (revealed theology); in other religions one could replace "revealed theology" with "scriptures" or "received traditions." Thus, even though p-predicates (personalistic predicates) derive primarily from the logical father, at least some will also undoubtedly come from the logical mother.

Correspondingly, Crombie draws a distinction between *believing that* and *believing in*; the latter is logically subsequent to and presupposes the former. Explains Crombie, in his "The Possibility of Theological Language,"

I cannot believe in Dr. Jones if I do not first believe that there is such a person. Nor is the reduction of credal affirmations to the behavior of worship and general charitable conduct that ought to follow from them of any avail. [in Mitchell, ed., *Faith and Logic*, George Allan & Unwin Ltd., London, 1957, 32].

Here Crombie rightly sees the charge of failed reference as a key criticism against the uses for which theological statements are devised and he considers the anomalous character of theological utterances to be the very basis for a response to this criticism: "The formal properties of theological statements . . . have to be, at first sight, mutually contradictory [antinomous] if they are to do their proper work" (Crombie, "Theological Language," 39). Within these anomalies of the formal properties of theological statements—the first anomaly dealing with *reference*, the second with *predication* of that referent—are to be found the answer to questions of reference fixing for statements about God. One can conclude from such an approach that "God" is simply a very unusual kind of reference, a proxi-reference which can be seen reflected in the anomalous character of the formal properties of religious statements. Crombie then distinguishes between common *proper proper names* (*vis-a-vis* direct reference) and *improper proper names* (a kind of indirect, categorical reference). "God" is such an *improper proper name*.

The distinction involved in the two anomalies—the first concerning *reference*, the second *predication*—parallel Crombie's earlier distinction between the logical mother and the logical father, respectively. Again, on the question of whether the personalist characterizations derive from the "logical father" or the "logical mother," they seem to derive primarily from the logical father (revelation/authority/tradition), for it is from here that most p-predicates are in fact derived and (parabolically) asserted. With the logical mother, one has only the *direct* awareness of the category of the divine with a bare minimum of p-predicates such as personality generally, a general creation-directed concern, a holy otherness, and so on. Although the context (of the logical mother) for the logical father is in a sense an "undifferentiated" theistic context, it is not

completely undifferentiated, for there are some immediately perceived differentiating, p-predicates that are directly grasped when confronted with the category of the divine. If there were not a minimum of such p-predicates in the direct encounter of the divine (logical mother), then that by which one was being directly appeared to or confronted with would not be distinguishable as divine or theistic at all.

There is thus a need to modify Crombie's "undifferentiated theistic context" for the "conception of the divine" to read *vaguely differentiated*, or better, *categorically-differentiated* theistic context. I do not think this modification substantially alters the main thrust of Crombie's position nor betrays the spirit of his intent.

Therefore, on the one hand, a "conception of the divine" (the logical mother) becomes the categorical proxi-reference, not for actually fixing the reference of theological statements, but for making much religious discourse possible. On the other hand, the *content* of theological, predicative statements are mostly based on the beliefs coming from the logical father. The logical mother is then the presuppositional-referential, linguistic foundation, while the logical father is the structure of predication and discourse built upon or standing on that foundation.

Now I see a close correlation between Crombie's notion of the logical mother (so modified) and Alston's direct reference. However, both a person's immediate experience of the category of the divine (the logical mother), and the indexical, direct reference mechanism utilized by that person to refer to the object of such immediate experience, are *essentially private*. Because of this indexicality, for purposes of *public discourse* one needs an additional, publicly accessible or interpretable reference mechanism; and this is where the categorical-presuppositional, proxi-reference mechanism, essential for public communication, comes into the picture, concerning vague, categorically differentiated experiences like that of the category of the divine.

Without such a public linguistic mechanism, there is no way of deciding whether or not individuals within a particular religious community are in actuality referring (*via* direct reference) to the same divine entity. Even on a less restricted level, with direct reference alone, there would seem to be no way of deciding the question of whether or not those within radically different religious traditions are referring to, let alone worshipping, the same God. Does it really make sense to hold that the Christian is referring to (let alone worshipping) the same god as is the Hindu worshipper of Kali, or that the Christian is referring to the same supernatural entity as referred to in witchcraft under the name Karanaya, the wood god? Concludes Alston:

the prospects for taking radically different religious traditions to all be referring to and worshipping the same God are greatly increased. If my referent is determined by what I take God to be like [*vis-a-vis* DTR], then we, the Hindus, and the ancient Greeks and Romans cannot be credited with worshipping the same being. But if reference is determined rather by the real contacts from which a referential practice stems, then there may indeed be a common referent, in case these traditions, including their referential traditions, all stemmed from, and are sustained by experiential contacts with the one God. [Alston, "Referring to God," 15-16]

Now I admit that Alston's view here is no doubt a conceptual possibility. However, I would argue that, on his direct reference account, there could be no way to decide for or against these inclinations. One could simply never know how these things actually work out in the real world.

Distinguishing between various "modes of discourse," rather than mechanisms of reference, can help clear up much confusion in public, religious discourse.

III. Keith Donnellan's Distinction Between Reality Discourse And Fictional Discourse

In his "Speaking of Nothing," Keith Donnellan speaks of the distinction between *discourse about fiction* and *discourse about reality*. "Under 'discourse about fiction'," he writes, "I mean to include those occasions on which it is a presupposition of the discourse that fictional, mythological, legendary (and so forth) persons, places or things are under discussion.... Discourse about actuality carries the presupposition that the speaker is talking about people, places, or things that occur in the history of our world" (in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, S. P. Schwartz, ed., Ithaca, 1977, 218-19).

To this distinction I add the third realm of *subjunctive discourse*, indeterminate and indefinite between the other two.⁴ This intermediate or subjunctive mode of discourse may be seen as functionally analogous to an indefinite truth-value (*indef*) lying between the two conventional truth-values of *true* and *false*, and characteristic of a three-valued logic such as that developed by Peter van Inwagen in his *Material Beings* (Syracuse University: unpublished, 1985). A major difference between subjunctive *indef* and logical *indef* is that the former is a linguistic matter with purely epistemic import, while the latter is a metaphysical matter with definite ontological import.

Consider, for example, the two statements, "Santa Clause does not exist" and "Santa Clause is a character of fiction." In terms of their referents, are these statements (*vis-a-vis* their deep structure) semantically identical? If both statements take place in the context of "discourse about fiction," it follows they have the same referential-semantic content (identical referents), the fictional character Santa Clause; and the second can paraphrase the first.

Note how a third, *subjunctive mode of discourse* then comes into play. Person A, an atheist, exclaims, "If God *were* to exist, this God could not allow his created beings to even once, thwart his plans; otherwise he would not be fully sovereign and in control of his universe. Thus, human free-will refutes the existence of God." As indicated by the grammatical formula "if God were to exist," A does not wish to refer to an existent God, for A *indicates* disbelief in any such being. What is the referent of this passage? Linguistically, A is making reference to what he believes to be a fictional or mythological creature; his references to God are thus in a fictional mode of discourse.

⁴ Note the following related topics: the ontology of "fictional entities" or "creatures of fiction," and the topic of counterfactual conditionals. On the former, see Hartley Slater's "Fictions" (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 27, 2, Spring 1987, 145-55), Steven Mandelker's "Searle on Fictional Discourse: A Defence Against Wolterstorff, Pavel and Rorty" (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 27, 2, Spring 1987, 156-68), Kendall Walton's "On the Ontological Status of Fictional Entities" (*Representation in the Arts*, Draft, 11/83), Peter van Inwagen's "Fiction and Metaphysics" (*Philosophy and Literature*, 7, 1, Spring 1983, 67-77) and "Creatures of Fiction" (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14, 4, Oct. 1977, 299-308), J. O. Urmson, "Fiction" (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 13, 1976, 153-57), Terence Parsons' *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980), and Robert Howell's "Fictional Objects: How They Are and How They Aren't" (*Poetics*, 8, 1/2, April 1979, 129-77) and "Review of Parsons' Nonexistence Objects" (in *Journal of Philosophy*, 1983, 163-173).

Concerning "counterfactual conditions" see R. S. Walter's "Contrary-to-fact Conditionals" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2, New York, 1972, 212-16), and the two classic works, Roderick Chisholm's "The Contrary-to-Fact Conditional" (*Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, Feigl and Sellars, eds., II, California, 1949, 482-97) and Nelson Goodman's "The Problem of Counterfactual Conditionals" (*Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, Leonard Linsky, ed., University of Illinois at Urbana, 1952, 231-46).

Now a theist, person **B**, counters with "Surely God is both sovereign and all powerful, and however it works out, he appears to have created human beings with free will, without in any way compromising his sovereignty. The Bible says so and that's good enough for me!" Person **B** is clearly speaking in a reality mode of discourse. Whatever person **A** believes about the referent of **B**'s statements, person **B** *intends* to be referring to an existent divine being.

Now person **C**, who is an agnostic—leaving open the possibility of God's existence—adds, "If God *was* there, maybe he is just powerful enough to figure out a way to preserve his sovereignty while at the same time allowing for true human freedom of will. I sometimes think I may actually believe that." Now as indicated by the grammatical formula "if God *was* there," **C** would qualify as an agnostic, or at least one who is not wholly convinced whether or not God does exist. For person **C**, it is wrong to say her statements are in a mode of fictional discourse, or in a mode of reality discourse. Due to the indefinite nature of **C**'s ontology (concerning the existence of God), it is linguistically more correct to characterize her discourse as indefinite or subjunctive.

The implication of these three examples of discourse is that they all semantically turn upon speaker's intent or meaning, but may be misunderstood by the hearer. For, in English, the subjunctive mood—indicated by the helping verbs "was" (not known but likely or possible) and "were" (not known but believed unlikely or impossible)—is a mostly dead grammatical form. I say mostly dead, because the counterfactual locution "if I *were* you" still persists even in common language usage, "were" here indicating the utter lack of belief in such a possibility. Editor and linguist Robert Claiborne writes,

An endangered, almost extinct species in English: few people nowadays say "If I were king," or "If this be treason"; indeed, both now have a somewhat old-fashioned flavor. The decline of the subjunctive parallels the decline of most other INFLECTIONS in English, and for good reason: it's unnecessary.

The commonest reason for using the subjunctive is (or was) the "condition contrary to fact," as in "If I were king" (obviously, I'm not). But—the "if" has already told us this: if I really was king, there'd be no "if" about it. Another reason is to express doubt or uncertainty. When Patrick Henry, in response to cries of "Treason!" during his famous speech, declared "If this be treason, make the most of it!" he was saying, in modern terms, "This may or may not be treason, but—so what?" Nowadays, the nuance conveyed by "If this be..." as against "If this is..." will pass right by most people—and some will think you made a mistake.

The gradual disappearance of the subjunctive in English may, for all I know, be a Bad Thing, but nothing can now be done about it. In many people's eyes, indeed, using it marks you as prissy or a pedant; judging from some remarks in one of Raymond Chandler's novels, this was true even fifty years ago. Unless you're in love with the past, feel free to ignore it—with one exception: "If I was king" is Standard, but "If I were you" is blue-collar, and if I were you I'd, avoid it. [Robert Claiborne, *Saying What You Mean*, New York, 1986, 229-30]

In other languages, especially the romance languages (and I believe Spanish is an excellent example), the subjunctive is still in common usage for counterfactual or *indefinite* discourse. With but few exceptions, in English there is no way for the hearer to determine (except by means of the vagaries of context) the specific metaphysical or ontological intent of a

speaker. I must say however, I do find disagreement with Claiborne's conclusion that the subjunctive is *unnecessary* in English. Rather, I believe that it is a great loss to the English language, especially in terms of the clarity of communication. And Spanish, as well as many other languages, which still retain a full-fledged, working subjunctive mood, testify to this belief.⁵

⁵ I would suggest that one likely reason for the demise of the subjunctive mood in American English is the vast dominance of Logical Positivism and related *moods* within American philosophy, science, and the general academic community during the first half of the 20th century. Not only was Positivism temporally coincident with the diminishing vestiges of the subjunctive mood, but many of the anti-metaphysical doctrines of Positivism undoubtedly did have their effect upon *non-spatio-temporally determinate* references, even within the language habits of the general populace.

It may also be helpful here to note the basis for Quine's opposition to subjunctive conditionals. In "Natural Kinds" (in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, S. P. Schwarts, ed., Ithaca, 1977, 155-75) Quine first seeks to establish the eliminability of "kinds." He explains,

I have stressed how fundamental the notion of similarity or of kind is to our thinking, and how alien to logic and set theory. I want to go on now to say more about how fundamental these notions are to our thinking, and something also about their non-logical roots. Afterward I want to bring out how the notion of similarity or of kind changes as science progresses. I shall suggest that it is a mark of maturity of a branch of science that the notion of similarity or kind finally dissolves, so far as it is relevant to that branch of science. That is, it ultimately submits to analysis in the special terms of that branch of science and logic. [*Ibid*, 161]

He goes on to identify species of *kinds*, specifically the domain of *dispositions* formulated as *subjunctive conditionals*:

We have seen that a sense of similarity or of kinds is fundamental to learning in the widest sense—to language learning, to induction, to expectation. Toward a further appreciation of how utterly this notion permeates our thought I want now to point out a number of other very familiar and central notions which seem to depend squarely on this one. They are notions that are definable in terms of similarity or kinds and further irreducible. A notable domain of examples is the domain of dispositions such as Carnap's example of solubility in water. To say of some individual object that it is soluble in water is not to say merely that it always dissolves when in water, because this would be true by default of any object however insoluble, if it merely happened to be destined never to get into water. It is to say rather that it would dissolve if it were in water; but this account brings small comfort, since the device of a subjunctive conditional involves all the perplexities of disposition terms and more.... Another dim notion, which has intimate connections with dispositions and subjunctive conditionals, is the notion of cause; and we shall see that it too turns on the notion of kinds. [*Ibid*, 168-69]

Quine's then points out:

We have noticed that the notion of kind, or similarity, is crucially relevant to the notion of disposition, to the subjunctive conditional, and to singular causal statements. From a scientific point of view these are pretty disreputable lot. The notion of kind, or similarity, is equally disreputable. Yet some such notion, some similarity sense, was seen to be crucial to all learning, and central in particular to the processes of inductive generalization and predication which are the very life of science. It appears that science is rotten to the core. [*Ibid*, 170]

And yet, Quine does believe there is a *functional* value to such dispositions:

There may be claimed for this rot a certain undeniable fecundity. Science reveals hidden mysteries, predicts successfully, and works technological wonders. If this is the way of rot, then rot is rather to be prized and praised than patronized. Rot, actually, is not the best model here. A better model is human progress. A sense of comparative similarity, I remarked earlier, is one of man's animal endowments. [*Ibid*, 170-71]

For Quine, the

idea of rationalizing a single notion of relative similarity, throughout its cosmic sweep, has its metaphysical attractions. But there would remain still need also to rationalize the similarity notion more locally and superficially, so as to capture only such similarity as is relevant to some special

IV. Proxi-Referents, Subjunctive Discourse, And God

Alston gives two cases which have descriptions "mostly" picking out God, while direct reference mechanisms connect up with something other than God: the "idolatry" case (Alston, 11), where mostly true descriptions of God are predicated of natural objects or non-divine entities; and the "Satan" case (Alston, 11-12), where mostly true descriptions of God are predicated of Satan or a satanic being. As far as these cases go, I have no argument. I agree with Alston's assessment, and thus with his claim, that in such cases direct reference is more basic than false descriptions of God.

Alston then goes on to consider the opposite sorts of situations—cases where our "descriptions (or most of them) pick out something else, but that we are still referring to God" (Alston, 13). I construe such cases differently, precisely because direct reference, as with direct perceptual experience, is personal and essentially indexical. Direct experiences, which a percipient has had of God, and subsequent personal references to God, will successfully pick out or refer to God whatever the predications, whether such predications are true or false. Yet, *in subsequent public religious discourse* between the percipient of God and other persons, if the predications of the percipient are overall false, then the referential components of such discourse, specifically in terms of hearer meaning, would seem to connect up with something other than God. In other words, the hearer could justifiably or reasonably reply, "you may *think* such predications are true of God to whom you are making reference (to whom you *claim* to make direct reference as based on your immediate experience), but I believe it is quite arguable that such predications, as a matter of fact, are *not* true of God—God simply not as you describe Him."

In the above dialogue, both interlocutors are referring to God, but are arguing for different positions concerning the nature or purposes of God, or the way God acts *vis-a-vis* the created world. (Again, direct reference is the indexical, linguistic counterpart to immediate perceptual experiences.)

Consider the following additions to Alston's analysis. First, the hearer is *equally* justified in making the following alternative response: "with what you have predicated of God, *especially* if you are suggesting that your beliefs concerning the truth of these predications are the direct *output* of such purported immediate experiences of God, I strongly suspect that your immediate experiences themselves must be of something other than God, of a demon, a mental construct, or a *mundane* imposter. And if I *am* correct in my suspicions concerning your immediate experiences, then it follows that, while you believe yourself to be referring to God here, by means of "direct reference," you have actually misconstrued the object of your direct reference

science..., different similarity measures, or relative similarity notions, best [suiting] different branches of science. [And it then follows that] disposition terms and subjunctive conditionals in these areas, where suitable senses of similarity and kind are forthcoming, suddenly turn respectable; respectable and, in principle, superfluous. In other domains they remain disreputable and practically indispensable. [*Ibid*, 173-74]

He then concludes that

in general we can take it as a very special mark of the maturity of a branch of science that it no longer needs an irreducible notion of similarity and kind. It is that final stage where the animal vestige is wholly absorbed into the theory. In this career of the similarity notion, starting in its innate phase, developing over the years in the light of accumulated experience, passing then from the intuitive phase into theoretical similarity, and finally disappearing altogether, we have a paradigm of the evolution of unreason into science. [*Ibid*, 174-75]

and are actually referring to something other than God." Recall the problem with construing Karanaya, the wood god of witchcraft, or the god Kali of Hinduism, as referentially identical with the (monotheistic) God of Christianity or Judaism (recall how seriously the name of God is taken in Judeo-Christian tradition).

Such a response seems quite reasonable and justified, and, Alston admits, not incompatible with his main position concerning direct reference. The significance of this second response is that a person can actually be mistaken in the linguistic act of "direct reference" as described by Alston. And *if this is so*, then in such cases direct reference is not linguistically or referentially basic in a way analogous to the basicity of the related direct perceptual experience underlying the referential claims and actions of the percipient.⁶ At least, the percipient might be confused or self-contradictory in claiming what are actually *false beliefs* to be consistently generated by some immediate experiences, while in predicating such beliefs of the object of these direct experiences, they end up as simply not truly predicable of the object or being to which they are being attributed. Finally, whether the first or the second response is more justifiable would seem to be a matter of degree in terms of the general compatibility or incompatibility of the set of predications made of the object of direct reference.

Undoubtedly a lot of people do worship the true God despite having "weak" theologies, vague conceptions of "who God is," or lacking articulate notions of the nature and purposes of God. On the other hand, there are a lot of people not worshipping the true God (even though they claim to) precisely because they do not know enough about "who God is," about his nature or general purposes. But to substantiate this conclusion, which is basic to classical trinitarian-Christian theism, the alternative presuppositional-categorical theory of reference is required.

CONCLUSION

I am not suggesting that I have an alternative to all other theories of reference. I am in accord with Alston's assessment concerning the undoubtable linguistic phenomena of a variety of available "referential apparatus"; and it seems that there is a general basicness of direct reference over and above other reference mechanisms, at least in a great number of cases.

I do conclude, however, that much confusion about failed reference, and especially concerning making reference to God or immaterial entities, arises precisely because English has no consistent, public, subjunctive mood, and correspondingly no consistent linguistic (grammatical) mechanisms for distinguishing between modes of discourse—between the two non-subjunctive modes, reality and fictional, and the subjunctive mode of discourse.

I offer two proposals, the first, an alternative to a Kripkean mechanism of *reference-maintenance*. There are certain direct perceptual experiences had by a majority of humans throughout history—the category of the divine being a paradigm case. In place of particular individual referents, proxi-categorical referents become the basis for predicative discourse about

⁶ Analogues between direct or immediate perception and direct reference do breakdown. "Direct perceptual-experience" is a *cognitive mechanism* (at least in terms of some theories of perception such as appearance theory, and as entailed by some reliabilist theories of epistemic justification). However, "direct reference" (as with other theories of reference) is not strictly subsumable under the category of a cognitive mechanisms. Rather, linguistic mechanisms such as in referring are at least partly a matter of interpersonal, public communication and the context of specific "language games." Colin McGinn makes a similar point: "One immediate consequence [of a spatio-temporal reference theory] is that an account of reference will not parallel what we have a right to expect of philosophical accounts of (say) perception and knowledge" ("The Mechanism of Reference," *Synthese*, 49, Holland, 1981).

such direct perceptual experiences. Second, the three overt public modes-of-discourse which act as *grammatical indicators* (including the subjunctive mood, along with helping verbs and particles) become the basis for meaningful and successful *public communication*, coordinating speaker and hearer meaning, using proxi-referents as presupposed place-holders for predication.

Given the above proposals, the PCTR can be construed in terms of two different types of cases, respectively. First, direct religious experiences (on a two-stage Crombian analysis) are had by a majority of human language speakers. Using the divine category as a proxi-referent, public predication, descriptive discourse, and non-referent-specific debate becomes possible and less ambiguous. And proxi-reference maintenance likewise becomes possible due to the general yet direct experience of the "*mysterium tremendum*" among the majority of humans. In this way the categorical proxi-referent is correspondingly "discernible" or publicly accessible.

Second, there are cases where individuals have never had, or believe themselves never to have had, direct experience of divine reality (the category of the divine). If, yet, they do desire to join in public religious discourse (for whatever reason), they must possess some notion of the category of the divine by means of the indirect medium of, e.g., religious literature, fiction, or historical tradition. In cases of the second sort, the "fictional mode of discourse" is used (or at least the "subjunctive mode of discourse" is in cases of admitted uncertainty). And where theists, agnostics, and atheists are carrying on about God or divine (religious) reality, confusion is avoided only with the help of linguistic mechanisms for identifying particular modes of discourse engaged in by each individual in the discussion.

The above considerations merely sketch out an alternative to other theories of reference, specifically as applied to religious discourse. It would be necessary, in order to more fully flesh out or substantiate the PCTR, to do a lot of examination and comparison of what language speakers actually do in the many, diverse contexts of religious discourse (as much the job of a linguist as that of a philosopher of language). A comparison between American English speakers and Spanish speakers (still in possession of the subjunctive mood) would also help to supply practical details of common language usage for the presuppositional-categorical theory of reference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alston, William P. "Referring to God." Syracuse University: unpublished paper.

Claiborne, Robert. 1986. *Saying What You Mean*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Crombie, I. M. 1957. "The Possibility of Theological Statements." In *Faith and Logic*. Basil Mitchell, ed., pp. 31-83. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

_____. 1964. Paper delivered for the symposium "Theology and Falsification." In *Readings in Philosophy of Religion*. John Hick, ed., pp. 448-463. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Donnellan, Keith S. 1977. "Speaking of Nothing." In *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*. Stephen P. Schwartz, ed., pp. 216-244. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kripke, Saul A. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

McGinn, Colin. 1981. "The Mechanisms of Reference." *Synthese*, v. 49, pp. 157-186. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Quine, W. V. 1977. "Natural Kinds." In *Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds*. Stephen P. Schwartz, ed., pp. 155-75. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Otto, Rudolf. 1987. *The Idea of The Holy*. London: Oxford University Press.

van Inwagen, Peter. 1985. *Material Beings*. Syracuse: unpublished paper.

OTHER IMPORTANT SOURCES

van Inwagen, Peter. "Creatures of Fiction." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 14, n. 4, October 1977, pp. 299-308.

_____. "Fiction and Metaphysics." *Philosophy and Literature*, v. 7, n. 1, Spring 1983, pp. 67-77.

Howell, Robert. "Fictional Objects: How They Are and How They Aren't." *Poetics*, v. 8, n. 1/2, April, 1979, pp. 129-177.

_____. "Review of Parsons' Nonexistence Objects" in *Journal of Philosophy*, 1983, pp. 163-173.

Kripke, Saul. "Identity and necessity" (1972).

_____. "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" (1977).

Searle, John R. *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969.

_____. "Proper Names" (1969).

Donnellan, Keith S. "Reference and Definite Description" (1966).

Evans, Gareth. "The Causal Theory of Names" (1973).

Miller, Richard B. "The Reference of 'God'" (1986).

Devitt, Michael. *Designation*.