On Referring Contextually

Ongun Kılıç

In his work "On Referring Referentially," Corey Woodfield raised several concerns regarding Alan MacKay's critique of Keith Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. In his paper, Woodfield, proposed an account of reference only after criticizing MacKay's account of having dismissible criteria and of being too restrictive in certain contexts. Here, I will argue that Woodfield's proposed account of reference is not relevant for theories of reference in which audience is not a necessary component and underestimates the importance of communicative conventions on determining whether, in fact, a given ostensible reference expression (*o.r.e.*) fits a certain intended object of reference. Lastly, I wish to remark on how Woodifeld's proposed account is plausible, on the other hand, for theories of reference in which audience is necessitated for genuine reference.

I will first broadly outline MacKay's analysis of Donnellan's referential theory of reference. Then, I will move on to analyze Woodfield's contextual account of reference. Lastly, I will raise some concerns with Woodfield's account of reference with regards to word-object correspondence, intersubjectivity and first-personal reference.

Ongun Kılıç is a junior at Koç University, Turkey. Apart from majoring in philosophy, he is set to pursue a double major with psychology. He hopes to go on to graduate studies after his expected graduation in Spring 2022. He is interested in philosophy of mind, cognitive science and the philosophical foundations of artificial intelligence.

Perhaps the broader aim and significance of this paper, and Woodfield's work for that matter, is better understood when the recent attempts to come up with a workable theory of reference and the pragmatic-semantic debate is taken into consideration. Philosophers of language have not only been struggling with the question of what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for genuine reference, but also with the question of what kinds of linguistic phrases are capable of referring. Although the semantic-pragmatic debate that took center stage with the correspondence between Donnellan and MacKay focused on the issue of whether definite descriptions in fact refer, there seemed to be underlying theories of reference that these philosophers were utilizing. Woodfield very neatly detects this, chooses to broaden the discussion and in effect proposes an account of reference that is neither as pragmatic as Donnellan's nor as semantic as MacKay's. Frankly, what I wish to do here is not very different from that of Woodfield's work. Just as Woodfield has neatly detected the underlying theories of reference from a smaller discussion of definite descriptions, I wish to take my cue from Woodfield to take this discussion to a broader, and hopefully a more focused landscape where we are once again talking not about what kinds of linguistic entities refer but rather what in fact reference is, in the first place.

The Debate

MacKay criticizes Donnellan's referential use of definite descriptions by claiming that a definite description can only be said to refer to something if there is, in fact, an object that fits the description used. He acknowledges four elements that play an important part in Donnellan's referential account of reference[1]: "(1) speaker's intentions; (2) ... ostensible reference expression used (*o.r.e*); (3) the object of intended reference; and (4) the audience" (199).[2] This four-part analysis that MacKay proposes for Donnellan's theory of reference provides the framework for Woodfield's own argument.

---

[1] Woodfield takes this to be MacKay's theory of reference. It seems to me that MacKay only posits these criteria in order to dissect Donnellan's conception of reference that seems to underlie the referential use of definite descriptions. This, I do not think stands by itself as a substantive theory of reference as Woodfield takes it to be. However, I shall not dwell on this since Woodfield goes on to propose a novel account of reference that has little to do with the mechanics of the correspondence between Donnellan and MacKay.

[2] Here, I will stick with Woodfield's insight that an audience does not include the speaker's self, since such considerations would seem to lead the whole discussion to a philosophically uninteresting place.

Referring Contextually

Woodfield argues that MacKay's analysis contains dismissible criteria and fails to account for some cases which we are willing to call genuine cases of reference. Although he is content with criteria (1) and (3) as being necessary conditions for genuine reference, Woodfield casts doubt upon the necessity of (4) and the content of (2). Woodfield contends that an audience's understanding of a referent's object has nothing to do with successful reference. I do not find this assertion to be very problematic. As Woodfield notes, one could be said to refer to the number "5" with the definite description "the square root of 25" even if an audience lacks the relevant mathematical knowledge to understand the description's object (17). While such may be the case, Woodfield's rejection of (4) as unnecessary is questionable. By rejecting (4) Woodfield effectively concludes that reference does not occur when an audience does not grasp the object of a referent. This, however, seems a bit too far of a stretch.

Woodfield amends (2) to include context by neatly saying that ". . . the ostensible referring expression fits the object *x* better than it fits any other thing present in the context of the speech act..." (20). Although he does not provide a substantive theory of context, what Woodfield has in mind might be understood by means of an example. Suppose Jones walks into a bar, which has in it many people holding martini glasses. Jones turns to his friend and says "The man drinking martini loves olives." In this case Woodfield would say that the reference failed simply because the description picked out not only one, but many objects in the world. While Woodfield's amendment restricts Donnellan's purely pragmatic approach, it is still a more lax account of reference than that of MacKay's analysis. It allows the speaker to successfully refer to an object with a description that does not fit the object entirely, given that there is no other object that better fits the description within the given context. An example Woodfield considers is referring to a book on a table with the description "the rock on the table" in the absence of any rocks or other books in the given context (20). Therefore, Woodfield concludes that this amendment posits a sweet spot between the semantic-pragmatic debate of definite descriptions.

Context, Intersubjectivity and Audience

There is but one question that I think will be beneficial in assessing Woodfield's proposal: what do we exactly mean when we claim that a certain ostensible reference expression *fits* an intended object of reference? It does not seem that words, by themselves, pick out only certain objects

independent of what the speaker intends to talk about with that word, or independent of the context of the speech act. Indeed, this is exactly the point where Woodfield finds MacKay's analysis too restrictive, as explicated above. A good candidate, I think, would be communicative conventions. What I exactly mean by communicative conventions is very simple. When we think of the word "table", there seems to be only one kind of thing that comes to mind: a four legged object with a flat surface. Now, of course, it would perhaps be an odd question to ask why we in fact call tables, "tables". One might wonder why this would be an odd question. The reason is simply this: the reason why we denote tables by the word "table" is simply an arbitrary, communicative agreement. There seems to be nothing special about, or intrinsic to the word "table" that only allows it to pick out four-legged wooden objects. We have just simply agreed to pick out those objects with the word "table." This element of arbitrary agreement that seems to surround our linguistic system as a whole, is what I here wish to call communicative conventions. Hence, it seems that when communicative conventions are taken into consideration, the way in which we claim that a certain definite description *fits* a certain object seems to be this: the *o.r.e.* used is a successful instance of the general communicative conventional use in talking about that particular object. Under this interpretation, the way in which we make sense of word-object correspondence simply becomes a matter of intersubjective agreement. I think these considerations have some interesting consequences for Woodfield's talk of context. Like Woodfield, if we grant that one can refer in the absence of an audience, the need for talk of context seems suspect. Suppose that Jones, who is now alone, has a flock of seagulls right before him and one of them attracts Jones' attention more than the other seagulls. Then, Jones refers to that particular seagull with the description "the seagull." Surely, Woodfield would not allow for successful reference in this case since there are many seagulls in the context of the speech act. However, since there is no thought Jones is trying to share with another person, that is to say, since he does not intend to make it knowable which particular seagull he is talking about, Jones need not use an *o.r.e.* that is compatible with Woodfield's amendments. The context, it seems, is always narrow enough in cases of first-personal reference. In the absence of an audience, there are no criteria for determining whether a definite description fits the intended object of reference, and, thus, no need for narrowing or widening the context simply because word-object relations are constructed on an intersubjective plane rather than aa first-personal, subjective one. Therefore, positing Woodfield's talk of context in the absence of an audience seems to stem from missing the intersubjective nature of how we conventionally name things. It seems as though talk of context is not relevant in the absence of an audience.

Perhaps we could distinguish between what I shall call subjective and intersubjective reference. In cases where there is no audience, taking my cue from MacKay's analysis, (1) and (3) seems to be sufficient for genuine reference, unlike what Woodfield proposes. If we take for granted the intersubjective basis of word-object correspondence, then one could, in the absence of an audience, successfully refer to the intended object of reference one has in mind with any o.r.e. he likes. This is simply because outside of the intersubjective plane, there are no restrictions on which description fits which object, everything goes. However, in the presence of an audience this cannot be the case and I think this is where Woodfield's contextual account of reference is very helpful. In cases where there is indeed an audience involved, we are now within an intersubjective plane and hence we now do have a criterion for determining whether a definite description fits a certain intended object of reference, namely our communicative conventions in a given language. Unlike the previous case, if Jones' intention were to make it knowable which particular seagull he is talking about to his friend, then he would indeed need to use an o.r.e. that fits the intended seagull better than any other seagull given in the context. In these instances where there is an audience, Woodfield's account of reference poses a plausible account of intersubjective reference. Therefore, Woodfield's talk of context here within a given intersubjective plane that includes an audience does in fact stand as a relevant, novel proposal for a theory of reference. The upshot of this is that I think we need to distinguish our theories of reference accordingly to cases in which there is an audience and to cases where there is not. While Woodfield's proposal seems like a plausible account of reference where audience is necessitated, the talk of context does not have any relevance for what I have here called subjective, or first-personal reference, which does not necessitate understanding on part of the audience.

Conclusion

I have here argued that Corey Woodfield's account of reference, although successful in and relevant for explaining intersubjective reference, is not a plausible account of what I have here called subjective, or first-personal reference. I have broadly outlined MacKay's analysis of Donnellan's referential reference, which Woodfield has employed in coming up with his proposal. Then, I explained Woodfield's contextual account of reference. Ultimately, I remarked on the intersubjective nature of word-object correspondence, which undermines the relevance Woodfield's talk of audience dependent context. I have argued that

Woodfield's contextual approach is not relevant for cases in which there is no audience, since there are no criteria for word-object correspondence within a non-intersubjective plane. I have concluded with the claim that Woodfield's contextual approach is very helpful in thinking about theories of reference that necessitate understanding on part of the audience for genuine reference.

Works Cited

Donnellan, Keith S. "Reference and Definite Descriptions." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 75, 1996, pp. 281–304.

MacKay, Alfred F. "Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 77, 1968, pp. 197–202.

Woodfield, Corey "On Referring Referentially." *Aporia*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2019, pp. 13–22.