ELIMINATIVISM AND REFERENCE

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Some philosophers tell us that what appear to be the objects of our ordinary experience do not exist. Thus, they say that supposed composite objects like books, computers, tables, and lamps are no objects at all. The only sorts of object that do exist are indivisible simples—particles, you might call them—and (perhaps) living organisms.[1] I shall call this view *eliminativism*, since it eliminates composite objects from our ontology.

In this paper, I will argue that philosophers who adhere to eliminativism face a severe problem when it comes to explaining how terms like "the book," "the computer," or "the table" refer.[2] In particular, I will show that neither of the two most popular theories of reference—the causal-historical theory and the descriptivist theory of reference—are viable options for eliminativists. If my arguments for this conclusion are sound, then philosophers who endorse eliminativism should either abandon this view or adopt a non-standard theory of reference.

The plan for my paper is as follows. First, I will outline the causal-historical theory of reference and argue that eliminativists should not endorse it (II). Second, I will outline the descriptivist theory of reference and argue that eliminativists should not endorse it, either (III). I then close the paper by assessing the import of my argument from reference as an argument against eliminativism (IV).

II

The causal-historical theory of reference appears in germ form in Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*. Formalized, the account says the following: An utterance u of a name n refers to an object o in virtue either of u's baptizing o as n or of u's being rightly causally connected to an historical chain c of utterances of n such that the first link l of c baptized o as n.[3] The account is called the causal-historical account because it accounts for the reference of names by appealing to causal connections which obtain between utterances of those names and historical chains of utterances of those names.

Kripke offered this proposal to explain how *names* refer. Yet, one might very easily extrapolate from his account to provide a story about terms like "the book" as well. If we take what Kripke says and apply it to utterances of terms like "the book," we will get the following analysis: An utterance u of a term t by a subject s refers to an object o just in case either s's utterance of t is an initial baptism of o as t or s's utterance of t is rightly causally connected to an historical chain c of utterances of t such that the first link l of c baptized o as t.[4] In what follows, I will argue that it is a necessary condition of an utterance u's bearing the right kind of causal relations to a chain c that the speaker s intend, in uttering u, to refer to the same object o to which the utterer of the first link l of c intended his utterance of l to refer. Call this condition the *intention condition*. After arguing for the intention condition, I will show how this condition renders the causal-historical theory incompatible with eliminativism.

My argument for the intention condition begins with an ambiguous remark from Kripke. He writes, "When the name is 'passed from link to link', the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it."[5] The remark might be saying:

> (α) In order for a subject s's utterance u of a term t to refer to an object o, s must intend u to refer to o and o must be the object j such that j is the object referred to by the first link l in a chain c of utterances of t which chain bears the right kind of causal relations to u.

Alternatively, the remark might be saying:

> (α') In order for a subject s's utterance u of a term t to refer to an object o, s must intend u to refer to o and o must be the object j such that j is the object to which the utterer of the first link l in a chain c of utterances of t *intended* to refer in uttering l, where c bears the right kinds of causal connections to u.

(α') includes the intention condition. Yet, it is not obvious that (α') is the correct interpretation of Kripke's remark. So, I will argue that, whether or not Kripke's remark is to be taken this way, the causal-historical theory ought to be taken as implying (α') and thus including the intention condition.

Understand an utterance's *actual referent* to be, intuitively, whatever object that utterance in fact picks out. Understand an utterance's *speaker-referent* to be the referent which the speaker intends his utterance to pick out. Now consider the following dilemma. Take any situation *S* where a first speaker P makes an utterance u_1 of a term t and then a second speaker P_2 borrows the referent of P's utterance u_1 by making his own utterance u_2 of term t. Now, in any situation *S*, the actual referent of u_1 and the speaker-referent of u_1 are either always the same or they are not always the same. If they are always the same, then (α) implies (α'). For, it follows in this case from P_2's intending, in uttering u_2, to refer to the same object to which P's utterance u_1 actually refers that P_2 intended to refer to the same object to which P intended his utterance u_1 to refer. But suppose it is not the case that, in any situation *S*, the actual referent of u_1 and the speaker-referent of u_1 are the same. From this supposition it will follow that there are clear cases of reference borrowing which we will have to say are not cases of reference borrowing, so long as we say that the causal-historical theory implies only (α). We do not want to say this. Thus, regardless of which horn of the dilemma we take, we must accept that the causal-historical theory of reference implies (α').

But what kinds of cases am I speaking about when I say that the second horn implies that we must say of clear cases of reference borrowing that they are not cases of reference borrowing, so long as we accept only (α)? Here is one. Imagine that you and I have been attending a murder trial all week. There has been very good evidence presented that Jones, the defendant, is guilty of murdering Smith. Yet, the jury hands down the decision that Jones is not guilty. You and I, who were good friends with Smith, are very disappointed in the decision. You say, intending to refer to Jones, "Smith's murderer got away with it!" I say in response, "Yes, Smith's murderer will soon be on the loose." This case looks to be one instance of situation *S* where I borrow the referent of your term. But now imagine that in fact Jones did not murder Smith. Instead, Schwartz did. If there are situations *S* where the actual referent of the first speaker's utterance is different from that utterance's speaker-referent, in accordance with the second horn of the dilemma above,

then your utterance of "Smith's murderer" is as good a candidate as any. But, if the actual referent of your utterance is not your utterance's speaker-referent, then presumably the actual referent is Schwartz. Yet, if the actual referent of your utterance is Schwartz, then I have not borrowed your referent when I say that Smith's murderer will soon be on the loose, according to (α). For, in uttering "Smith's murderer" I did not intend to refer to the same object to which your utterance in fact referred (Schwartz). Thus, if there are situations *S* in which actual referent and speaker-referent come apart for the first speaker, then we must either adopt (α') or say that what appeared to be clear cases of reference borrowing are not cases of reference borrowing.

I have now shown that the causal-historical theory of reference must include the intention condition. For, if it does not include this condition, then there will be clear cases of reference borrowing which turn out not to be cases of reference borrowing. A full statement of the causal-historical theory of reference, then, would look like this:

> A subject s's utterance u of a term t refers to an object o just in case s utters u with the intention of referring to o and o is the object to which the utterer of the first link l in a chain c of utterances of t intended to refer in uttering l, where c bears the right kinds of causal connections to u.

I will now show that the causal-historical theory with the addition of the intention condition is incompatible with eliminativism. Specifically, I will show that eliminativists cannot endorse this theory of reference because it will not allow them to make sense of their dialogue with non-eliminativists. Consider the following example.

John, an eliminativist, invites some non-eliminativist friends, Sam and David, over for dinner. While dinner is prepared, John escorts his guests around his home, giving them the grand tour. When they enter the dining room, David begins asking John all about his extravagant dining table. John responds by saying, "The table was imported from Italy. In fact, our family rarely eats at the table for this reason. That's why we are eating at the kitchen table tonight."

Let us examine the utterance of "the table" which occurs in John's second sentence. The causal-historical theory of reference will say that this utterance of "the table" refers to the object o to which it refers because John intends his utterance to refer to o and because his utterance bears the right sorts of causal connections to a chain c of utterances of "the table" such that the first link l in c was uttered with the intention to refer to o. But there is an important question to ask about this account to which the eliminativist can provide no good answer: What utterance of "the table" is l? It seems that l will either be one of David's utterances or John's first utterance. I will argue that neither of these options is attractive for the eliminativist.

Supposing that l is one of David's utterances leads us into a severe problem for the eliminativist. For, on the causal-historical theory of reference John, in uttering "the table," would have to be intending to refer to the same object to which David intended to refer. But it seems quite implausible that he would be doing so, given that he is an eliminativist and David not. It seems likely that David intended to refer to a composite object, whereas John surely did not. So, if eliminativists are to embrace the causal-historical theory of reference, they will have to deny that l was an utterance of David's.

Yet, if we suppose that l is one of John's utterances, we also run into a severe problem. It will turn out that, contrary to our supposition, John and David were not having a genuine conversation at all. They were only talking past one another. For, if l is one of John's utterances, then when John utters his second sentence he must be intending to refer to an object which is not a composite object. But, when David uttered "the table" he was intending to refer to a composite object. He and John are talking past each other. They are using the same words, but their talk is not getting them anywhere with the other.

Consider a parallel example. Imagine a scenario where a speaker S, intending to refer to an academic department, makes a series of utterances about Emerson Hall not taking kindly to certain academic procedures. A conversation partner of S's then says, "Does Emerson Hall have any children?" intending to refer to a person. In this instance it is clear that our speakers are talking past one another. They are not having a genuine conversation about the same object. Analogously, the same result holds for our John and David. So, I conclude that if l is John's utterance, David and John are talking past one another.

The conclusion is this. The eliminativist must either deny the causal-historical theory of reference or affirm that when he and his non-eliminativist conversation partners make use of terms seeming to have to do with composite objects, he and they are talking past one another. The better of these consequences would seem to be denying the causal-historical theory of reference. For, the eliminativist will want to maintain that John and David are having a genuine conversation about the table. But, what will the eliminativist do to explain reference if he denies the causal-historical theory? He will very likely turn to the descriptivist theory of reference. Yet, I will argue in the next section that this move is not available either.

III

The descriptivist theory of reference comes in two guises—a classical guise and a contemporary guise. Common to each presentation of the theory is the claim that the way in which terms refer to objects in the world is though the speaker's associating certain descriptive attributes with those terms.[6] The main difference between the classical and contemporary presentations of the theory is over which descriptions are associated with a given term.

Contemporary descriptivist theories have turned somewhat ironically to causal descriptions. In particular, they have turned to descriptions which have for their contents material which sounds like it has come straight out of the books of the causal-historical theorists, and unaccidentally so. This is especially the case for times when a speaker borrows a referent for a term and has very little knowledge about the object to which his term refers.[7] In these cases, descriptivists will say that the term refers to the object to which it refers in virtue of the speaker associating with the term a description according to which the speaker's utterance of the term bears the right sort of causal connections to a chain of utterances the first link of which baptized the object with the term. But, as I will argue momentarily, this is precisely why contemporary descriptivist accounts—often called causal descriptivist accounts—are not good options for the eliminativist.

Consider the following case. John, our eliminativist, has moved into a new home and needs to buy some furniture to decorate. So, off he trots to his trusty antique dealer Ron who is not an eliminativist. John knows little about antiques, but he finds them intriguing nonetheless. When John gets to the dealership, Ron, intending to speak of a piece of furniture in the next room, asks him, "John, how about the breakfront? The breakfront would look swell in your new living room. Don't you agree?" John, not wanting Ron to know he does not know what a breakfront is, replies, "Perhaps. Are you sure the breakfront is short enough, though? I've only got nine-foot ceilings."

The utterance I want to focus on here is John's utterance about the breakfront. If there is any example where the attributes one associates with a term are causal ones of the sort mentioned above, then this example would seem a prime candidate. Thus, John's utterance u of "the breakfront" refers to the object o to which it refers, according to the causal descriptivist, in virtue of John's associating with u the attribute that u is such that it bears the right kinds of causal connections to a chain c of utterances of "the breakfront" such that the first link l of c originally baptized o as "the breakfront." Remember, however, that the right kinds of causal connections here must include the fact that John, in uttering u, intended to refer to the same object o to which the one who uttered l intended his utterance of l to refer. But, this will give us an unacceptable result. For, given this story, John must associate with his utterance of "the breakfront" the attribute that his utterance is such that it refers to the same object to which Ron intended his utterance of "the breakfront" to refer.[8] And, it is just not plausible to think that John would associate such an attribute with his utterance of "the breakfront." For, *ex hypothesi*, John is an eliminativist and Ron is not. Ron likely intends to refer to a composite object; John does not. So, John would not be associating this kind if attribute with his utterance of "the breakfront." Thus, causal descriptivism is not an attractive view for eliminativists.

IV

I have now argued that neither of the two most popular theories of reference—the causal-historical theory and the descriptivist theory—is compatible with eliminativism. But, it is not just that these two theories are the most popular. They are *by far* the most popular. It is widely agreed that a version of one of them is right, at least when it comes to terms like "the book" or "the computer." Thus, the argument above gives us some good reason to think that eliminativism is not compatible with the correct account of reference for such terms. That being the case, the argument gives us some reason to conclude that eliminativism is false. We have here at least the beginnings of a semantically-driven argument against eliminativism. And this result is important, considering that the most popular argument against eliminativism to date very likely has serious flaws.[9]

NOTES

1. Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990); Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); Alexander Pruss also endorses a version of eliminativism.

2. I will not discuss in detail in this paper the different options an eliminativist might take for what object(s) these are. Briefly, a few options would be (i) certain simples, (ii) aggregates of simples, (iii) mythical abstracta, (iv) the terms are empty—they do not refer. I think all of these options are problematic, but I will not argue as much here.

3. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge U P, 1980) 91.

4. Here I phrase the second part of the biconditional as a disjunction. I will only work with the second disjunct in the remainder of the paper, assuming and not stating the first disjunct. For instance, see how I phrase (α) and (α') below.

5. Kripke 96.

6. See Frank Jackson, "Reference and Description Revisited," *Philosophical Perspectives* 12 (1998): 201-18; Jason Stanley, "Names and Rigid Designation," *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Hale and Wright (Oxford: Blackwell P, 1997): 555-85.

7. Otherwise, we have to say that John is not borrowing reference and thereby run into the problem that John and Ron are talking past one another.

8. I am thinking of the argument to which Merricks 56-72 is intended as a response.