WHY THE CONCEPT OF PRESUPPOSITIONS IS OTIOSE

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Pity the poor logician. For nearly 2000 years he had to struggle with the question of whether certain propositions have "existential import"—a question wholly outside the scope of logic proper. (Where were the metaphysicians when we needed them?) The question is now considered settled. The accepted solution is wrong, but at least it is a solution.[1] We shall now be free to play at rearranging strings of funny-looking marks. Or shall we? It seems, you see, that this particular Hydra has grown another head, for we are now confronted with the spectre of propositions which have "presuppositions".[2] I, for one, am not fooled. I suspect that we have here the same old head wearing a new mask. It is possible, however, to view this development optimistically, for in a sense we are being offered a second chance to answer the question of existential import. Perhaps this time we shall get it right.

"All John's children are asleep". True or false? Neither, says Mr. Strawson. The proposition presupposes that John has children. Perhaps I shall be considered impertinent, but is not this the same thing as saying that the proposition presupposes the existence of members of the subject class? Oh well, let us take one more stab at it.

Consider an argument containing the sample proposition as a premise:

All John's children are asleep.

Children who are asleep always dream of sugar plum fairies.

All John's children are dreaming of sugar plum fairies.

The argument is valid. This means (since commonplaces are so easily forgotten) that <u>if</u> its premises are true, then its conclusion must also be true. The question of the truth of the first premise is irrelevant as far as the question of the argument's validity is concerned. So also, it follows, are the <u>conditions</u> of its truth, the conditions of its falsity, or the conditions of its being either true or false.

I fear many logicians will not rest content with the point made above. It is rather too obvious. Being unable to resist a good argument, they will enter the fray and raise much sound and fury over whether the sample proposition is bivalent. Let them be forewarned of a lurking confusion: "the confusion between sentence and statement".[3] A sentence is merely a collection of words (either written or spoken) put together according to the syntax of some language. A statement "is identified, not only by reference to the words used (i.e., the sentence), but also by reference to the circumstances in which they are used, and, sometimes, to the identity of the person using them".[4] It should be obvious that

no sentence has presuppositions. If it is said, therefore, that "All John's children are asleep" has a presupposition, what must be meant is that a certain statement has a presupposition. But what statement? Well, the statement in question will be identified not only by the words "All John's children are asleep", but also by the circumstances in which those words are being used. But surely those circumstances will include the information whether John has any progeny. What, then, is left to presuppose?

In order to have a statement relating to the sentence "All John's children are asleep", let us consider an example. I have a Catholic friend, John, who has been blessed with twelve children. I call his residence and ask his housekeeper (surely anyone with twelve children would need a housekeeper) if I might speak to one of John's children. The housekeeper replies with our sample proposition. The circumstances are now supplied. We have a statement. But it should be obvious that what John's domestic said is either true or false, and that no presupposition enters into the question of what it is.

We are now in a position clearly to see what is otiose about the concept of a presupposition. Anything which might seem to be a presupposition of a statement turns out, upon analysis, to be part and parcel of the statement itself! Whence comes the term presupposition? It is easy to see how the idea of a presupposition has a prima-facie plausibility. If we are asked, quite out of the blue, whether "All John's children are asleep" is true or false, we cannot answer. We need to know which John is being referred to, whether he has any children, if they are asleep, etc. So we might be tempted to say that there are presuppositions here. But since only statements, not sentences, can be true or false, and since the statement will differ from the sentence by including precisely the information we require, we should resist this temptation. Sentences seem to have presuppositions because they are, almost by definition, incomplete. But sentences cannot have presuppositions and statements will not have them since statements differ from sentences by their inclusion of the very information which sentences lack. So Strawson's distinction between a sentence and a statement solves his conundrum concerning presuppositions!

What has all this to do with existential import? Everything. If the question of the existence of members of a class bears on the truth of a proposition, then it will be part of that proposition. Knowing that the class "John's children" is not empty is part of the penumbra which differentiates the sentence "All John's children are asleep" from the related statement. And, I should hasten to add, it cannot be the task of logic proper to determine the material truth or falsity of statements.

At this point, I should like to think that you, reader, are convinced. If so, do not succumb to premature euphoria. Before you become too sanguine, you should be advised that the notion of presuppositions has invaded the hallowed ground of formal logic. Professor Van Fraasen and others have already rendered it into sets of marks, integrated these marks by means of precise procedures with others more well established, and, at this very moment, logicians in all corners are furiously moving

these marks about, discovering new theorems in the logic of presuppositions. I only hope we are not too late, for we already suffer a disadvantage pointed out by Wittgenstein:

> The curse of the invasion of mathematics by mathematical logic is that now any proposition can be represented in a mathematical symbolism, and this makes us feel obliged to understand it.[5]

The formal relation of presupposition given by Van Fraasen is:[6]

> If A and B are sentences of L, then A presupposes B in L if, for every admissible valuation ν of L, if $\nu(A) = T$, then $\nu(B) = T$ and if $\nu(A) = F$, then $\nu(B) = T$.

The L in the definition stands for some formal language. Suppose there were a language, L, which had this relation between some of its expressions. If A and B are expressions in L, and if A presupposes B, then what about B? Does it presuppose some C? (Zeno would have loved this.) Ruling out both an infinite regress and a vicious circle, we are left with the assumption that some of the expressions of L must not have presuppositions. So the existence of the relation defined by Van Fraasen in L implies that some of the expressions of that language do not have presuppositions. If we symbolize the relation "x presupposes y" as "Pxy", then we may express our point by saying that some expressions of L are not in the domain of P.

Since L is a formal language, no expression in L can have any admissible valuation unless it is a wff. Hence, any expression in L, say A, presupposes another expression; namely, the expression that A is a wff. That is, the relation between the two expressions A and "A is a wff" is exactly the relation defined by Van Fraasen. Let us symbolize "A is a wff" by A'. If A is F, A' is T, and if A is T, A' is T. It follows that any expression in L, say x, presupposes x'. So all expressions of L will be in the domain of P. Since we just saw that it also follows that some expressions in L must not be in the domain of P, we evidently have a problem. "All are" and "some are not" cannot both be true even on the current interpretation of existential import!

I expect that at this point someone will accuse me of chicanery and/or sophistry. It will be claimed that since Van Fraasen's definition has nothing to do with wffs, my argument is merely an ignoratio elenchi. Such an objection would overlook the nature of Van Fraasen's definition. Insofar as that definition is purely formal, we are free to interpret it in any way we please so long as our interpretation is consistent with the relation defined. The interpretation of "A presupposes B" as "B is the expression that A is a wff" is consistent with the relation since for such an interpretation $A(T) \rightarrow B$ and $A(F) \rightarrow B$.

Unfortunately, the preceding argument is not conclusive because to state that argument it was necessary to tacitly accept the idea that expressions of a formal language can be true or false; an idea which is certainly questionable. Does Van Fraasen's definition commit him to

the claim that expressions of a formal language can be true or false? I am not certain. Recall that the defined relation says "if $v(A) = T$, then $v(B) = T$ and if $v(A) = F$, then $v(B) = T$". If the valuations symbolized by T and F are purely formal, then Van Fraasen is not committed to claiming that expressions of L are true or false in the ordinary (non-logical) sense. Further, I would have no quarrel with the definition on this interpretation although I would have preferred to use 1 and 0 instead of T and F. However, if this is the case, then what has been defined is not Strawson's notion of a presupposition. The most that could be claimed is that Strawson's notion of a presupposition might be an interpretation of or a model for Van Fraasen's definition. If that were the case, then the expressions of L would become statements in English or some other natural language, and any supposed relation between these expressions which purported to be a relation of presupposition would be subject to the criticism made earlier in this paper. Since formal systems are independent of any linguistic interpretation given them in ordinary language, little support can be derived for Strawson's concept of a presupposition by appeal to Van Fraasen's definition so long as that definition is considered formally. If, on the other hand, the T's and F's of the definition are understood to stand for material truth and material falsity, then we must inquire how expressions in a formal language could be materially true or false. The situation here is analogous to many others in logic where, despite the existence of acceptable formal systems, we are uncertain concerning the interpretations or models of such systems. The symbols $\supset$ and $\sqsubset$ are good examples. No one supposes that there is nothing problematic about implication simply because we may successfully deal with the horseshoe in formal systems. Nor does the successful use of the square allay our doubts about the status of necessary propositions.

I do not want to be understood as claiming that there are no proper uses of the word "presupposition" in ordinary language. Certainly there are. Questions may have presuppositions. It also seems appropriate to call a suppressed premise in an argument a presupposition. What I do deny is that anything should be called a statement or proposition unless it is bivalent. It seems obvious that what philosophers and logicians have had in mind when attempting the difficult task of defining a proposition is something which, unlike other utterances, is always either true or false. If this is correct, then it would be better to refrain from calling anything a proposition unless it is bivalent. I am well aware of the difficulties associated with the concept of propositions. Some philosophers object to the metaphysical status of propositions. Others claim that nothing could ever be precise enough to be genuinely true or false in a definitive way. Nonetheless, they continue to use the word and, I suspect, the usual concept, for lack of any viable substitute. I suggest that we reserve the word proposition just in case these problems are overcome. I hope that they are, for without the concept of a bivalent proposition, I fail to see how the human practice of communicating information can be explained.

NOTES

1. Richard B. Angell presents what I take to be the current solutions in Reasoning and Logic (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), 1964.

2. P.F. Strawson, Introduction to Logical Theory (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd.), 1952.

3. Ibid., p. 174.

4. Ibid., p. 4.

5. Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (New York: The Macmillan Company), 1956, Part IV, 46.

6. Formal Semantics and Logic (New York: The Macmillan Company), 1971, p. 154.