

THE CONCEPT OF REFERENCE

(Russell-Strawson Controversy)

In the present paper, we shall discuss Strawson's criticisms of Russell's doctrine of reference, and shall try to establish the following three points :

1. Strawson's criticisms of Russell's doctrine of reference seem to involve some misapprehension of Russell's view.
2. Though Strawson has formulated his theory of reference as a criticism of Russell's theory, still it has some striking similarities with Russell's theory.
3. The difference of opinion between Russell and Strawson seems to be due to a difference in their respective points of view.

Let us start with the first point. We shall try to show that the objections that Strawson has raised against Russell's doctrine of reference do not really stand against his view; these criticisms seem to arise as a result of some misunderstanding of Russell's doctrine. It is this point that is sought to be established through out the entire essay. The first step to prove this is to show that Russell did not make the confusion between meaning and reference that he is alleged to have made.

Strawson has criticised Russell by saying that Russell has confused the distinction between referring and meaning. He says, "The source of Russell's mistake was that he thought that referring or mentioning, if it occurred at all, must be meaning.¹ This indicates that Strawson thinks that Russell made no distinction between meaning and referring, whereas in fact they are fundamentally different from one another. The difference between the two is stated in the following passage by Strawson, "Meaning is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression."² So, according to Strawson, Russell mistakenly thinks that reference, just like meaning, is a function of the linguistic expression, while it is really a function of the use of such expressions. But it appears that Russell was not

totally unaware of the distinction, and in his doctrine of reference, he was mainly concerned with the use of linguistic expressions, instead of the expression itself. Russell has made a distinction between names and descriptions, two different sorts of linguistic expressions; and has said that descriptions can not be regarded as referring expressions, names alone can be used as such. But, how to know whether a certain expression is a name or a description? The reply on behalf of Russell would be that, it is not from their outward form but from the functions the expressions are used to perform that they are to be regarded as names or as descriptions. That which in outward form seems to be a name will not be regarded as a name by Russell unless it is used as such. Similarly a so-called descriptive phrase also might be regarded as a name if it is used in that way. So, whether an expression is a name or a description is to be decided from the use of that expression, not from the form of it. An examination of the theory of descriptions as presented by Russell, will make this evident. He regards those expressions as descriptions which do not denote any actual individual. It appears that Russell probably will not insist that this sort of expressions can never be regarded as referring expressions; if they are used in such a way as to fulfill the conditions for being a name, they might be regarded as names; but in that case, they would cease to remain descriptions, in Russell's sense of the term. So, 'names' and 'descriptions' seem to be the descriptions, not of the linguistic expressions themselves, but of the functions that they are used to perform. If the act of referring is really distinct from the act of describing, as is admitted by Strawson also, then, this classification of expressions into names and descriptions also is to be made.

That Russell did not put much stress on the use of expressions is perhaps due to the fact that he was thinking of constructing an ideal language. If the functions that the expressions are used to perform are really different, then why should we not construct our syntax and vocabulary in such a manner as to use different expressions for performing these different tasks? It will help us to avoid confusions and errors.

So, it appears that Russell is not completely unaware of the distinction between reference and meaning as he did recognise the fact that reference is not a function of the expression itself

but of the use of the expression. Russell never thinks that an expression by itself can refer. It is of the use of expressions that he is formulating his theory. It might be said here on behalf of Strawson that though it might be true to say that both Russell and Strawson are concerned with the use and not the expression itself when they think of 'reference', still Russell's sense of 'use' is different from that of Strawson. In Russell "use of an expression" means a certain relation between the speaker who uses the expression and the object for which the expression stands, but in Strawson 'use' means utterance of an expression in suitable circumstances to mention an object. But, Strawson's conception of the 'genuine' and 'spurious' 'use' of expressions suggests that he also believes, like Russell that the speaker who uses the expression must have some relation with the object mentioned by the expression he uses. Whether the use is a spurious one, depends on whether the object referred to is a real one and whether the speaker thinks it as such. So there is also a relation between the speaker and the object.

Next, we shall discuss two further points; one is the doctrine of 'about' as formulated by Russell as well as by Strawson, and we shall try to show that in spite of the criticisms raised against Russell's theory, Strawson himself shares the common view with Russell in this respect. The second point to be discussed is the exact point of difference between Russell and Strawson.

One of the points that Russell has sought to establish in his theory of descriptions is this— descriptive phrases cannot be the real or logical subject of a sentence. The reason that he has offered for his saying so is that descriptive phrases do not denote any individual, and, hence if any such descriptive phrase becomes the subject of a sentence, the sentence could not be regarded as about anything and consequently could not be regarded either as true or as false and hence meaningless. Strawson has challenged this view and says that a sentence should not be regarded as meaningless only because it could not be regarded either as true or as false. He thinks that sentences containing descriptive phrases can be regarded as ordinary subject-predicate sentences, and in this very respect, he disagrees with Russell. But what I am trying to convey is this, that, Strawson himself does not

actually think that a descriptive phrase that denotes nothing can still be regarded as the logical subject of a sentence. If expressions which do not denote any actual individual can be used as subjects of sentences then the sentences containing them could not be regarded as either true or false. The reason for such failure is sought to be explained by Strawson. He thinks that in these cases the act of referring fails and the use of descriptive phrases as referring expressions in such cases is not to be regarded as genuine or proper use, but as 'spurious' use. If Strawson really thinks so, then he might be requested to formulate the theory of the proper or genuine use only. It might be said on behalf of Russell that he has formulated his doctrine of reference with a view to explain the genuine or proper use of referring expressions only.

Strawson himself believes that in case of failure of reference, the person cannot be said to be talking about anything. He writes "And I will add, it will be used to make a true or false assertion only if the person using it is talking about something. If, when he utters it, he is not talking about anything, then his use is not a genuine one, but a spurious or pseudo use."³ So, using descriptive phrases that denote nothing a person cannot successfully talk about anything. How can Strawson still think that such descriptive phrases could occur as the logical subjects of assertions? That alone is to be regarded as the logical subject of an assertion, about which we are saying something. When we are not talking about anything, how can we still say that we are talking about something? C. E. Caton in his paper⁴ has criticised Strawson by saying that his conception of spurious use of referring expressions closely resembles Russell's concept of reference. Strawson also thinks like Russell that the linguistic expressions which denote nothing cannot be used to refer to anything, while Caton himself thinks that failure or success of reference does not depend on whether there is any object corresponding to the referring expression, or not.

So, it appears that Strawson's concept of reference resembles that of Russell in some important respects. We shall mention some further points of resemblance between their views. Strawson feels a necessity for distinguishing between a speaker's sense

of identification and the hearer's sense of the same. This is clear from the following passage "So we have a hearer's sense and a speaker's sense of identify"⁵ This fact of identification is important for understanding the concept "reference". In his conception of the speaker's sense of identity, Strawson holds a conception of referring from the speaker's point of view which resembles Russell's doctrine to a great extent.

For the speaker to refer is to make an identification, but what is meant by this identification in case of a speaker? To refer to a certain object, the speaker uses a certain expression, but the use of that expression will be a correct referring use only when the speaker is aware of the fact, who or what it is, that he is speaking of. In order to know this he must fulfil two conditions, one is that he must be in a certain relation to that object. He writes "And I will add it will be used to make a true or false assertion only if the person using it is talking about something... it is the requirement that the thing should be in a certain relation to the speaker and to the context of utterance".⁶

This view of Strawson seems to have a striking resemblance to Russell's view that proper names, which are the only referring expressions, denote individuals alone with which the speaker is acquainted.* Strawson seems to think something more than this. He says that a name is always to be substituted by a description. This perhaps would not be accepted by Russell.

But we shall enquire whether this use of description is necessary according to Strawson, for the speaker to identify the object he refers to. A descriptive phrase consists of a combination of certain attributes; if this combination of attributes is to be used for the purpose of referring to something then for the speaker at least it could not be just an arbitrary combination of imaginary attributes, because such a descriptive phrase cannot possibly be regarded as a referring expression at least for the speaker, nor can it help him to identify the object referred to. In such cases the speaker is fully conscious of the fact that he is not talking about anything real with which he is in a particular relation and consequently he cannot regard such descriptive phrases as referring expressions. In such cases, the speaker will not believe in the truth of the presupposition which is considered by Strawson as

a pre-requisite of any genuine utterance. So, descriptive phrases, if they are at all to be regarded by the speaker as referring expressions, must contain real descriptions of some objects, but in order to have such a description, the speaker must first be acquainted with the object he is describing and perhaps it is this acquaintance with the object that is considered by Russell as 'reference' of names. Presentation of the object is prior to the describing of it; prior in the sense, that describing pre-supposes this relation of direct confrontation with objects; but this relation itself does not pre-suppose description of the object. It might be objected here, "Why should we think that the speaker must be acquainted with the object in order to refer to it? We might refer to many objects about which we have just heard from others, and with which we ourselves have no acquaintance."

We must admit that it is difficult to guess what will be Strawson's own view as to such cases. He perhaps will be inclined to think that second hand reference could passibly be made by the speaker. But we wonder whether Strawson can plausibly hold such a view. The cases of second hand reference do not satisfy the condition of identification for the speaker, viz., the speaker must be in a particular relation to the object. Again whether the use of referring expressions in such cases is a genuine use or not, that also cannot be decided by the consideration of the case itself. Here the speaker may make use of such second hand reference, and might think that he is speaking about something as he has pre-supposed the existence of that object. But, if so, he is actually in the position of the hearer; and if so, then he is not to be regarded as the true speaker, hence the problem of reference does not really arise in such cases; it arises in case of those persons who are the actual speakers. Thus, we might say that when descriptive phrases are apparently used as the subject of some sentence, the sentence is not really of the subject-predicate form, at least, not for the speaker. For the speaker, the real form of the sentences containing descriptive phrases as subject as for example, the sentence "The present king of France is bald" is of the following form: "That existing individual who is of such and such nature has such and such other qualities," hence, the descriptive phrase really occurs not as the subject but as the predicate. In order to be used as a referring expression,

the descriptive phrases pre-suppose reference in Russell's sense of the term. So, the logical consequences of what Strawson believes lead one to the conclusion that if reference is considered from the speaker's point of view, descriptive phrases cannot be regarded as genuine referring expressions, because the use of them as such pre-supposes the use of some other expression which directly denotes that object without describing it. In order to refer, or in other words, in order to speak about a certain object, the speaker must use some expression which directly mentions the object without describing at all. That word or expression would have no descriptive content, it would merely stand for the object, and hence what else could be the meaning of that word except the individual denoted by it? Strawson seems to be right in supposing that one can use any expression to refer to some object, but the important point to be noticed is that, he cannot use it as a descriptive phrase; its descriptive function is to be withheld.

So far as we are concerned with the speaker's point of view, the concept of 'reference' seems to be almost similarly understood by Russell and by Strawson.

Still it is to be admitted that Strawson himself does not think so. He regards descriptive phrases as referring expressions, and these expressions according to him can occur as the subject of assertions. This obviously cannot be accepted by Russell. Strawson's following statement also will perhaps not be accepted by Russell. He says, "so it may seem, in the non-demonstrative identification of particular we depend ultimately on descriptions."⁷ So, he seems to have some disagreement with Russell. We shall try to show that this difference in their opinions originates from the difference in their points of view.

Besides the speaker's sense of identification, Strawson speaks also of the hearer's sense of identification. We shall presently consider the concept 'reference' from the hearer's point of view.

Language is a means of communication. So, it is not enough for the speaker to have some relation with the object to which he wants to refer, he must follow certain devices so that his hearer might understand what particular individual he is speaking about. "What in general is required for making a unique reference is,

obviously, some device or devices, for showing both *that* a unique reference is intended and *what* unique reference it is; some device requiring and enabling the hearer to identify what is being talked about."⁸ As the concept of identification is different for the hearer than it is for the speaker, so this brings a lot of difference in the concept, of 'reference' too.

According to Strawson there might be three different cases in which the speaker may be said to make identifying reference for the hearer. One is the case when the speaker is said to invoke identifying knowledge that the hearer is assumed to be in possession. The other is the case when the hearer is not actually in possession of any identifying knowledge of the individual referred to, but the use of the referring expression leads the hearer to presume the existence of one such individual. Both of these above mentioned cases are cases of non-demonstrative identification. There might be demonstrative identification also; in such cases, the speaker and the hearer both are acquainted with the object referred to, the object is in the present field of perception for both of them; in such cases when the speaker uses a referring expression he merely wants to draw the attention of the hearer.⁹

It is to be noted here that in case of non-demonstrative identification, use of the descriptive phrases as referring expression is not only possible but is indispensable. It is by the help of those descriptions used by the speaker that the hearer is able to identify the object he already knows; or, to presume the existence of any such object. Meaningless symbols which lack any descriptive content can neither invoke identifying knowledge in the hearer nor can they lead him to presume the existence of any such object referred to by the speaker.

In case of demonstrative identification, the speaker may use meaningless non-descriptive symbols as well as descriptive phrases to draw the attention of the hearer towards the object he is referring to.

So, it appears that considered from the hearer's point of view, descriptive phrases might be regarded as referring expressions; as Strawson rightly says "A name is worthless without a backing of descriptions which can be produced on demand to explain its application."¹⁰ But this is true for the hearer's language

only. And the controversy between Russell and Strawson is perhaps due to their emphasis on different aspects of language. Russell thinks that in an important discussion about language, its social aspect should not be emphasised.¹¹ He says, "A 'logically perfect language, if it could be constructed, would not only be intolerably prolix, but as regards its vocabulary would be very largely private to one speaker.'¹² So, Russell has constructed his doctrine of reference with a view to explain the problems that arise in the speaker's language alone. Strawson, though he has made a distinction between speaker's sense of identification and hearer's sense of the same, is still primarily concerned with the hearer's sense.

So, it appears that the controversy between Russell and Strawson arises from a difference in their respective points of view.

Dept. of Philosophy,
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Swapna Sengupta

NOTES AND REFERENCE

* They may differ as to the nature of the relation and of the nature of of 'individual'. Still the similarity is also to be noticed.

1. Strawson : " *On Referring* ".
2. Strawson : " *On Referring* ".
3. Strawson : " *On Referring* ".
4. Caton : " *Strawson on Referring* " *Mind*, 1959.
5. Strawson : *Individuals* P. 16.
6. Strawson : " *On Referring* ".
7. Strawson : *Individuals* P. 29.
8. Strawson : " *On Referring* ".
9. Strawson : *Logico Linguistic Papers* P. 79.
10. Strawson *Individuals* P. 20.
11. Russell *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* P. 177.
12. Russell *Logic and Knowledge* P. 198.

