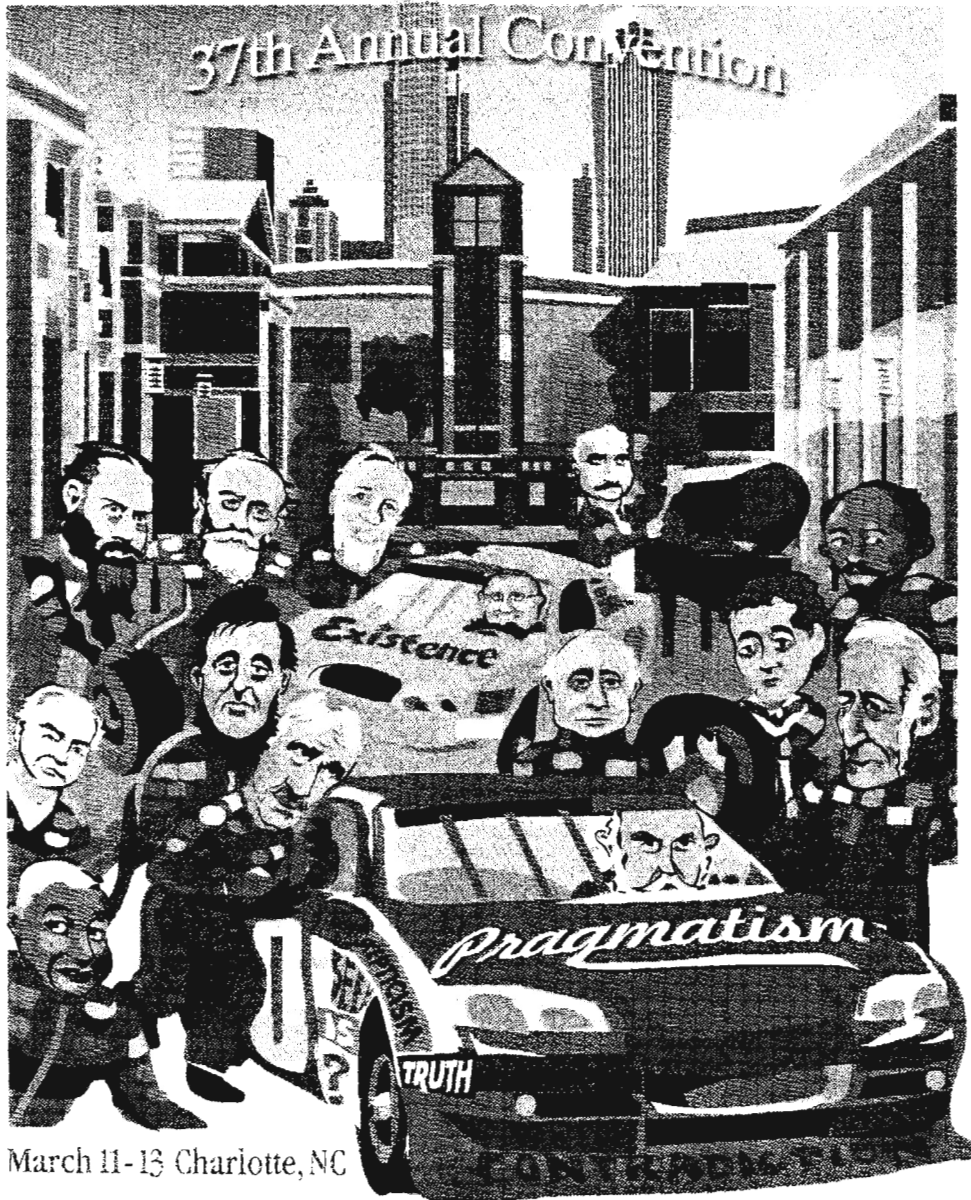


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*Pragmatism and Reference*. David Boersema. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009. 279 pages, \$36.00

This book is an excellent exploration of the concept of reference. Boersema compares and contrasts recent analytical accounts of reference with various pragmatist views, both classical and recent. Boersema's arguments are of course not recounted here, but some key claims and conclusions are summarized as an indication of the book's main themes.

The book is in three parts, each part consisting of three chapters. (1) In the first set of three chapters, Boersema critiques three standard accounts of reference. These include, first, a descriptivist cluster theory of names, associated with Russell and Searle, and second, a causal account of direct reference associated with Kripke, Donnellan, Devitt, and others. Despite their obvious differences, these two accounts of reference have much in common, including realist commitments to conceptions of individuation and similarity (pp.41-46,191-192). In contrast, third, a Wittgensteinian theory of meaning as use yields a fundamentally different option, recognizing "the open texture of names" (p.53) and otherwise rejecting fundamental features of the other two accounts (such as the notion that at least some referring terms are so-called rigid designators). Boersema argues that the first two views fall short for multiple reasons and that the third by itself does not quite save the day, leaving room then for the consideration of alternatives such as one finds in the writings of classical as well as more recent pragmatists.

(2) In the second group of three chapters, Boersema recounts views of reference of three different sets of pragmatists. The first of these chapters looks at "the big three" classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey); the second chapter looks at three contemporary Americans (Putnam, Elgin, Rorty); and the third examines three recent Europeans (Eco, Apel, Habermas). This is of course a motley group whose collective work harbors a variety of views on names and reference. Yet they provide Boersema with the basic ingredients for a coherent pragmatist alternative to the cluster and causal accounts of reference.

One would like to see more details concerning what Peirce, James, and Dewey thought about names and reference, especially given that classical pragmatism provides the basis for Boersema's response to the descriptivist-cluster and direct-causal accounts of reference. Prior familiarity with the big three pragmatists is required here (e.g., Peirce's notion of an "interpretant"); but the focus and the strength of this chapter is Boersema's discussion of how the views of none of the big three fall under either of the two received accounts of reference. Assuming the reader already knows what these three have said about names and reference, it is a useful exercise at this historical juncture to articulate what those views are *not*. Boersema shows in detail why none of them can be properly understood in terms of a descriptivist cluster account or a causal direct-reference account.

The discussion of Putnam, Elgin, and Rorty is also focused on establishing that their respective views on reference fall neatly under *neither* of the two received views. We also begin

to see more clearly which pragmatist themes Boersema is intent on endorsing. In an earlier chapter, we found that James promoted a view that reference presupposes abilities to use language and that the latter abilities are themselves dependent on our engagement in purposive social behaviors (p.77). Putnam also "insists on the collective sociality of reference (and the ability to refer)" (p.95) and holds that our engagement with the world (e.g., perceiving and naming) is mediated by *interest*-relative representations (p.97). Elgin, while not a professed pragmatist, promotes a Goodmansque constructivism (or constructionalism) as a standpoint midway between absolute foundationalism and absolute relativism (p.107). She rejects the simplistic metaphysical realism of the direct-causal account of reference along with the underlying essentialism of the associated view of names as rigid designators (p.112). It is harder to assess what Boersema takes from Rorty's discourse-oriented pragmatism, though it includes Rorty's admonition that we should escape the trap of 17th-century presumptions that "mind-language represents the world and we need to explain how" (p.122). These and related themes are not entirely clear when so briefly stated, but this list points to key aspects of Boersema's own response to the received view of names and reference.

Boersema also mines the work of Europeans Eco, Apel, and Habermas for similar resources to support his alternative pragmatist account of reference. Eco's so-called "contractual realism" blends semantics and pragmatics so as to cast referring as an action based on social cooperation and negotiation (pp.131,136). There is an inherent connection in Eco's view between interpretation, inference, evidence, and a contractual view of reference (p.141). Apel's "transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics" tie together subjective intention, linguistic convention, and reference—intentionality, intensionality, and extensionality—in a comprehensive attempt to understand the nature of meaning (pp.143-4). Apel rejects methodological solipsism, holding that intersubjective meaning is not reducible to subjective intentionality. His account of reference requires all three mutually irreducible components of a Peircean semiotics: signs, objects, and interpretants. He views language as having as much a world-coping function as it does a world-disclosing function, such that communication and reference involves performative as well as denotative elements of language. Otherwise, Apel "emphasizes a normative hermeneutic" such that "understanding, communication, and interpretation all involve transcendent conditions of possibility, validity conditions" (pp.152-3). Habermas is not often labeled as a pragmatist but he promotes views of language and communication that resonate with pragmatist themes, particularly in the works of Peirce and Mead (p.153). Boersema highlights two significant themes, Habermas's reservations about "noncategorized particulars" (objects, referents) as mere haecceities; and his view that reference involves actions that "are housed in purposes and goal-oriented behaviors" (p.156). Like other pragmatists Habermas is intent on shifting philosophical precedence away from the individual subject to a philosophy of *communicative action* and *communicative rationality*, claiming that communication and thus reference involves three necessary and mutually irreducible components: "a subjective sphere of a person's intentions, an objective sphere of an external world of situations, and an intersubjective sphere of interaction and shared normative expectations with others" (pp.158-9).

(3) The third set of three chapters contain Boersema's alternative to the received views of reference presented in the first three chapters. The first of the final three chapters is Boersema's argument for rejecting the notion of the given-ness or "thisness" of referents (haecceity), given that the latter notion rests on realist notions of similarity and individuation entirely independent

of epistemic considerations (pp.167,191-2). Boersema argues that regularities (reference classes) in the world are determined as much by our cognitive interests as by an independent world. Our abilities to refer depend on individuation abilities, and the latter are *both* interest-dependent and world-dependent (pp.170,172,178).

The second chapter focuses on showing that both the cluster and causal accounts of names and reference are committed to essentialism and, in particular, to haecceities, both commitments having been shown to be faulty in the previous chapter (p.193). The arguments in these two chapters rely on some key insights into the dubious nature of an otherwise intuitive distinction between (essences of) individuals and (essences of) kinds (pp.200ff). Boersema, in typical pragmatist form, rejects the view that individuals and/or kinds are "ready-made" such that "there is only one way the world is." While emphasizing the interest-dependence of individuation and similarity relations, Boersema argues that pragmatism does not deny the existence of an independent world "out there" nor does it endorse idealist metaphysics or any kind of solipsism, subjectivism, or unfalsifiable relativism (p.215).

The final chapter turns from an account of "the signified" to an account of "the signifier," bringing the preceding elements together in an account of the *process* of naming (p.215). Boersema explores several examples of the naming process in detail ("Neptune," "Uranus," "Nemesis," "AIDS") to show that the received views are committed to naming and reference as "private," both of them ignoring the fundamentally public aspect of names. The ineliminable sociality of reference (pp.218-20) makes naming an extended process rather than a singular dubbing or baptism event as postulated by the causal theory (pp.216ff). A central element of Boersema's arguments against private intentionality is his claim that intentionality is inseparable from interpretation where the latter is fundamentally public in nature (pp.221ff). To articulate this public nature of reference Boersema provides a slogan for his view calling it "conferring, deferring, and inferring" (pp.166,228). That a word functions as a name is conferred upon it by public acceptance. This often is a matter of deferring to subsequent public usage (an aspect of James's "workings"). It is a matter of inferring in that it requires interpretation. In Elgin's words "It is the availability of a reasonable interpretation rather than the intention with which they were produced that is crucial in deciding whether [a speaker's] words refer" (p.227). Words and objects are hooked together, but not just because of some singular dubbing event. Besides the names and objects themselves, their association requires modes of interpretation such that (in good Peircean fashion) "reference ... is not a dyadic relation between word and object, but a triadic relation between word and object and interpretant" (pp.227-8).

These are some of the main features of Boersema's pragmatist account of reference. On the whole, this book addresses a longstanding need to examine and evaluate in a measured way some deep-seated problems in standard analytical views of reference that persistently evade critical attention. Granted, problems of reference internal to an analytical philosophical stance continue to receive lots of attention; but these problems are in large part the upshot of a philosophical stance that remains oddly free of proper critical assessment. The fact that such internal problems of reference continue to dog analytical philosophy arguably point to deeper problems in that philosophical stance itself. Boersema, in his characteristically circumspect manner, argues that it might be more productive to move away from a standard analytical pose to consider more far-reaching alternatives. One of the selling features of this book is the amount of attention the author gives to showing what exactly is wrong with the received analytical accounts

of reference. This is invaluable even if a positive account of a pragmatist alternative remains unfinished.

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