

The descriptivist theory of names and the problem of paradoxical reputations

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Abstract. This paper presents an objection to the theory of names according to which what a name refers to is determined by a description that the speaker or writer associates with that name. Some names are associated with paradoxical descriptions. I use the reputations of Henry Sidgwick and J.M.E. McTaggart to illustrate this problem.

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—*What description of a soul*

Ever caught the whole?

What does a name refer to? According to one theory, known as the descriptivist theory, what it refers to is determined by a description that the speaker or writer associates with that name. For example, if I say, “I am reading a book by Henry Sidgwick,” the name Henry Sidgwick refers to the person picked out by a description I associate with this name. But there is an objection to this theory. My aim here is to present it.

We can use the example of Sidgwick to illustrate the objection. The first edition of Sidgwick’s book *The Method of Ethics* was published in 1874, the seventh in 1907. The book is well-known in certain circles, but well-known for being boring. I personally did not find the parts I read that boring at the time, though I confess that afterwards I felt the effects of digesting this material. Even a very sympathetic commentator warns us about its boringness.¹ Sidgwick is

¹ Alfred North Whitehead apparently said that he read the book as a young man and found it so stodgy that he never read another book on ethics again (Harrod 1951: 76-77). Bernard Williams tenderly discusses its boringness; but

also well-known for being a utilitarian. It seems to me that Sidgwick's reputation is heading in the following direction: the utilitarian who wrote the most boring book ever. This is a memorable description to associate with his name; but how can Sidgwick be a utilitarian if he wrote the most boring book ever? Would not a utilitarian, or at least an act-based one such as Sidgwick, consider the writing of such a book to be an immoral act? According to his variety of utilitarianism, the moral action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness in the world. Any action that produces less happiness is immoral. And Sidgwick himself knew that his writing was boring.

We can call the general problem for the descriptivist theory of names the problem of paradoxical descriptions, with Sidgwick as our paradigm case. If one looks at Sidgwick's reputation in philosophy, there are two main strands to it and they do not appear to cohere. It would be unsurprising if, as a consequence, some people today or in the future associate his name with a paradoxical description. But how then can the name refer when these people use it?

You might think that this problem is so rare that the descriptivist can just accept reference failure in such a case. However, I found another example just by looking in the vicinity, namely J.M.E. McTaggart. Here is a description that fits well with his reputation: the Hegelian who denied the existence of time. But is not the most famous theory from Hegel a theory about the development of ideas in history? First a thesis is put forward and supported, then its antithesis is supported, then a synthesis of the two is achieved. That sounds like it involves a commitment to time!

There are probably other examples of a paradoxical way of capturing a person's contribution to a field. In search of examples, I would look at the reputations of contributors who are not quite top-tier and probably a target for newer generations to try to sweep aside and say,

later he cuttingly, though probably aptly, refers to Sidgwick's philosophy as "Government-House Utilitarianism." (1982) The very sympathetic commentator I have in mind is Parfit 2011: xxxiii.

“It’s our turn now!” But contributors of this level do not go away easily. Even when almost nothing is known about them, sometimes what is left of their reputations are simple paradoxes, which makes it easy for them to be remembered and to pique curiosity as well. If we can find enough examples of this kind, then the number of likely cases of reference failure, given the descriptivist theory, will increase to the point that the theory is looking questionable. It is likely that these names refer, despite the reputations associated with them, but the descriptivist theory does not explain how.

References

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