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PRAGMATISM AND REFERENCE

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I.

In recent years there has been a plethora of philosophic works expressing their authors' pragmatist views on various puzzles concerning traditional philosophy. Not strictly belonging either to the analytical or continental perspectives, these books, for the most part, present a new general perspective on dealing with philosophical problems. In this respect, the most important value of pragmatism seems to lie in its ability to creatively engage the vocabularies used by technical analysts as well as those of the somewhat poetical continental philosophers. Indeed, from the methodological aspect, pragmatism can be perceived, according to Giovanni Papini's famous characterization, as the corridor of a great hotel where there are a hundred doors that open onto a hundred rooms. In one there is a faldstool and a kneeling man who wants to regain his faith, in another a writing-desk and a man who wants to banish all metaphysics, in a third there is a laboratory and a man who wants to find new vantage points on the future.

David Boersema's book, *Pragmatism and Reference* (2009), I propose, should be viewed as being such a kind of door-opener—this time onto the analytic room of the problem of names and naming. In the context of the history of philosophy, the puzzle of how names hang on objects is far from recent. Plato's *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*, the fourth treatise of Buridan's *Summulae de dialectica*, and *A System of Logic* by Mill are just a few of the many more works written in the course of centuries on the subject. By the same token, within the last century the papers of Russell, Kripke, Searle and many others may seem to have said all there is to say on the problem of referring. Is this the case? I believe this question may be answered in two ways: 1) For the time being (as we will also see below) it seems that analytic philosophers have shot all their bullets and all they have been doing during the last few decades is slightly modifying their original theories in reaction to their opponents' critiques without any apparent progression towards a successful end. 2) However, since nobody denies that the itch of the problem of reference is still there, we can be quite sure that we can still take issue with this matter. Providing that these two theses are correct it is probably high time we try to take a different approach to the problem of naming.

It is actually the second, more challenging, route that was chosen by Boersema in his monograph. Another important enterprise of the author is to explicate and elucidate the thinking of various pragmatists on the subject of reference. Boersema gradually engages, in his discussion of names, such personas of pragmatist thinking as Peirce, James, Dewey, Apel, Habermas, Elgin, Putnam and several others. Although not all of these philosophers can be unproblematically labeled as "pragmatists", in the course of the book we notice that for the specific purposes of Boersema's reflections on reference this terminology is perfectly justifiable. At this point the author deserves much credit for being able to distill the pragmatists' ideas on reference from their work since, for instance, the classical pragmatists addressed this problem only marginally and sometimes with fairly different terminology. This kind of philosophical enterprise requires a very firm grasp on the whole of their ideas and, it must be admitted right at the outset—Boersema does justice to this requirement.

The selection of philosophers whose work the author wants to analyze is always a matter of his autonomous decision; on the other hand, when dealing with the problem of reference it is not clear why Boersema chose to omit the work of George H. Mead (p. xi), who actually came up with the most complete theory of language, meaning and communication of all the classical pragmatists. In this respect, Boersema far too easily dismisses Mead's important theories of reference and naming as presented in a number of his papers.[1] Considering that one of the most important issues for Boersema is the problem of individuation and identity he probably should not have missed some of the pragmatic points made by Mead (1932) in some of his papers. To be fair, Boersema writes that Mead, along with Dummett, Ricoeur and others, also held important positions on these topics but does not explain for what specific reason he favors others. I am sure that the informed reader will demand a more elaborate explanation, than mere reference to the author's editorial choice.

There are several difficulties in dealing with reference that should be noted in advance of our engaging with this problem fully. First, as soon as we decide to seriously inquire into the philosophical dimension of reference we are likely to find that this subject tends to significantly overlap from pure semantics, in which it is usually articulated, to disciplines like metaphysics and epistemology (primarily to the alethic domain). Second, if we agree with Hilary Putnam's contention that much of contemporary analytic philosophy is permeated with quarrels between philosophy professors' differing "intuitions" (Putnam 1995, 139) the situation in the philosophical theories of reference is a nice example of that. It is clear from Boersema's monograph that in his view philosophy is a discipline grounded by definition in arguments (and hence should probably avoid the discourse of intuitions), nevertheless, when discussing various theories of reference he is able to rationally address these "intuitions" however difficult it is. Third, there is the problem of methodological approach: we can treat the problem of reference from the angle of pure semantics, but also from that of linguistics or pragmatics. The trouble here is, however, that each of these ways of intellectual reflection generates very divergent and mutually rather incommensurable answers.

[1] Cf. for instance: "Consciousness and the Unquestioned" in Mead, G. H. (1938, 63-78); and most importantly Mead, G. H. (1967, 41-109).

II.

The corpus of Boersema's book is divided into nine chapters which is, arguably, too many, considering that the extent of the book's corpus is approximately 240 pages.[2] The first two chapters offer us a detailed treatment of the two most prominent analytic theories of reference, namely the descriptivist/cluster and causal account of reference. As for the first, Boersema focuses on Searle's cluster account of reference (he also touches on Russell's theory of definite descriptions) which is, for specific reasons, important for the rest of the book. On the other hand, Kripke, and his causal-historical theory of reference, is of equal importance to the author. Boersema contends that these two approaches, despite saying very different things about how reference is to be defined, share a lot of commonalities, making them a single target for criticism from the pragmatist side of the fence. The third chapter might well be called a transitory one. On the background of the late Wittgenstein's ideas on reference it basically familiarizes the reader with the context of pragmatist-like theories of reference. It is actually chapters three to six that present the pragmatist core of the book. Here the author deals with the classical pragmatists' approaches to reference, but the theories of contemporary American (Putnam, Rorty, Elgin) and European (Eco, Habermas, Apel) pragmatists are also examined in appropriate detail. It should be highlighted that Boersema has produced an incredibly well executed heuristic and interpretative work especially in the case of the classical pragmatists. Surely, even readers who consider themselves to be very competent in the field of classical pragmatism may be surprised by how much these thinkers have to say with respect to the problem of reference. The last three chapters offer a conclusion on the line of argument that gradually unfolds throughout the book. Here, Boersema diagnoses the underlying inexplicit commitments of analytic theories of reference to specific conceptions of individuation, similarity, essences (at this point, he often employs Duns Scotus' term "haecceity") and sociality of language.

III.

If any author wants to do justice to the legacy of the classical pragmatists it is absolutely necessary for him to be able to engage in the (sometimes terminologically sophisticated) debates taking place within philosophical currents that are very different from that of pragmatism.[3] This is why, in the first chapter, Boersema pays quite a lot of attention to describing the descriptivist/cluster theory of reference. Although it is not Russell who is Boersema's main target in the book, the author correctly chose to depict Searle's cluster account of descriptions and reference against the background of Russell's theory of definite

[2] Some of the chapters are thematically closely related, e. g. 1-2, 3-6, 7-9. I suppose that if the author reorganized the structure of the book into three general chapters (the first one presenting analytic theories, the second dealing with pragmatic ones and a third chapter which would summarize and conclude the subject considered) it would become more user-friendly for undergraduate readers and the general philosophical public; at the same time the important message of the book would gain more transparency.

[3] A perfect example of how this should be done in the field of logic and analytic philosophy are Dewey's books (Dewey 1938; Bentley and Dewey 1949).

descriptions. Russell held that what philosophers call proper names are not really names, at least not in the genuine Millian[4] sense of direct reference. They look like names and they sound like names when we say them out loud, but they are not names at the level of logical form, where expressions' logical properties are laid bare. Russell maintains that proper names are equivalent to definite descriptions. Indeed, he says they are "abbreviations" of those descriptions. As we will see below, in this respect, Dewey's perspective on reference is not dissimilar from that of Russell's. However, an important issue from the pragmatist perspective that Boersema forgot to underline, at this point, is that Russell's account of reference in fact introduces a tacit dualism[5] of appearance and reality that, surely, would have been unacceptable to Dewey. To what extent this dualism counts also for Searle is an interesting question too. In my opinion, Searle does not think of the grammar of ordinary language in these strongly metaphysical and reductionistic terms and this helps him avoid the mistakes made by Russell. There are, on the other hand, obvious metaphysical commitments in Searle's cluster account and it is on them that Boersema wants to focus.

Searle basically thought of proper names also in terms of descriptions but whereas in Russell's account a name refers to an object in virtue of a single description[6], Searle's view is that names should not be thought of as being "abbreviations" (Searle talks of associations) of a single description but rather of a whole cluster or disjunctive set of descriptions. Moreover, Searle tends to think of reference as occurring within speech acts (in his later work he emphasizes the intentionality of action and perception). In Searle's view, names are associated with a disjunctive set of descriptions (or descriptive predicates), the satisfaction by an object of some of which is necessary for the object to be the referent of the name. Again, what Boersema does not mention and what is interesting about Searle's statement from the pragmatist point of view is its striking vagueness; for what exactly does it mean to say that the object has to satisfy *some* of the descriptions associated with the name? I am convinced that such kinds of statements are subject to the old Pyrrhonian argument of the pile of stones[7] sometimes used by pragmatists. If we take names as language expressions associated with disjunctive sets of descriptions, from what exact point can we speak of referring? Is it when, say, eight out of fifteen descriptions is satisfied by an object? Why not seven? Why not ten? As far as I know Searle has not been clear on these matters. Another series of critical

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[4] John S. Mill held that names have their meanings simply by designating the particular things they designate, and introducing those designata into discourse. In other words, Mill's direct reference theory claims that proper names are merely labels for individual persons or objects and contribute no more than those individuals themselves to the meanings of the sentences in which they occur.

[5] Russell's account presupposes at least two levels of language—a surface level that is manifested in the "misleading" ordinary language and its use, and the deep level that represents the reality—the logical form of the content of linguistic expressions. Hence, the real language is that of logical forms because these forms are reflective of what they describe in the real world of objects and their properties.

[6] For a synoptic critique of Russell's approach see Kripke (1980, 13-70).

[7] The point of the argument lies in pointing out the indeterminability of the majority of words in the common language. Imagine that someone wants to collect a pile of stones, he brings one stone, three, five etc. Now the question is: from what point do three, five, ten or even more stones constitute a pile of stones?

remarks, mainly those by Kripke (1980, 71-106) and Donnellan, are examined by Boersema in great detail. As for the factual side of Boersema's depiction of the analytic discussions concerning the theory of reference there is absolutely no doubt that he has a very firm grasp on these matters and leads his readers through them with great confidence.

Kripke's ideas concerning the problem of reference are somewhat closer to Mill's direct reference. In his causal-historical picture of referring, names are actually directly referential. In a further argument against description theories of proper names, Kripke appealed to the notion of a "possible world" or universe alternative to our own. A definite description of Russell's sort changes its referent from world to world; although, for instance, "the world's fastest human being in 1999" actually refers to Maurice Greene, it designates different individuals in other worlds, since Greene might have been slower (or not even have existed) and other men (or women) might have been better runners. But typically, a proper name such as "Maurice Greene" refers to the very same individual in every world in which that individual exists. In virtue of what, then, does a proper name designate its bearer? Kripke offered a causal-historical picture of referring, according to which a given use of "Maurice Greene" refers to Maurice Greene in virtue of a causal chain that grounds that utterance event in the baptismal ceremony in which Greene was first given the name. The sense in which this is a causal account of reference is that the passage of a name from link to link is said to secure a causal connection between the name of an object and the object. Boersema diagnoses several important points in Kripke's account from the pragmatic point of view. Most importantly, Kripke introduces into his theory an important idea of sociality because according to causal account, reference is fixed by a description during the baptismal event and then passed on (by "borrowing the reference") in the course of social interaction. Next, Searle's cluster theory and Kripke's causal-historical account employ in their reasonings the idea of intentionality. This is very important for Boersema because he contends that in connection with the ontological commitments underlying both theories he can make a strong pragmatic case against them. In this respect Boersema is right. It should be noted though that the idea of intentionality may be a necessary condition for reference in Searle's cluster theory but this does not count for the description theory as such. It is quite thinkable that one can hold a descriptivist position without holding on to intentionality[8], especially if one is interested primarily in semantics and not in epistemology.

To sum up, the commonalities that are shared, in Boersema's opinion, by Searle's cluster theory on the one hand, and Kripke's causal-historical account on the other are the following (p. 45):

i. Both of these theories hold that a "proper" intention is a necessary condition for reference to take place; by the same token both deny that it is a sufficient condition.
ii. Both see ostension as paradigmatic of a correct theory of reference.
iii. Both engage descriptions as means of fixing reference.
iv. Both deny (as in the case of abstract objects) that a causal link between an object and a name is necessary to secure reference.

What is, then, the difference between them? Boersema seems to disagree with the generally accepted view that only Searle's cluster theory is supposedly committed to private

[8] It seems that Boersema is aware of this fact; see p. 44.

reference and fails to account for the historical, public nature of reference. He holds that even Kripke's account "at bottom" allows for private reference (p. 46). I must admit that the argument that Boersema presents later on is rather inconsistent (pp. 220-221). Boersema says:

> ... Kripke thinks that a given speaker might still refer to Feynman even though none of the descriptions associated by that speaker with the name "Feynman" is true of Feynman. This strikes me as a clear indication that Kripke (implicitly, at least) sees reference as something that can be done by a single, given speaker independent of a language community (p. 220).

To this he adds:

> I agree with Kripke that one might refer even though all of the descriptions one associates with a name might fail to pick out the intended object of reference. However, I disagree with Kripke if he thinks that one might refer even though all of the descriptions that the entire language community associates with a name fail to pick out the intended object of reference (p. 221).

In my opinion, Boersema misrepresents Kripke at this particular point because Kripke has never said that one might refer even though all of the descriptions that the entire language community associates with a name fail to pick out the intended object of reference. What he intends to say using his "Feynman example" (cf. Kripke 1980, 81-82, 91-92) is that an individual member of the language community can still refer to Feynman, even though he cannot identify him uniquely; this happens, for Kripke, precisely under the condition that the public causal chain in the language community has been established[9] in terms of which any member of the community is, in principle, able to pick out the individual referred to uniquely.[10] It is precisely because of the public nature of the causal chain that any of its members can refer to a unique individual, even though descriptions put forth by some of the community members cannot do this work by themselves. This, however, does not mean that these speakers refer privately. It is not clear, in this respect, on what basis Boersema came to the idea that Kripke actually claims (tacitly) that private reference is in this sense possible.

In the chapters devoted to relating analytic ideas on the problem of reference with those of classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey) and neo-pragmatists (Putnam, Elgin, Rorty) Boersema really has produced an impressive interpretative work. When talking about Peirce, Boersema starts to use the term *haecceity*. This notion, initially coined by Duns Scotus, was sometimes used by Peirce (himself being one of the greatest admirers of Scotus' work). He used this term as a means of non-descriptive reference to individual entities. As Boersema correctly points out, the term "haecceity" may well be related to Kripke's treatment of rigid designator. In Kripke's account rigid designator is a proper name that designates the same object in all possible worlds in which it designates any object at

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[9] Which *of course* implies, for Kripke, that the set of descriptions of Feynman must be true of him, and hence pick him out uniquely, for reference to occur.

[10] "So he doesn't have to know these things, but, instead, a chain of communication going back to Feynman himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study: By 'Feynman' I shall mean the man who did such and such and such and such" (Kripke 1980, 91-92).

all. The logical consequence of his account of rigid designators is that as a principle of the individuation of rigid designators any essential properties the object might have cannot be employed. More precisely, the object might have essential properties, but these are irrelevant to the individualness of the object. Whatever (if anything) might be essential or defining for Maurice Greene, the name "Maurice Greene" always and only picks out a unique, particular object. That is to say, it picks out a haecceity. In this regard, Peirce and Kripke might seem to be saying very similar things. However, Boersema correctly argues that this is not the case. What Kripke's account lacks when compared to that of Peirce's is the pragmatic aspect of signification and communication, in other words, that which Peirce called *interpretant*. Again, Boersema is right to claim that the commonality of experience of speaker and listener is necessary, and not a merely accidental, feature of the haecceity of the object. Hence, in Peirce's terms, Kripke's account does justice only to two of Peirce's triadic relation of the sign (representamen), the object and the interpretant. Thus, Peirce would reject the notion of rigid designators because, for him, we cannot simply eliminate the semiotic element of names, since names convey more than the mere existence of an object (cf. Peirce 1998, 480). I believe that the target at which Boersema is aiming is the analytic treatment of the distinction of semantic reference and speaker's reference. Analytic philosophers tend to deal with the fact of the sociality of language by pointing to speaker's reference. This is, however, in their perspective something quite different from semantic reference. Classical analytic philosophers of language claim that they are not interested in how reference occurs but in what reference is. Peirce and other pragmatic philosophers, on the other hand, hold that these two domains necessarily merge. I am convinced that from this chapter on Boersema puts forth very strong arguments about why these objections of pragmatist philosophers should be taken seriously (see pp. 66-70). In the case of William James, Boersema shows, for instance, how his notion of reference and identity is connected with the always future-oriented idea of workings and theory of truth. According to James, as well as Dewey, reference and the process of individuating objects in our discourse never occurs without projecting our values, interests and goals into that discourse. Objects are not simply bare particulars; they are what Dewey has dubbed "objects-named," that is, portions of the world, aspects of our knowing, that we find important enough in the context of our inquiries to label. Names can provide a much more convenient label for us than descriptions, especially as our inquiries firm up our ontology. So, names are not just truncated descriptions (or clusters of descriptions) that a speaker might have associated with an object. They are part of our efforts to specify objects in line with our epistemic and practical concerns. So, for the pragmatists, names do not refer to objects independently of the pattern of inquiry. By the same token, what the language speakers consider an object depends on their practical concerns and the values of the particular course of action.

Besides presenting Putnam's well-known ideas about the untenability of the fact-value dichotomy and thought experiments on "Twin Earth" and "Brain in a Vat" along with Rorty's ideas on reference, Boersema introduces into the discussion the opinions of Catherine Elgin who became famous in the field mainly thanks to her profound pragmatist critique of Kripke's accounts of reference. Elgin rejects Kripke's notion, that there are bare particulars, i.e. individuals that are somewhat inherently individuated. Contrary to the Kripkeans, Elgin argues that individuation depends on schematization, thus we experience objects always

in the context of categories, never as bare particulars. Drawing on Quine's notion of the inscrutability of reference, Elgin argues that causal statements are part of the structure that requires interpretation. Since causal theory cannot secure the unequivocal interpretation of "cause", it affords no escape from indeterminacy. The world, then, does not determine the reference of any terms, even the natural-kind ones. Elgin states that reference can be understood only in the context of our symbol systems, themselves a function of our interests, goals, values, beliefs, and the like. So, reference fixing, even via a baptismal event, can and does occur only in such contexts.

As I said earlier, the talk of reference significantly overlaps into metaphysics. Also Boersema's treatment of this issue ends up in metaphysical rather than semantic conclusions. There are at least three reasons for this: 1) Most importantly, if one approaches the problem of reference from a philosophical (epistemological) rather than purely semantic point of view, one is ultimately interested in how elements of our language hang on to the particular "pieces of the world". 2) Whereas contemporary analytical logicist philosophers of language do not care that much about the metaphysical side of the reference problem, the pragmatist critique of their views inescapably diagnoses that they are tacitly faithful to many, sometimes quite problematic, metaphysical commitments. 3) The question of which theory of reference we hold is, to a great extent, a matter of our metaphysical views.[11] This is when we come back to the aforementioned notion of haecceity to which both Kripke and Searle are faithful (albeit tacitly). Boersema argues that the notion of haecceity rests on metaphysical commitments to individuation and similarity, in other words to the question of partitioning the world. The author insightfully complains (p. 168) that none of the analytic philosophers of language raises any question or problem with the principle of individuation. Individuals are simply "out there" and reference is a matter of the right hookup of name to person. Indeed, for Searle, there seem to be unproblematically individuated entities of the world, independent of our practical concerns and interpretative activities.

In this respect, Boersema argues that both Searle and Kripke are committed to a particular view of individuation, namely one in which individuals are "given" in the world. He argues that this conception of individuation is mistaken at least in the sense of not being appreciative of underlying complexities and commitments, and that consequently both the cluster and causal accounts of reference are weakened by this. In his criticism he might have chosen several different approaches: a) He might have remained completely on the analytic side of the fence and tried to find inconsistencies in the theories of Searle and Kripke with the "methodological weapons" with which they are very familiar. b) Boersema could also have utilized his earlier conclusions drawn from his characterization of various pragmatic approaches to reference. He actually chose c) to go the middle way and presented his pragmatic objections in the language of analytic philosophy. There are very few better companions in executing this goal than Nelson Goodman and some of his theories. In the course of reading Boersema's book it is actually not very difficult to feel the tacit presence of Goodman's ideas, and not only in Boersema's depiction of the views of Catherine Elgin for whom Goodman is a mentor. There is no problem with this, after all, if anyone wants to

[11] Exactly the same applies, for instance, to our perspective on the problem of truth.

pragmatically deal with the question of reference as stated by the analytic philosophers, one can hardly proceed very differently than Goodman did. This is also why Boersema decided to use his views for the final assault on the analytic metaphysical commitments. He agrees with the basic contention of Goodman that our partitioning of the world is (at least in significant part) determined by our cognitive interests (cf. Goodman 1978, 7-22). Employing Goodman's "New Riddle of Induction" (see Goodman 1983, 71-80). Boersema takes up the problem of individuals and reference classes and concludes that the significance of Goodman's aforementioned argument for discussions about reference is to be found in the idea that regularities of nature are where we find them and we can find them anywhere (depending on our practical interest). This, however, does not mean that we can find regularities everywhere. In this respect, Boersema points to his and Goodman's contention that it is both the world and our cognitive interests that shape what regularities there are.

The assumption that Boersema finds unwarranted in both the cluster and causal accounts of reference is the realist view that names refer to entities "out there" in the world, unproblematically individuated without regard to our practical interests and values/goals of inquiry. Exactly the same applies to natural kind terms (Kripke). Boersema argues that "natural kinds" make sense only as interest- and theory-dependent notions. Another problematic part of Kripke's (and Searle's) account is the contention that reference of a natural term is fixed by ostension (in the cluster account—by association of descriptions). However, the act of ostension is far from being so straightforward as to be able to unproblematically pick[12] the right property of the entity referred to. Those are the two most important cases made by Boersema in his book. Especially the last two chapters offer a vast supply of supportive arguments against Searle's and Kripke's unadmitted essentialism and realist commitments (see, for instance, pp. 188-192), representation of which would by far exceed the limits of this review.

IV.

To sum up, in his book "Pragmatism and Reference", David Boersema presents a comprehensive treatment of contemporary theories of reference. At the same time he makes a very strong pragmatic case against some of the assumptions of the two most prominent of them, i.e. descriptive/cluster and causal-historical account. Boersema's extraordinary and rare ability to move swiftly between the nuances of the analytic as well as pragmatist theories should be valued most of all. In my judgment, the book contains very few factual inaccuracies and, with respect to contemporary debates among analytic philosophers of language and pragmatists, the reader can rely on it almost completely. At the end of the introduction to his book the author mentions a story from his graduate studies days when one of his faculty advisors remarked that what he had to say was clear, but wrong. Boersema wrote that he was not prepared to doubt his teacher, but he wished that what he had written

[12] Imagine that one points a finger at a chair and says: "This is a chair." Now, supposing that the ostension was addressed to a not very competent member of the language community—this act may well be interpreted as meaning: "this is hard", "this is made of wood", "this is yellow" etc. Boersema took this example from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see: Wittgenstein 1967, § 32-33).

was at least interestingly wrong. At the end of the story he tells readers that he hopes his book will achieve that standard. I think that the standard should be raised; Boersema's book deserves it.

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