

On Reference Theory

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If Andrew says to Edward, his neighbour, who has just returned from holiday: “I have a dog, now.” then Andrew has a referent, a real dog that he named Tessa. He has particular ideas as to where she was bought and knows what she looks like. Andrew also has general concepts on what a dog is. These latter will be similar to Edward’s, and might include: that ‘dog’ categorises a domesticated species of animal; that it has four legs, and that it barks. If Edward has no Experience of Tessa, then he cannot have knowledge of her Qualities.¹

On using and hearing the word ‘dog’, both expand it from personal fields of experience. Andrew’s is based on a wide, intimate knowledge, founded on a real dog. His statement is an expression of his current thoughts. Edward’s opens from the narrow, the word ‘dog’, to his general, background knowledge. Because he does not know Tessa, then he has no referent. Therefore, Andrew talks from the particular, while Edward is a ‘nonreferring observer’². Indeed, does Edward perceive from what might be termed a blank slate? Prior to hearing Andrew’s comment, what might have been written on it if he could not have known in advance what Andrew was going to say?

All sound is simple, minimal. Therefore, Andrew’s concepts, feelings and thoughts on Tessa are not attached to any of the sounds that he made.³ Givens have no attachments. Indeed, they can be thought of as pure. On hearing sounds, Edward ‘draws’ from a multiple of possible interpretations: a clock ticking; an engine revving or a spoken word. From that, through a process of rapid refinement, ‘dog’ leads to other concepts and possible meanings. Concepts inform Edward him of what a dog is so that he understands Andrew’s proposition. But, he cannot know more than that if sounds, such as the word ‘dog’, have no attachments. If sound, spoken or otherwise, is simple, then it cannot be received by the listener in any other way.

¹ I use Qualities—such as that of perceived Colour—when referring to the mental equivalent of the properties of real-world objects.

² ‘Unreferring’ is a characteristic of the nonreferring Perceiver.

³ Non-attachment applies to each of the Givens. For the hearer, the only relevant component is the Given itself, not what happens prior to it Becoming that.