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A serpent in the garden?*

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ABSTRACT



This paper presents Elmar Unnsteinsson's novel theory of Edenic Intentionalism, on which a speaker cannot refer to an object when the speaker is relevantly confused about its identity. A challenge to the theory is presented and several possible responses considered. The challenge is this: According to Edenic Intentionalism, reference often fails even when speakers seem to refer successfully. Elmar therefore supplements Edenic Intentionalism with an explanation of how communication can succeed without reference. If such an explanation is available, it isn't clear what need there is for Edenic Intentionalism.

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1. Introduction

Though Elmar Unnsteinsson's *Talking About* (2022) is subtitled *An Intentionalist Theory of Reference*, many of the ideas (relating to belief, thought, cognitive mechanisms, functions, philosophical methodology, and more) are of broad philosophical interest and will be useful to many philosophers with no special interest in theories of reference. Given the richness of the book, I won't attempt a complete summary here. Instead, the next section will present Elmar's theory of Edenic Intentionalism and Section 3 will describe one issue that concerns me about that theory.¹ Section 4 will then canvas a few ways in which Elmar may (or may not) choose to respond. The problem presented in Section 3 is

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*This title is in honour of the late Prof. Peter Clark who memorably said that 'the serpent had already entered the garden' when describing Frege's Basic Law V in a postgraduate course on the philosophy of mathematics; a turn of phrase often repeated by students in that course.

¹Elmar has expressed (personal communication) the view that Icelandic patronyms are not names. I therefore refer to him as 'Elmar' throughout and list him by his first name in the bibliography, in accordance with Icelandic practice.

an issue for many different theories of reference² but I think that it is particularly striking for a theory like Edenic Intentionalism, which categorises many quotidian instances of apparent reference as referential failures. Indeed, similar problems often arise when a philosopher proposes an extension for a term that differs significantly from its intuitive extension; in this case, it arises for terms such as ‘referent’ and ‘refers’. I hope that this problem will provide Elmar with an opportunity to clarify the nature and role of his interesting new theory.

2. Edenic intentionalism

Intentionalist theories of reference suggest that the reference of a referring expression, such as a proper name or demonstrative, is determined by the speaker’s intentions. My utterance of ‘Julius Caesar’ refers to the man who inspired the Shakespeare play, rather than Julius ‘Caligula’ Caesar for example, because I intend for it to refer to the former rather than the latter. Such theories have long battled with so-called Frege cases, in which a speaker is somehow confused about identity. Elmar (Chapter 2) distinguishes two forms of confusion.

First, there is *separatory confusion* in which the speaker mistakes one object for two distinct objects. Take Lois Lane, for example, who says ‘You just missed Superman!’ when Clark Kent enters the room adjusting his glasses. Superman and Clark Kent are (spoiler!) the same person but Lois mistakenly believes that they are distinct individuals. Because Superman *is* Clark Kent, it seems that Lois Lane refers to Kent by both her utterance of ‘You’ and her utterance of ‘Superman’, so she falsely says that Kent missed himself. Yet this is at odds with her intentions. By uttering ‘Superman’, Lois does not intend to refer to Clark Kent.

Second, there is *combinatory confusion*, in which the speaker mistakenly thinks that two objects are one.³ A speaker is subject to combinatory confusion if, for example, they think that Francis Bacon the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century philosopher is the same as Francis Bacon the twentieth-century artist. Depending on the context, such a speaker might seem to refer to either the artist or the philosopher. When, in the middle of a conversation about the philosopher, they say ‘And did you know that he was born in Dublin?’ the confused speaker

²Heck (2014) and Bowker (2022) present similar views about reference to those presented here.

³It may be difficult to see how these kinds of confusion are possible. How can I believe that someone is not self-identical, or believe that two different individuals are identical? See Chapter 2 for Elmar’s discussion. I won’t challenge that aspect of the theory here.

seems to refer to the philosopher and say something false about him. Yet this is also at odds with the speaker's intentions, as they clearly intend to refer to someone born in Dublin, i.e. the artist.

Talking About takes a novel approach to Frege cases. According to Edenic Intentionalism, these cases represent malfunctions in which speakers fail to refer to anything. The book posits a cognitive mechanism, the function of which is to produce referring utterances. Like other mechanisms (whether cognitive, biological, mechanical, or whatever) this mechanism can malfunction. The function of the 'E' key on a keyboard is to produce an 'E'. The key can malfunction, however, in which case the function is not executed. When a speaker is subject to identity confusion, this constitutes a malfunction of the referential mechanism and no referring utterance is produced.

Such cases constitute malfunctions because a referring utterance is intended to direct the audience to a particular object but this intention is not satisfiable in cases of confusion. In cases of separatory confusion, the speaker intends to refer to some object *a* without referring to some object *b*, which is impossible given that $a = b$. Lois Lane wants to refer to Superman without referring to Clark Kent, but Superman *is* Clark Kent, so the intention is impossible to satisfy. In cases of combinatory confusion, the speaker intends to refer to a single object that is both *a* and *b*, which is impossible given that $a \neq b$. The Bacon-confused speaker, for example, wants their utterance of 'Francis Bacon' to refer to a single person who is both the philosopher and the artist, which is impossible given that they are two different people.

The core of this response to Frege cases is captured in the **EDENIC CONSTRAINT**.

EDENIC CONSTRAINT ON SPEAKER REFERENCE

If *S* is relevantly confused about object *o* at time *t*, *S* cannot successfully perform an act of Speaker Reference to refer to *o* at *t*, i.e. *S*'s act of referring will be constitutively barred from performing its Proper Function.

(151)

Ultimately, Elmar argues in Chapter 8 that a 'confusion-driven methodology' informed primarily by cases of identity confusion is an improper methodology for the study of reference. For the Edenic Intentionalist, these are simply not the kind of cases that we should be building our theory of reference around. Though this methodological point is made with respect to theories of reference, it could surely be applied in other domains, given the extent to which philosophers focus on deviant cases.

We might be concerned that the **EDENIC CONSTRAINT** will overgeneralise. Suppose I see someone going into a bakery and mistakenly think they are my mother. I say to my friend, 'My mother just went into the bakery'. By saying 'my mother', I want to refer both to my mother and to the person who went into the bakery. If this confusion prevents me from referring to anyone, then the **EDENIC CONSTRAINT** seems absurd. If I can refer to anyone, surely I can refer to my own mother, even if I briefly misidentify her.

Things are not so simple, however. The **EDENIC CONSTRAINT** is restricted to cases in which the speaker is 'relevantly' confused. In short, confusion must be 'sufficiently relevant to the determination of the speaker's meaning-intention' (158), which requires that 'the confused objects must, intuitively, be equal or near-equal in their mental activation or origin' (161). Yes, in this instance I falsely identify someone as my mother, so I do intend to refer both to my mother and intend to some other person, but my long history of object-dependent thoughts about my mother may make the former intention predominant. This explains the intuition with which we started: that surely I can refer to my own mother, even in the face of identity confusion. Yes, I can, and that is because the intention to refer to my mother might override the intention to refer to whomever entered the bakery. The setup is entirely different from someone who consistently conflates the two Bacons.

Just which cases involve sufficient confusion to prevent reference is not entirely clear. Elmar tends to rely on intuition (see the quote from p. 161 in the previous paragraph) but intuitions can certainly vary about even relatively mundane cases, such as the case of my mother and the bakery. Though some of the classic Frege cases can be set aside through the **EDENIC CONSTRAINT**, Edenic Intentionalists will be able to spend a great deal of time arguing with each other about the degree of confusion that is compatible with reference and we might worry that Edenic Intentionalism will sometimes introduce new problems, rather than solving old ones, at least in cases of combinatory confusion. First, Edenic Intentionalists will have to figure out whether the confusion present in a particular case is sufficient to prevent reference. That is already a difficult question. If the answer is 'No', then they are faced with the same old problem: to whom does the speaker refer?

Whatever the result of these debates, Edenic Intentionalism will certainly deem a great many intuitive cases of reference to be failures. Lois Lane fails to refer to Clark Kent by saying 'You' in an utterance of 'You just missed Superman', for example, even though Kent is standing right

in front of her. Any reasonable observer would conclude that she referred to Kent. Elmar explains this as the result of a repair strategy. This idea is not implausible, though, as I will suggest in the following section, it does threaten to undermine the significance of the theory.

3. The purpose of reference

In this section, I present my primary concern for Edenic Intentionalism, which is that it threatens to make theories of reference obsolete. I don't consider that problematic in itself, because my temptation is to think that theories of reference *are* obsolete. It is a problem for Edenic Intentionalism, however, because Edenic Intentionalism is a theory of reference. The problem I present is not at all unique to Edenic Intentionalism but it is particularly striking for a theory like this, which rejects so many intuitive cases of reference as referential failures.

Theories of reference are often thought to play several related roles. First, and most obviously, they explain our intuitions about the referents of terms. My utterance of 'Harry' seems to refer to Harry because it *does* refer to Harry. Second, they contribute to an explanation of the intuitive difference between what is literally said and what is implied, implicated, or otherwise conveyed. 'Harry met Sally' literally says that Harry met Sally, in part because 'Harry' refers to Harry and 'Sally' refers to Sally. The sentence can be used to convey other propositions, such as the proposition that Harry didn't meet Mary, but that is not part of what it literally says. In turn, this helps to explain why some sentences seem true and others seem false. Because of what it literally says, 'Harry met Sally' is true if and only if Harry met Sally, and false otherwise. Reference also contributes to the explanation of communication. If I want to tell you that Harry met Sally, I can do so by uttering 'Harry met Sally', thereby referring to Harry and so literally saying what I intend to communicate.

I am concerned that Edenic Intentionalism is not going to play these roles well. Consider Kripke's (1977) case of Jones raking the leaves. Two people see someone in the distance raking leaves. Thinking that the distant individual is Jones, one says to the other, 'What is Jones doing?' The other responds, 'Jones is raking the leaves'. In fact, Jones is not raking leaves in the distance but at home tucked up in bed and the raker in the distance is not Jones but Smith. The respondent is confused, as they mistakenly identify Smith as Jones. As Kripke (1977, 263) points out, '[“Jones”] is a name of Jones; it never names Smith'. It seems, therefore, that the speaker must be referring to Jones by uttering 'Jones'.

According to Edenic Intentionalism, however, they refer to no one. If the speaker says that Jones is raking the leaves, as they seem to, that is not because the speaker has referred to Jones. If the utterance is false, as it seems to be, that is not because the speaker referred to Jones. And while the speaker clearly seems to communicate that Jones is raking the leaves, that, again, is not because the speaker referred to Jones. For all these traditional functions of a theory of reference, Edenic Intentionalism has nothing to say and we need an alternative explanation.

Elmar of course recognises that the confused speaker can seem to successfully communicate propositions. As the speaker intends their utterance of 'Jones' to refer to Jones and to the person in the distance (Smith), 'the edenic intentionalist will refuse to assign any official referent to A's utterance' (177). This failure doesn't prevent the speaker's audience from assigning a referent to the confused speaker's utterance, however. As the audience is also confused about the identity of the figure raking the leaves, there is nothing to stop them from interpreting 'Jones' as referring to Jones in the ordinary way, interpret 'Jones is raking the leaves' as saying that Jones is raking the leaves, and so understand the speaker as intending to communicate that Jones is raking the leaves. Of course, the audience in this case is also confused, and it might be no surprise that a confused interpreter will understand a confused speaker as referring to Jones. What about an audience who is not confused and recognises Smith raking in the distance? Again, Elmar has an explanation for why they might understand the speaker as referring to Jones and as saying and communicating the corresponding proposition. We can utilise various repair strategies to interpret confused speakers, such as taking 'the speaker to refer to the object they would probably have had in mind if they were not confused' (156). When the speaker is not confused, they have Jones in mind when they utter 'Jones', so the audience can interpret them as referring to Jones, as falsely saying that Jones is raking the leaves, and as communicating that proposition.⁴

So both the reaction of the speaker's intended audience and of a more knowledgeable audience can be explained without supposing that reference has been achieved. The question, then, is what is the purpose of reference? What does reference add to the story that we don't get when reference fails? Suppose that it was in fact Jones in the distance raking the leaves, so that the speaker is not confused and does refer to

⁴Of course, there is also a sense in which the speaker referred to Smith, as Smith is in fact the person raking the leaves, but this is not the sense of 'reference' that contributes to what they literally say.

Jones. Again, we can say that the speaker had Jones in mind, that they were understood as having Jones in mind, that they intended to be interpreted as saying that Jones is raking the leaves, that they were interpreted as (in this case, truly) saying that Jones is raking leaves and therefore communicated that Jones is raking the leaves. What is missing from this explanation that is added by a theory of reference?

It ends up being difficult for me to see what the purpose of the theory is. According to Edenic Intentionalism, reference often fails even when it intuitively succeeds. To explain this intuition, as well as the intuition that a truth-evaluable proposition has been said and communicated, we need another story. Once we have that story, what do we need Edenic Intentionalism for? Indeed, more generally, once we have such a story, what do we need any theory of reference for? If we can explain the speaker's communicative intentions and the audience's interpretation, what need do we have for a further theory of reference? I want to stress again that Edenic Intentionalism is not the only view subject to this problem. Other views of reference face precisely the same problem. The problem is particularly striking for Edenic Intentionalism, however, because this theory will relegate so many cases of apparent reference to *merely* apparent reference, necessitating a way of explaining apparent truth-evaluable communication without reference.

4. Possible responses

In this section, I canvass a few possible responses to the problem from the previous section. That section began by listing the roles a theory of reference is thought to play. The function that Elmar assigns to reference is noticeably absent from that list: 'the function of giving someone optimal evidence for a referential intention' (7). In cases of confusion, this evidence will necessarily be defective, because the speaker's referential intentions are impossible to satisfy.

The **EDENIC CONSTRAINT**, however, seems far too weak to ensure optimal evidence. A great deal can render evidence of the speaker's referential intention suboptimal even when the speaker is not confused. Your audience might know that Jones is not raking the leaves, but spreading the leaves. Describing someone as raking is suboptimal evidence for the intention to refer to someone who is not raking. Your audience might know that Jones has gotten married and changed their surname to 'Baker', in which case use of the name 'Jones' is suboptimal evidence. Just like the confused speaker, these cases can involve conflicting intentions. The combinatorially

confused speaker attempts to do the impossible by attempting to refer to a single individual while referring to both Jones and Smith. The speaker who mistakes the spreader for a raker also attempts to do the impossible: referring to someone who is raking and referring to someone who is not raking. Likewise for the speaker who doesn't realise that Jones has changed their name: they intend to refer to the person in the distance (i.e. Baker, née Jones) and refer to someone who is conventionally known as 'Jones'. In both cases, the speaker has intentions that cannot all be satisfied together. Why should the former undermine the presentation of optimal evidence if the second does not?

Worse still, evidence can be suboptimal due to unforeseeable facts about the audience.⁵ Even if Jones is raking the leaves, the audience might believe that Jones is spreading them. Describing Jones as raking is suboptimal evidence when your audience believes that Jones is not raking. Referring to Jones as 'Jones' is suboptimal when your audience believes that they have changed their name to 'Baker'. Thankfully, we can often understand perfectly well what someone intends to talk about, even when the evidence provided by their utterance is far from optimal.

If reference requires the provision of optimal evidence for one's referential intention, we will end up building a notion of reference requiring so much of speakers and hearers that it will be even further removed from the standard goals of referential theory. Speakers will only be said to refer when they phrase themselves in a way ideally suited to the whims of their audience, or when speaker and audience lack any relevant false beliefs about the object referred to. There will be a great many cases in which optimal evidence is not achieved, so we will need a theory to explain apparent communicative success without reference. Again, what is gained by carving off a small subset of these cases as referential successes?

The roles I attributed to theory of reference might also be criticised on the following grounds: I take the role of reference to be the explanation of various intuitions and seemings: it *seems* that names refer to particular individuals, that speakers literally say certain things, and that some sentences are true and others are false. Rather, the objection goes, the purpose of a theory of reference is to explain certain facts: that names refer to particular individuals and that some sentences are true and others are false. To explain these facts, we need a theory of reference. But what are the grounds for supposing that names refer and sentences

⁵The speaker's intention is to utter something which has some specific property that makes it easy for the target audience to figure out which object is the referent ... Thus, we can say that the proper function of R-intentional acts is to produce the optimal IB[inference-base]-feature for the hearer' (108).

have truth-values? At the most basic level, these suppositions depend on the fact that names *seem* to refer and sentences *seem* to have truth-values. The supposition of reference and truth-value is a means of explaining these seemings. As Edenic Intentionalism adopts a very restrictive condition for reference, it has to accept that these seemings can be explained in the absence of reference. Why not, then, extend this explanation to all cases? We need some further role for the theory of reference to play.

Gauker (2019, 115) suggests that we need reference to explain logical relations between sentences. 'That is ripe' entails 'Something is ripe' so 'there needs to be some kind of parameter such that we can say that for each value of that parameter relative to which 'That is ripe' is true, "Something is ripe" is true relative to that value of that parameter as well'. Such an explanation of entailment doesn't require reference, however. The relevant parameter might as well be one intended by the speaker, or supplied by an interpreter. Gauker (2019, 115) also argues that the theory of reference is required to explain 'what it is that interlocutors know about their language that enables them to communicate by means of it'. I agree that this is how the theory of reference is usually conceived but it doesn't seem to me that we need to include knowledge of referents to explain communication. Elmar seems to agree with me, seeing as many seemingly successful cases of communication do not, according to Elmar, involve reference.

Note that we needn't give up on truth and falsity when we give up on reference. We may give up on the idea that utterances are true or false but not the idea of truth and falsity themselves. Speakers intend to communicate propositions and those propositions can be true and false. Nor need we deny the existence of the *concept* of reference. Many speakers believe in reference, so we need the concept, at the very least, to explain speakers' prescriptivist inclinations, as when they say, for example, that 'Frankenstein' really refers to the doctor rather than creature. Nor need we give up on the idea that some interpretations are correct and others incorrect. Interpretations can still be judged in various ways. They can be judged by how closely they hit their target, where their target is not 'what was literally said' but how the speaker intended to be interpreted. They can also be judged by how reasonable they are, given what the interpreter knows (or should know) about the speaker and the context.⁶ These two means of assessing interpretations

⁶This is something that Elmar explicitly accepts (154). We can still study the normative aspects of interpretation without relying on a notion of reference.

can be in tension. A speaker who phrases their utterance poorly may only be interpreted as they intend if the audience takes a very unreasonable interpretation. Likewise, an archer who is deceived as to the location of their target might hit the bullseye only by firing in a very unreasonable direction.

5. Conclusion

Talking About is a rich text that engages with a range of questions. I recommend it to anyone interested in reference but also those interested in belief, cognitive mechanisms, functional explanation, meaning, and philosophical methodology. Edenic Intentionalism provides a novel and interesting response to a classic problem in philosophy of language and it contains a strong general moral for philosophers: don't let your theorising be overly controlled by consideration of deviant cases. I am concerned, however, that such a restrictive notion of reference leaves no useful work for the notion to do. That criticism is neither completely novel, nor a problem only for Edenic Intentionalism, but I hope that it provides Elmar with a useful point of discussion.

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