

Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, Chapter 10: “Existential Statements”

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The problem

- Evans is a Russellian about singular terms, which means that he thinks that “nothing is said by someone who makes a normal, information-invoking use of a singular term that has no referent,” (343).
- However, “there are apparently intelligible uses of [singular] terms, made in the full knowledge that they have no referent[, and which] are intelligible only because they can be interpreted in such a way that there is the possibility that they are *true* when the term has no referent,” (343). These “conniving” uses fall into two categories:
 - (1) Statements regarding the content of some “representation of the world” (e.g. ‘David Copperfield was born in penury’). Call these *standard conniving uses*.
 - (2) Negative existential statements

Against metalinguistic solutions (p. 344)

- Evans argues that understanding ‘That woman does not (really) exist’ (in the context of a shared perceptual illusion) does not simply amount to understanding ‘This use of the demonstrative “That woman” does not refer’.

Against solutions requiring reference to abstract objects (pp. 366-368)

- Evans makes it explicit that he is not concerned with Meinongian accounts in which reference is to “unreal” (or “non-existing”) objects, but rather with accounts in which singular terms refer to abstract entities. So, presumably, abstract entities are *existents*.
- He proposes three objections to these sorts of accounts:
 - (1) Such accounts “[fail] to make it a requirement for understanding these remarks that the hearer possess and invoke information (or misinformation) in a way which mimics the understanding of remarks involving ordinary singular terms,” (367).
 - This objection presupposes that Evans’ account of ordinary singular terms as essentially “information-invoking” is correct. Grant that it is. It is not obvious that the proponent of abstract entities cannot say something similar: when one uses a singular term to refer to an abstract entity, one appeals to the information one possesses which has its origin in the abstract entity.
 - (2) Such accounts “[fail] to recognize the undeniable element of pretence present in this kind of discourse,” (367).
 - The notion of pretence is central to Evans’ own account, so I suppose that whether one finds this objection compelling or not will depend on what one thinks about Evans’ discussion of pretence.
 - A related objection might focus on the fact that abstract objects must be considered to be existent entities. Thus, a statement like ‘David Copperfield exists’ will be true (*simpliciter* – i.e. not just according to Dickens’ novel) when it should in fact be false (the notion of pretence presumably allows one to distinguish the sense in which it is true from the sense in which it is false).

- (3) Such accounts require a general conception of the identity-conditions of these abstract objects, the understanding of which, Evans claims, is an excessive requirement for the competent engagement in such discourse.
- Evans notes that this objection is based on a principle he defends elsewhere (367, fn. 42).

The framework for Evans' solution

- Conniving uses of singular terms are to be construed as linguistic moves within a pretense (or as Evans sometimes says, a “game of make-believe”) to say something about the content of the pretense (i.e. a representation) or about the pretense itself.
- He claims that the capacity to understand the counterfactual idiom is the same capacity involved in engaging in pretense (355). This allows him to state the various rules governing a pretense (viz. the incorporation and recursive principles), and it helps him account for the similarities in the manner in which an ordinary singular term and an empty singular term can be used to invoke information (see below).
- Distinction between three different types of pretense:
 - (1) Existentially conservative (e.g. mud-pie game): “[A]ll referential thoughts and linguistic actions within the [pretense] involve reference to things outside of it,” (360). So, if $*\exists x(Ax)*$, then $\exists x*(Ax)*$.
 - (2) Existentially creative but not information-based (e.g. shadow-boxer game): “Referential communication within games of this kind must always depend on a common description...” (361).
 - (3) Existentially creative and information-based (e.g. shared perceptual illusion, conversation about the novel, etc.): “existentially creative in virtue of an initial pretense that things are as they *seem* – that things are as the information we share presents them as being,” (359).
 - A worry: Evans allows for (among other things) a “skillfully told story” to belong to this category of pretense. So, it seems that the shared informational backdrop can consist merely of descriptions as to how things are (I’m not sure what else a story could be considered to be). Granted, the descriptions involved in this case are likely more “rich and complex” (to use Evans’ words) than the shared descriptions involved in, say, the shadow-boxing game. The trouble, though, is in making a principled distinction between the two types of pretenses – in other words, how much richness and complexity of description must be involved in order for this kind of pretense to be considered a type-3 pretense rather than a type-2 pretense? And, furthermore, if this distinction cannot be secured, is one then forced to consider all supposed singular terms involved in story-like pretenses as actually being disguised descriptions (in the manner of the shadow-boxing game – see pp. 360-361)?
- The conniving uses of singular terms in which Evans is interested are involved in existentially creative and information-based pretenses.
- Distinction between understanding and quasi-understanding:
 - Normal information-invoking uses of singular terms express propositions and can thus be *understood*.

- Information-invoking uses of empty singular terms are not understood but *quasi-understood* (i.e. *understood*) given the informational backdrop of the pretense.

Evans on standard conniving uses

- That a hearer quasi-understands a speaker's conniving use of an empty singular term requires that the speaker and the hearer possess informational backdrops with the same origin, for this guarantees the truth of the following counterfactual: were the information veridical, the speaker and hearer would be thinking of the same object (362).
 - What about, e.g., mass hallucination?
- One exploits the pretense by *making a statement* while “[manifesting] the intention that what one does should be up for assessment as...*really* correct or *really* incorrect...according to whether or not *the statement one makes is correct or incorrect*,” (364).
- Roughly this amounts to the hearer realizing that a *proposition* is to be assessed as absolutely true if it is true according to the pretense (i.e. *true*). (365)

Evans on singular negative existential statements

- A hearer cannot quasi-understand an utterance of ‘that little green man does not exist’ and *think something true*, for *that little green man exists* must be *true* (and *that little green man does not exist* must be *false*) in order for the hearer to quasi-understand the utterance. So, Evans must analyze singular negative existential statements in a different way.
- Evans’ 3rd constraint on a solution (involvement of the concept ‘is real’):
 - There is a close connection between (in the context of a real or merely apparent illusion) ‘That little green man does not exist’ and ‘That little green man does not *really* exist’.
 - The inclusion of the concept of ‘is real’ in the singular negative existential statement allows that it is actually the denial of ‘this so-and-so *really* exists (or is *real*)’ rather than ‘this so-and-so exists’.
 - ‘Had this man’s parents never met, he wouldn’t have existed’
 - ‘Had this man’s parents never met, he wouldn’t have *really* existed (or been *real*)’
- “‘Really’ is a word which, when prefixed to a sentence, produces a sentence such that an utterance of it is true (absolutely) if and only if the sentence preceded by ‘really’ is itself such that there is a proposition expressed by it when it is uttered as a move in the relevant game of make-believe, and this proposition is true (absolutely) – not merely *true*,” (370).
 - Why does Evans need the qualification ‘when it is uttered as a move in the relevant game of make-believe’? If a proposition is expressed by a sentence, then it is expressed by it independently of any pretense (e.g. ‘that little green man exists’). The only way a pretense becomes relevant is if one is discussing *expressing a proposition*.
- “The game-to-reality shift”: If the subject is mistaken about the veridicality of his information (and, e.g., the little green man does in fact exist), then he is actually having referential thoughts about the object which he takes to be really non-existent (362).

- This allows ‘Really (That little green man is F)’ to be true: “in quasi-understanding the embedded sentence, one would have grasped a proposition which is true.”
 - Is this the right description of what is going on? One cannot be said to grasp the true proposition in virtue of *quasi*-understanding the sentence – it is one’s *actual understanding* (whether or not one realizes this) that allows for one’s grasping of the proposition.
- Consider ‘Really (That little green man exists)’. Evans claims that even if this is false, it can be understood in the following way. One quasi-understands ‘that little green man exists’, but also has the knowledge that ‘Really (That little green man exists)’ would be true iff a proposition is *expressed by the embedded sentence* and that proposition is true (absolutely). (see 371)
 - But, again, if that proposition is true, it is not *expressed by the embedded sentence* - it is *actually* expressed by the embedded sentence. A proposition *expressed by the embedded sentence* is a *proposition*, and one needs some account of how a *proposition* can be true (absolutely). The account provided for standard conniving uses won’t work for the reasons I gave before, so Evans needs a different account. The game-to-reality shift was supposed to show how a *proposition* can be true (absolutely), but I think what one must say in that case is that the proposition (and not *proposition*) expressed by the sentence uttered with the intent of being a move in the pretense is true.
- If ‘Really (That little green man is F)’ can be understood when it is false, then the singular negative existential statement can be understood as: ‘Not (Really (That little green man exists))’.
 - I think what most of the foregoing objections boil down to is that the fact that quasi-understanding is not a species of understanding seems to “taint” the ability to understand (and thus evaluate the (absolute) truth of) any sentence in which a quasi-understood sentence is embedded.
 - Could this problem be avoided if Evans claims that quasi-understanding is a species of understanding?