

Reference and Reflexivity

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Contents

Preface xi

1 Introduction 1

- 1.1 Mach and the shabby pedagogue 1
- 1.2 Paradigms, arguments and problems 3
- 1.3 Has semantics rested on a mistake? 7
- 1.4 The reflexive-referential theory 9
- 1.5 Intentionality and network content 13
- 1.6 Plan 14

2 Contents and Propositions 17

- 2.1 Introduction 17
- 2.2 Meaning and content 17
- 2.3 Common sense and official content 19
- 2.4 The classificatory concept of content 20
- 2.5 Conditions and propositions 24
- 2.6 Varieties of designation 29

3 Utterance and Context 33

- 3.1 Introduction 33
- 3.2 The reflexive-referential theory 34
- 3.3 Signs, tokens and utterances 37
- 3.4 Context 39
- 3.5 Semantic uses of context 42
- 3.6 Content-supplemental uses of context 44

4	Context and cognitive paths	51
4.1	Introduction	51
4.2	Information games	52
4.3	Cognitive paths	54
4.4	Indexicals and contexts	58
4.5	Stretch the dog	63
4.6	Dthat	65
4.7	Real, doxastic and fictional contexts	66
5	Meanings and Contents	71
5.1	Introduction	71
5.2	Reichenbach, reflexivity and indexical content	76
5.3	Indexical content and referential content	78
5.4	Varieties of content	81
5.5	Official content	85
5.6	Stretching cognitive content	88
5.7	Austin's two tubes	93
6	Names and the Co-reference Problem	101
6.1	Introduction	101
6.2	The computer scientist	101
6.3	Names and conventions	103
6.4	Names and cognitive significance	106
6.5	Reflexivity and names	109
6.6	Paderewski	114
6.7	Mach and the shabby pedagogue	117
6.8	What <i>is</i> said?	118
7	Names, Networks and Notions	123
7.1	Introduction	123
7.2	Applying the reflexive-referential theory	126
7.3	Intersubjective networks of notions	128
7.4	Networks and information games	142

8	The No-reference Problem	147
8.1	Introduction	147
8.2	Names, conventions and networks	147
8.3	Networks and pronouns	150
8.4	Networks and intentionality	152
8.5	Narrow enough contents	156
8.6	Jacob Horn	160
8.7	Playing with names	164
9	Conclusion	173
9.1	Introduction	173
9.2	Dialectical reversal?	174
9.3	Frege's argument	175
9.4	On being a (psychologized) Fregean	179
9.5	Kaplan and direct reference	185
9.6	Kaplan's arguments for direct reference	192
9.7	Conclusion	194
	Examples	197
	References	201
	Index	207

Introduction

‘Not long ago, after a trying railway journey by night, when I was very tired, I got into an omnibus, just as another man appeared at the other end. ‘What a shabby pedagogue that is, that has just entered,’ thought I. It was myself: opposite me hung a large mirror. The physiognomy of my class, accordingly, was better known to me than my own.’

(Ernst Mach, Mach 45: 4n)

1.1 Mach and the shabby pedagogue

Mach acquired a belief at the beginning of the episode, that we can imagine him expressing as:

(1) That man is a shabby pedagogue.

By the end of the episode he has another, which we can imagine him expressing as:

(2) I am a shabby pedagogue.

It will also be convenient to imagine that Mach went on to make an obvious inference and to say,

(3) Mach is a shabby pedagogue.

These three sentences correspond to three quite different kinds of thought Mach might have had. (1) expresses the kind of thought one has about a person that one is perceiving; one may not know who they are, or what their name is. (3) expresses the sort of thought one can have about someone one has never met, but merely read

about. Both of these thoughts are the sort one can have and often does have about other people. People at the other end of the bus may well have pointed at Mach and uttered (1). People all over Vienna may have uttered (3) while gossiping about local celebrities.

But (2) expresses a very special kind of thought, the kind of thought one has about oneself. Although in Mach's case all three statements are true only if Mach himself is a shabby pedagogue, we think of (2) as expressing self-knowledge in a way that the others do not.

In two companions to this book, *Meaning and the Self* (Perry 69), and *Knowledge, Possibility and Consciousness* (Perry 2001a), I provide an account of self-knowledge of the sort expressed by (2), and relate it to questions about the self and consciousness. The present book is intended to lay some of the groundwork for those inquiries, by contributing to our understanding of the meanings of sentences and contents of statements of the sort illustrated by (1), (2) and (3). We use such sentences to express our own beliefs about relatively simple issues about people, things, places and times, and to influence the beliefs of others about such matters. The sentences are tools, suited by their meanings to express information in different ways appropriate to various situations. I hope to provide an account that allows us to explain the way the meanings of such sentences relate to when, why and how we use them. In spite of a century of attention, it seems to me that the philosophy of language has yet to provide an account of names and pronouns that performs this service in a completely adequate way.

My account should not only be of interest to those who share my curiosity about self-knowledge. Simple statements about people, things, places and times are the bedrock of language. They are basic units of conversation, of literature, of the language of practical affairs. Scientific theory may eschew them, but they are used to report the facts science must explain, to plan and describe the scientific activity that develops and tests theory, and to formulate

and justify budgets that support that activity. Logicians love the complexities that come with variables and quantifiers; philosophers of language love the problems that come with adverbs and sentence-embedding constructions. But simple sentences of the sort I explore are the model for the atomic sentences of logic, the sentences that get quantified into, modified, and embedded in larger constructions. If, as I shall argue, we need some new (or forgotten) items in our semantic toolkit to deal with the way such simple sentences are used, the same will hold for those which are logically more complex.

The issues I discuss mainly concern the simple devices we use to refer, that is, proper names and pronouns, including indexicals. *Indexicals* are words, like 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'that woman', 'here', 'now', and 'today', that designate different objects depending on who says them and when. 'I,' for example, designates me if I say it, and you if you say it; 'today' designates a new day every twenty-four hours. Demonstratives are a subset of indexicals, including 'this' and 'that' and compounds like 'this man' as well as demonstrative uses of 'he' and 'she'. With these expressions, which object is designated depends in some way on which object the speaker attends to or demonstrates. *Proper names* are expressions we more or less arbitrarily assign to specific objects, people, animals, things, and places, and use to refer to them—expressions such as 'Bill', 'Bill Clinton', 'New York City', 'Rockefeller Plaza', 'David Israel' and 'Mach'.

Theories as to the informational content of statements containing names and indexicals have been dominated by two paradigms, two arguments and two problems. We look at how this cast of characters interacts in the case of names, and then move to indexicals.

1.2 Paradigms, arguments and problems

In the case of the meaning of proper names, the main debate has been between what I shall call *descriptive* and *referential* analyses. Referentialists follow Mill in holding that names are basically just

tags for objects; the conventions of language assign names directly to objects, and the propositions that statements containing the names express, are about those objects. If I say, 'Clinton likes pickles with his hamburgers,' I say that a certain fellow, the one who is President as I write this chapter, likes pickles with his hamburgers. What I say—the proposition I express—is true in just those worlds in which that person likes pickles with his hamburgers. Thus anyone who says that Clinton likes pickles with his hamburgers has said just what I did. I may associate various descriptions with the name 'Clinton'; you may associate others; nevertheless, we express the same proposition, true in the same worlds, when we each say 'Clinton likes pickles with his hamburgers.' It is Clinton himself, not any description of him, that enters into what we say. In David Kaplan's terminology, what is said is a *singular proposition*, with Clinton himself as a constituent, rather than a *general proposition*, to the effect that some person who meets the description the speaker associates with 'Clinton' likes pickles on his hamburgers.

We should really be careful here, though. Descriptions are linguistic items; it's the *identifying conditions* that we associate with such descriptions that are really at issue.

By an *identifying condition*, I mean a unary condition that only one thing can meet.¹ The classic examples are the conditions that are expressed with definite descriptions: *being the king of France*, *being the author of Waverley*, etc. I will use italics to indicate that I am talking about a condition. Thus what I said above about Kaplan's terminology might be put better in this way. The alternative to the singular proposition with Clinton himself as a constituent is a general proposition with some identifying condition the speaker associates with 'Clinton' as a constituent, to the effect that whoever meets that condition likes pickles on his hamburgers.

The descriptivist holds that it is some identifying condition that Clinton satisfies that is associated with my use of the name, and that is contributed to the proposition I express. This condi-

¹Elsewhere I've used Frege's term 'mode of presentation' for this concept.

tion might be derived from the speaker's beliefs, *being the current President* say, or *being Hillary's husband*, or *being the man who beat Dole*. Or it might be derived from the way language works: *being the man the speaker has in mind when he uses 'Clinton'*. On the descriptivist view, in either form, what I say may not be just what you say, even if we use the same name.

Two arguments favor the referentialist theory. The first is the argument from *counterfactual truth-conditions*. The referentialist account seems to get these right—at least for a wide variety of cases. That is, it seems to give the right predictions about the possible worlds or situations in which we would count what I said as true. The identifying conditions I associate with 'Clinton' don't seem to be a factor in this. Suppose I am wrong about Clinton being the current President. He resigned over the some scandal or other a few hours ago, and Gore has been sworn in. Then who has to like pickles with their hamburgers for my statement to be true, Gore or Clinton? Clearly Clinton. What I said was true just in case a certain man, the one I wrongly thought to have those properties, that is, Bill Clinton, likes pickles with his hamburgers, and false if he does not. Nothing else about him matters.

The second argument is the argument from *same-saying*. In a wide variety of cases the referentialist account also predicts correctly the conditions in which two people have said the same thing. We need to say things whose truth or falsity turns on the same objects having the same properties, or standing in the same relations. In this case, we have said the same thing if what we each say is true if Clinton likes pickles with his hamburgers, and false if he doesn't. The names or indexicals we use and the descriptions we associate with them do not matter.

In the descriptivist's favor are two problems for the referentialist: *co-reference* and *no-reference*. Suppose I say 'Bill Clinton loves pickles with his hamburgers,' and you say 'Bill Blythe loves pickles with his hamburgers.' Now in fact, Bill Blythe is Bill Clinton, one name comes by way of his father, the other by way of his stepfather; he's been called 'Bill Clinton' most of his life, but when he

was a kid it was 'Bill Blythe'. We can imagine that some of his childhood friends still call him that, and perhaps some of them haven't figured out that their old friend is now the President. On the referentialist account you and I have said the same thing; our statements expressed the same proposition. But then surely something is lacking in the referentialist account, for these statements, in some sense, express and convey quite different information. To most people, the second statement would neither change nor confirm what they thought about the pickle-eating habits of the President, while the first would. The co-reference problem for the referentialist, then, is that statements that contain different names of the same individual, seem to differ in what is often called 'cognitive significance.' The cognitive states, in particular the beliefs, that might motivate the speaker to make one statement would not motivate him to make the other, and the beliefs, adoption of which on the part of the listener, would show understanding of the one, would not show understanding of the other.

The no-reference problem comes from the fact that there are empty names, names that don't designate anyone or anything. For example, there is no Santa Claus, there is no Sherlock Holmes, there is no Captain Queeg. And yet children believe in Santa Claus, and use the name 'Santa Claus' in statements that express their beliefs, and so have cognitive significance. Adults who don't believe use the name in statements intended to influence the beliefs of their children. Two adults that know that there is no Captain Queeg still might disagree on whether Maryk should have relieved him of command during the typhoon Wouk 89. On the referentialist view, taken quite literally, it seems that we say the same thing when we say 'Santa Claus has a white beard' as we do when we say 'Sherlock Holmes has a white beard' or 'Captain Queeg has a white beard'—namely, nothing at all. For since those individuals do not exist, there are no propositions with them as constituents to serve as what is said in these cases. This seems unacceptable.

In the case of indexicals, there is also a debate between ref-

referentialists and descriptivists, but things are more complicated. As with names, the referentialist holds that statements containing indexical express propositions about the objects the indexicals designate. Thus one who is a referentialist about both names and indexicals would see (4) and (5) as expressing the same proposition:

- (4) I am a computer scientist (said by David Israel).
 (5) David Israel is a computer scientist.

The referentialist view seems to give the right truth-conditions. What David says when he says (4) is true in worlds in which David Israel is a computer scientist. He doesn't need to say (4), or anything else in those worlds; he doesn't need to fulfill whatever descriptions David or his audience might favor him with; he simply needs to be a computer scientist. And intuitively, the person who said (5), said the same thing with it that David said with (4). That David Israel is a computer scientist is just the information that is passed from David to his audience when he says (4), and (5) is the way a member of the audience might pass this information on to someone else, or record it in her notes.

But, as with names, the referentialist has a co-reference problem. Suppose you are talking to David Israel, not knowing his name. If David says (4) to you, you will learn that you are talking to a computer scientist. If he says (5), you will not learn that you are talking to a computer scientist, but you will learn that there is at least one computer scientist in the world named 'David Israel'. How can the referentialist explain this difference in cognitive significance, in the beliefs that might be expressed or acquired through the use of the sentences, if both statements express a proposition about a particular person rather one about whoever is talking to you, or about the name 'David Israel'?

1.3 Has semantics rested on a mistake?

The co-reference and no-reference examples pose a problem for the referentialist on the assumption that it is the business of se-

mantics to explain cognitive significance, or at least provide the materials to explain it. The assumption that this is part of the job of semantics seems to date at least from the first paragraph of Frege's 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'. There he considers something like a referentialist view, and rejects it because of the co-reference problem. Frege drew a sharp line between psychology and semantics, but still accepted what Kenneth Taylor calls a 'cognitive constraint on semantics' (Taylor 81). Here is one straightforward version of the constraint:

If a person who understands the meaning of sentences S and S' of language L can consistently accept S and not accept S' , then S and S' must express different propositions.

Howard Wettstein argues that referentialist theories are clearly correct, but just as clearly cannot meet the constraint. He concludes that the constraint is a methodological mistake; that semantics *has* rested on a mistake (Wettstein 87, 88). The job of the semanticist is to get the truth-conditions right, to provide a theory that tells us what propositions various sentences express. It is a mistake to suppose that this must provide us with a theory of cognitive significance.

In this book, I attempt to accept both Frege's cognitive constraint (or something recognizably descended from it) and the insights of referentialism. I cannot accept that a semantic theory can be correct that does not provide us with an appropriate interface between what sentences mean, and how we use them to communicate beliefs in order to motivate and explain action. A theory of linguistic meaning should provide us with an understanding of the properties sentences have that lead us to produce them under different circumstances, and react as we do to their utterance by others.

To accept the straightforward formulation above, would be to abandon hope for this reconciling project. That merely shows, I think, that this formulation is too strong. It builds in the assumption that the proposition expressed by an utterance is the only

cognitively significant property that a semantics provides. I argue that this is not true, especially in the case of referentialist semantics. This formulation of the cognitive constraint allows a little more room for maneuver:

If there is some aspect of meaning, by which an utterance u of S and an utterance u' of S' differ, so that a rational person who understood both S and S' might accept u but not u' , then a fully adequate semantics should say what it is.

To see how a referentialist semantics might do this, let's return to the thread of our discussion and look at descriptivist theories of indexicals and demonstratives. It is one such theory that I think holds the key to resolving our dilemma.

1.4 The reflexive-referential theory

As in the case with names, the descriptivist position on indexicals and demonstratives comes in two basic varieties. One can hold that statements involving indexicals express propositions that incorporate identifying conditions that the speaker associates with the individual the indexical designates. Or one can hold that the identifying conditions derive from the rules of language. In the case of indexicals, it is the second position that has proven more attractive, in the form of the theory of token-reflexives. On this view, in more or less the form Reichenbach gave it, the proposition associated with (4) is a proposition about the token of 'T' in (4)—hence 'reflexive'; the proposition is about the token of 'T' *itself*. Call the token of 'T' in (4) ' ι '. Then the proposition associated with (4) is

(P^x4) That ***the speaker of ι*** is a computer scientist.

(The superscript ' x ' signals that this is a reflexive content; a superscript ' r ' will signal referential content; the use of boldface and italic can be ignored for the moment; it will be explained in the next chapter.)

One can surely claim at least this, in favor of the token-reflexive theory: (P^x4) clearly is *one* thing that a competent speaker learns from an utterance of (4). To see this, imagine that when he says (4) David is not visible to the speaker. Perhaps an urgent call has gone out from a meeting for a computer scientist to resolve some particularly algorithmic problem, and David, as he rushes up the hall responding to the emergency, shouts (1) to reassure the waiting crowd. His token travels faster than he does, and reaches the meeting room before him. The crowd hears the token, grasps (P^x4), and is reassured, although though they don't yet know who the speaker is. The semantically competent members of the crowd will grasp (P^x4) simply in virtue of hearing the token and recognizing its type. (P^x4) is a proposition associated with (4) simply in virtue of the meaning of the type, 'I am a computer scientist'.

Reichenbach's theory is the starting point for the reflexive-referential theory I develop in this book. Oversimplifying a bit for introductory purposes, I'll call (P^x4) the *reflexive* content of (4). (Later I'll distinguish among various reflexive contents.) (P^x4) is reflexive because it is about the utterance (4) *itself*. Reflexive contents provide a solution to the co-reference and no-reference problems. Suppose that, after David makes it to the meeting room, a member of the crowd points at him and utters,

(6) You are a computer scientist.

We can distinguish between the reflexive and referential contents of (6). Dub the token of 'you' in (6) τ . Then the reflexive content of (6) is

(P^x6) That *the addressee of the speaker of* τ is a computer scientist.

while the referential content is,

(P^r6) That **David Israel** is a computer scientist.

The referential content of (6) is the same as that of (4), but their reflexive contents differ. Even though the speaker of ι is the addressee of τ , (P^x4) is a quite different proposition than (P^x6); (P^x4) is about ι and (P^x6) is about τ , for one thing. At the level of reflex-

ive content, the co-reference problem does not arise.

Suppose now that David does not arrive, and the group sits forlornly waiting for a computer scientist to rescue them. A noise is heard, which one member of the crowd takes to be a knock at the door. She utters (6) hopefully. But in this case, there is no addressee; no one is there; it was only ice falling on the stoop. So there is no referent for this utterance of 'you' in her utterance of (6), and no referential content. But that does not mean there is no reflexive content; it is still given by (P^x6).

Reichenbach's proposal, then, has merit. It provides, as contents for statements involving indexicals, propositions that are linked directly to utterances by meaning, that are clearly grasped by semantically competent listeners, and that avoid the co-reference and no-reference problems. But there are a number of objections to his proposal. In the first place, (P^x4) clearly is *not* what David says as he hurries down the hall. He is not talking about his own words but about himself. And (P^x6) clearly does *not* capture what the person in the meeting room says with (6), either in the case in which we imagine her talking to David, or in the case in which we imagine her talking to no one.

In the second place, reflexive contents would appear to provide a solution to the co-reference and no-reference problems only in the case of indexicals. Names are not indexicals. The referent of a name is not determined by some contextual feature of the situation of use, such as who is speaking or to whom or which objects are demonstrated. One can use a name to refer to anyone one can think of with that name; one does not need to know the physical relation of that person to the token, for it does not matter. It seems that the same phenomenon is at work with the co-reference and no-reference problems in the case of indexicals and names. Especially given the first objection, it seems unwise to adopt a solution to the problems for indexical cases that will not extend to cases involving names.

I shall argue, however, that these objections can be met. My argument rests on two basic ideas.

With respect to the first point, following an important paper by Arthur Burks, I shall argue that statements involving indexicals have two contents, which I call 'indexical' and 'referential'. The indexical contents are a species of reflexive contents; that is, they are propositions about the utterance itself. The referential contents are, at least in most cases, the 'official contents'; they are 'what is said' by the person making the statement. They are about the subject matter of the utterance, not the utterance itself. The counterfactual and same-saying arguments apply to referential contents. But referential content alone do not suffice to provide us with an account of the cognitive significance of utterances. For that we need reflexive contents as well.

With respect to the second point, I make a distinction between indexicality, the special case, and reflexivity, the general case. Any statement, whether or not it contains indexicals, has multiple reflexive contents associated with it, which will be grasped by a semantically competent listener and are necessary for an account of cognitive significance. Suppose, for example, that you hear me utter (5),

(5) David Israel is a computer scientist

but that you have no idea who David Israel is. You know, however, how proper names work. You know that my utterance will be true just in case (roughly) the following proposition is true:

(P^x5) ***The person named 'David Israel' to whom the use of it in (5) refers, is a computer scientist***

(P^x5) is certainly not the proposition expressed by (5). It is, however, a proposition that gives reflexive truth-conditions for (5), that a semantically competent speaker will grasp.

In this case the reflexivity does not derive from indexicality. Indexicality is simply a special case in which reflexivity is, so to speak, exploited by meaning. But, I shall argue, there are a wide variety of reflexive contents that we can and should appeal to in explaining the cognitive significance of language. And, I shall argue, if we examine carefully what the problems that cases of co-

reference and no-reference pose for semantic theory, we shall see that these problems can be solved at the level of reflexive content.

The basic idea of the book, then, is that there are both reflexive and referential contents. The referentialist is right, basically, that ‘what is said,’ the official contents of statements, are referential contents. There is some question of how rigidly this identity holds, whether the referential contents are always what is said, or only in what one might think of as the default case. But basically, the referentialist is right about what is said. The descriptivist is right, in holding that to explain the cognitive significance of statements we need to associate identifying conditions with the names and indexicals. These are found at the level of reflexive content.

1.5 Intentionality and network content

These tools handle the co-reference problem satisfactorily, or so I argue. Reflexive contents allow us to get at the multiplicity of ways we can think about and refer to the same object. But to handle the no-reference cases we need another layer of content, which I explain in terms of ‘notion-networks’ and call *intentional* content.

The term ‘intentionality’ is used by philosophers to get at phenomena connected with the ‘object-directedness’ of thought and language, and particular the phenomenon of object directedness where there is no object. Children all around the world are expecting Santa Claus to come on Christmas eve. Thoughtful readers around the world think that Sherlock Holmes was a better detective than the real Los Angeles detective Mark Furman. Even though there is no Santa Claus, and no Sherlock Holmes, people can think about them, and think about them in different ways. While our reflexive contents allow us to explain multiple takes on the same object, they do not provide an account about shared beliefs about an object that doesn’t exist.

The key here, I shall argue, is to consider what is involved in the flow of information and misinformation using language, and especially how the use of names and pronouns allows us to refer to objects that *do* exist. Our use of names and our talk about

objects with which we are not interacting with depends on our participation in causal, historical, and informational chains of the sorts noted by Kaplan, Kripke, Donnellan, Evans and others. I call these ‘notion-networks’. I can think of and talk about Aristotle because of a notion-network that has been going on since he was born. My use of ‘Aristotle’ is supported by this network. Aristotle is the origin of the network. My grandchild Anissa and her friends also participate in a network, one that stretches back to a series of nineteenth-century events that set up a network with no origin, and that supports the use of the term ‘Santa Claus,’ by believers and non-believers alike.² To say Anissa and Everett expect the same person to come, or that Nathasha doesn’t believe in the same person Anissa and Everett do believe in, is to say no more than that their beliefs, doubts, desires, and pretences are supported by the same network.

Once we recognize the importance of networks we can introduce a level of content, network content, that is in a sense between reflexive and official content. The network is a public object. It is these networks, I claim, that provide the structure that allows us to speak of beliefs that are directed at the same object, even when there is no object at which they are directed.

1.6 Plan

After fixing some ideas and terminology in Chapter 2, the first item of business will be to develop the reflexive-referential account of indexicals and demonstratives. This I do in chapter 3-5. In chapter 3, after discussing Burks’ theory and its relation to the reflexive-referential theory, I discuss how indexicals work, semantically and cognitively. This requires a distinction between tokens and utterances, consideration of various types of contexts and contextual features that are relevant to various expressions.

In Chapter 5 I discuss Reichenbach’s idea, give an account of the meanings, reflexive contents and referential contents of state-

²This network co-opted one dating from the eight century and Saint Nicholas, in the language I’ll explain in Chapter 7. See (author?) *Encyclopedia Americana*.

ments containing indexicals and demonstratives, and apply these ideas to resolving the co-reference problem for demonstratives and indexicals. In Chapter 6 I apply these ideas to proper names. This involves providing an account of how names work that allows us to apply the tools of reflexive content to them. I argue that reflexive content is the level relevant to cognitive significance, while referential content is official content, 'what is said'. Thus reflexive content is used to provide a solution to the co-reference problems, while subject matter content is what the referentialists arguments are about.

In Chapters 7 and 8 I turn to the no-reference problem. I develop an account of notion-networks in Chapter 7. In chapter 8 I fit pronouns into this account, and use it to discuss empty names and intentionality.

In Chapter 9 I briefly return to the arguments for and against referentialism and descriptivism. First I discuss Frege's argument in the first paragraph of his essay 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung.' Then I turn to the question of whether the reflexive-referential theory can be used to defend what Ken Taylor calls 'the psychologized Fregean' in Taylor 81; that is, whether the reflexive-referential theory can allow us to respect Frege's cognitive constraint while defending some version of referentialism. Finally I turn to Kaplan's arguments for direct reference in his *Demonstratives*. I argue that the reflexive-referential theory captures all of the valid insights of the arguments of Frege and Kaplan, while respecting a reasonable version of Frege's cognitive constraint.