

## Chapter Eleven In Search of Strawsonian Modes of Presentation<sup>1</sup>

### ' 11.1 The Plan

There are many alternative ways that a mind or brain might represent that two of its representations were of the same object or property—the "Strawson" model, the "duplicates" model, the "equals sign" model, the "synchrony" model, the "Christmas lights" model, the "anaphor" model, and so forth (' 10.1). In the last chapter I discussed what would *constitute* that a mind or brain was using one of these systems rather than another in order to mark identity. In this chapter I discuss the devastating impact of the Strawson model of identity marking on the notion that there are such things as modes of presentation in thought. I will then argue that Evans' idea that there are "dynamic Fregean thoughts" has exactly the same implications as the Strawson model. In Chapter Twelve I will claim that, in fact, all of the other models of identity marking we have discussed are strictly isomorphic to the Strawson model, hence have exactly the same devastating results for modes of presentation. There is no principled way to individuate modes of presentation such as to achieve any semblance of the set of effects for the sake of which Frege introduced them.

### ' 11.2 Naive Strawson-model Modes of Presentation

Suppose that our minds/brains used Strawson markers for marking identity. Keeping clearly in mind that the project here is neither exegesis of Strawson's text nor exegesis of Frege's, let us ask what, on this model, would correspond most closely to the Frege-inspired notion that the same object can be thought of by a thinker under various different "modes of presentation".

Gareth Evans tells us that different modes of presentation are, just, different ways of thinking of an object (e.g., Evans 1982, section 1.4). Suppose that we take this statement completely naively. On a Strawson model it appears that, so long as we always recognized when we were receiving information about the same object again, each of us would end up having only *one* way of thinking about each object. No matter what attributes the Strawson-style cognitive system thinks of an object as having, as long as it does not fail in the task of reidentifying, it always thinks of the object the same way, with the same dot. Two modes of presentation of the same might occur, for example, as the system collected information about a person seen in the distance prior to recognizing them, or about a person being discussed by gossipers before finding out about whom they were talking. But this sort of situation is usually temporary. Either the person seen or discussed is soon identified, or the information collected about the unknown person is easily forgotten. For example, we do not usually retain memories of people we pass on the street unless we recognize them. On this model, it would usually be so that all your beliefs concerning the same object were beliefs entertained under precisely the same mode of presentation.

On this naive reading of "modes of presentation," moreover, no two people could think of an object under the same mode of presentation. To do so they would have to

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter are revised from "Images of Identity" (Millikan 1997b) with the kind permission of Oxford University Press.

have numerically the same dot in their heads! On a Strawson model, there is no kind of similarity between two minds, either in internal features or in external relations, that would constitute their thinking of the same "in the same way." There might be relevant similarities between the ways you and I think of a thing, conceivably we might even have exactly the same beliefs about a thing, associate with it all the same identifying descriptions and so forth. But on this interpretation this would not bring us any closer to thinking of it under the same mode of presentation.

Interpreted this way, "modes of presentation" obviously would bear scant resemblance to Fregean senses, the very first job of which was to correspond to shared meanings of words and sentences in public languages. For example, Frege supposed that the very same senses are grasped first by the speaker and then the hearer when communication is effected through language. Also, on the Strawson model the different identifying descriptions that you attach to the dot representing a given man are not different ways of thinking of him, but merely various things you know about him, some of which *might* sometime come in handy in helping to reidentify him as the source of some incoming information. Correspondingly, the differences between various kinds of referring expressions Cdescriptions versus proper names versus indexicalsC would not parallel differences between various kinds of thoughts. On this model there are, for example, no indexical thoughts or ideas, although there would, of course, be times when the thinker used perceptual tracking abilities to collect various bits of incoming information together next to the same dot in his head.

And, of course, sentences expressing nontrivial identities could not be analyzed Frege's way on the naive Strawson model. Accordingly, Strawson's description of the semantics of identity sentences (Strawson 1974) differed radically from Frege's. The public meaning of the identity sentence does not correspond to a particular sharable thought. It concerns what the sentence conventionally *does* to hearers' heads. What it does is not to impart information but to change the mental vocabulary, altering the mental representational system. As such, its function is different, in one important sense, for every hearer. Both the affected dots and, barring weird coincidences, the information in the structures attached to these dots, will be different for each hearer.

Perhaps most critical of all, on this model, should the thinker make a mistake in identifying, the result will be the creation of an equivocal mode of presentation, one that has two referents at once. Nor will the subject who grasps the equivocal mode of presentation have direct access to this flaw. Suppose that you are confused about the identity of Tweedledum, having mixed him up with Tweedledee, so that whenever you meet either you store the information gathered next to the very same dot. Which man does this dot represent? Which man is it that you misidentify, thinking he is the other? Rather, the dot must stand for Tweedledumdee, an amalgam of the two. Further, if systematic misidentifications occurred, or if misidentifications were frequent and random, it seems that a dot's reference might focus on no object at all, hence reasonably be considered quite empty. Similarly, it seems that a dot might undergo massive yet invisible shifts in reference. Consider, in this light, the suggestions offered on the epistemology of substance concepts in Chapter Seven.

An interesting corollary would be that negative identity sentences have no determinate meaning, not even for individual persons. For example, on this model you have no separate ideas Cicero and Tully, nor even the man called 'Cicero' and the man called 'Tully'. Your way of thinking of the referent of each of the four corresponding public terms merges them irretrievably together. They are different for you only in that they are recognizably different packages in which information about the same thing can enter when you are among speakers speaking a language you know. Suppose then that a historian now informs you that there has been, in fact, an unaccountable confusion among philosophers and that Cicero was *not* in fact Tully. How are you to understand this negative identity claim? What you've got in your head is one dot, attached to which is a variety of (presumed) information, including the information ...is called "Cicero" and ...is called "Tully". But how will you divide the rest of the information into two piles? This could only be accomplished through a major job of reconstruction, as you tried to remember or to guess how you had acquired each separate bit of information, hence from which of these men it was most likely to have originated.

It is hard to imagine anything further from Frege's intention than these various results. What has gone wrong? Later (' 12.4-6) I will tease apart several strands that are woven together to produce the peculiarities of this "naive" Strawson-inspired image of "modes of presentation", and I will try to articulate the underlying principles that divide it from Frege's own vision. But there is also another interpretation possible of what modes of presentation might be for a mind that used Strawson markers.

### ' 11.3 Strawson-model Modes of Presentation as Ways of Recognizing

In our "naive" image above, Strawson's dots are taken to be modes of presentation because they are "ways of thinking of things," a phrase most easily interpreted in this context to mean kinds of mental representations of things. In interpreting modes of presentation this way, we parted from a very important strand within, anyway, the contemporary neo-Fregean tradition. Gareth Evans, for example equates the way one is thinking about an object with the way in which the object is identified (Evans 1982 p. 82, McDowell's formulation for Evans). Similarly<sup>2</sup>, Dummett takes Fregean sense to be a method or procedure for determining a *Bedeutung*, paradigmatically, for determining the presence of the *Bedeutung* (e.g., Dummett 1973, pp. 95ff). Evans and Dummett agree, for example, that grasp of a particular way of recognizing a referent encountered in perception corresponds to a mode of presentation of the referent. Now the Strawson image of sameness marking seems to pry apart the way one thinks of a thing from the various ways one knows to recognize it. Perhaps, then, if we identify modes of presentation with the latter instead of the former we will find them to be more as Frege intended.

Suppose then we take modes of presentation, on the Strawson model, to be not ways of *thinking* about a thing but ways of *identifying* it, in particular, ways that a thinker

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2. Similarly enough that is. Evans is at pains to distinguish his views from Dummett's here, but not in ways that affect what is at issue for us.

knows to recognize incoming information, arriving via perception, language (Chapter Seven), or inference, as being about that thing. That is, given the terminology developed in earlier chapters of this book, we take modes of presentation to correspond to various aspects of the conception that a person has of an object, rather than to the concept itself. Modes of presentation will thus describe people's conceptual reidentifying abilities by their means rather than by their ends (' 4.5).

On this reading, it seems that a person might grasp not just one but many modes of presentation for a given object. Also, perhaps different people might grasp the same mode of presentation, for they might be able to recognize the object in the same way. Moreover, suppose that understanding a certain sort of linguistic expression as referring to an object is, just, grasping a particular way to reidentify the object, through its manifestations in the speech of others (' 6.2) and/or, in the case of definite descriptions, through prior identification of certain of its properties. Then it might seem that some modes of presentation would correspond directly to meanings of referring expressions. Certainly many philosophers have supposed something like this to be true. The results look much better at first than on the "naive" interpretation of Strawson-model modes of presentation.

But trouble is not far away. On the Strawson model, the terms in the various beliefs that a person has will not then be characterized by determinate modes of presentation. Characteristically, each dot will be coordinated with multiple ways of identifying, multiple ways that the thinker would be able to recognize incoming information about that referent. But the various pieces of information attached to a given dot are not associated with any one of these ways more than another. True, each bit of information may have found its way to the dot by just one path of recognition. But the Strawson system keeps no record of which information entered by which path. Besides, on this model modes of presentation are not supposed to be just ways a thing has historically been recognized by the thinker, but ways s/he knows to recognize it. Many modes of presentation grasped for it may never have been used in the forming of particular beliefs.

Certainly these will not be modes under which anything is believed about it. Note also that if the terms of a thinker's belief are not each characterized by a determinate single mode of presentation, but by many modes at once, and if these various modes should happen not, in fact, all to determine the same object, then, as before, it seems that the thinker's thought might in all innocence be equivocal.

A more serious problem with taking Strawson modes of presentation to be merely ways of identifying things so as to channel information about the same arriving in different packages to a single focus or "dot, concerns the difficulty of individuating ways of identifying a thing, such as to form distinct modes or senses. Such a view is implicit, I believe, in Gareth Evans' discussion of "dynamic Fregean thoughts," so I will use his analysis to exemplify its weaknesses. Evans' view that there are dynamic Fregean thoughts, if pushed to its limit, yields exactly the same paradoxical results as does the naive Strawson model of modes of presentation.

#### ' 11.4 Evans' "Dynamic Fregean Thoughts"

Evans (Evans 1981, 1982 pp. 174-6, pp. 194 ff) proposed that when you are tracking an

object perceptually, say, keeping it in view as it moves and you move, if you continue to believe over this period of time that the perceived object has a certain property, this should not be considered to be a sequence of similar beliefs that you have, but a single belief that persists over time.<sup>3</sup> You continue to think of the object under the same mode of presentation, as long, that is, as you haven't unknowingly lost track of it. Evans calls this sort of thought a "dynamic Fregean thought", and he says that in such cases the relevant "way of thinking of an object" is a "way of keeping track of an object" (p. 196). Now if you do not merely persist in the same belief about the object over the tracking period, but continue to collect new information about it from perception, noting, say, its way of moving, what it looks like from the back, what it sounds like, how large it is, and so forth, presumably this will not change the fact that you continue to think of it under the same mode of presentation, as long as you don't lose track. Note the isomorphism with the Strawsonian analysis of the same tracking event. You continue to keep many old predicates attached to the dot while you funnel in various new bits of information to attach to the very same dot.

And what if you should unknowingly lose track of the object? You thought it was one little minnow— you named him "Primus"— that nibbled first your toe then your ankle, but there were actually two. In that case, Evans claims, "we have not a case of misidentification but a case where the subject has no thought at all" (Evans 1982, p.176). For in the absence of "an ability to keep track" of the object, "it is not possible for a subject to have a thought about an object in this kind of situation at all" (p. 195).

But an ability, I have argued, is not, in general, something one either has or has not. Most abilities come in degrees. One of my surest abilities is my ability to walk, but there are still times when I trip. Hence there seems another response possible for Evans. You do have an ability to keep track of things like minnows, only this time you tripped (Chapter Four). This particular dynamic mode of presentation of yours is indeed part of a thought, but the thought happens to be equivocal. It hovers between the two minnows, presenting both as if one. Taking another example, imagine a person losing track and apparently, but wrongly, perceiving the same squirrel eating first six and then seven more Brazil nuts. The result is an indelible memory of the squirrel who ate 13 whole Brazil nuts at a sitting. Surely this is not a case of no thought at all, but a case where two contents have been blended, a case where thought is equivocal.

True, Evans is wedded to "Russell's principle"— that a subject cannot make a judgment about something unless he knows which object his judgment is about— and he interprets this to mean that the subject "has a capacity to distinguish the object of his thought from all other things" (Evans 1982, p. 89). But Evans gives no argument anywhere for the soundness of this principle used this particular way. I am happy to agree that if a dynamic mode of presentation were sufficiently equivocal, not just mixing little minnow Primus with Secundus, but also rolling in, say, Sextus, Septimus and Octavius, indeed, a large random sample of other minnows in the school, it would be odd

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3 See also John Campbell (1987/88).

to consider it as determining a thought of any minnow at all. It should probably be considered "a case where the subject has no thought [anyway, of individual minnows] at all." In earlier chapters I, too, have argued that some ability to track them individually is necessary to having thoughts of individuals. This is parallel to the result we got on the naive Strawson-inspired model: If enough mistakes in identifying were made, the resulting thoughts would be effectively empty. But I have never heard an *argument* anywhere that *no equivocation at all* is ever possible in thought.

Whatever one decides about that, however, surely the case of error-infected naive Strawson-inspired modes of presentation and the case of error-infected Evans-inspired dynamic modes of presentation must be decided in the same way, for the parallel is exact. The parallel can be shown, indeed, to be a structural identity.

Consider the dynamic mode of presentation involved as you perceptually track a person, Kate, to whom you have just been introduced at a party. For a brief moment—not much longer, suppose, than a saccade—you divert your eyes to the face of a friend, but immediately pick up Kate's face again. Then a large fat man, excusing himself, passes between you and Kate, but again you immediately pick up the track. Looking at Kate and hearing her voice, you perceive these as having the same source, as locating the same person. Now Kate passes for a moment into another room, but you continue to hear her voice—though of course there are spaces between the words—and she soon emerges again. By now she is beginning both to look and to sound quite familiar, so that after stepping outside for a moment, you immediately find her again. The time interval was longer this time than between her words, but short enough for her voice still to be "in your ears". Compare this, for example, to the way a bloodhound tracks a person by smell, at moments losing but then picking the scent up again, or the way one tracks an object visually, seeing it as the same object as it emerges after passing behind a tree. You should not think of the bloodhound as merely *repeating* a particular way of recognizing the person over and over as the scent is lost and regained. Nor do you merely repeat a way of recognizing the visually tracked object. You keep track of it by tracing and anticipating its natural projectory in space.<sup>4</sup>

Now suppose that Kate looks and sounds familiar also an hour later and then a day later when you meet her again, first in the lobby, then on the street. Probably you would not have recognized her, however, had you met her in Singapore—in some radically disjoint context. Similarly, Evans tells us in his chapter on recognition that though by using your recognitional ability alone you might not be able to tell a certain sheep you are thinking of from every other sheep in the world, still, because you can keep track of the neighborhood in which the sheep is likely to be and you can also keep track of where you yourself are, you can maintain an ability to reidentify the sheep (Evans 1982 ' 8.3). Further now, suppose that Kate's name has become familiar, and as more time goes by you often pick up information about her from friends. Again, you usually know which

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4 Compare Evans: "...demonstrative Ideas will shade off, without a sharp boundary, into Ideas associated with capacities to recognize objects" (1982, p 176).

"Kate" they are talking about from the context, from anticipating her possible projectories, and the possible projectories of various kinds of information emanating from her.

When did you stop tracking Kate? When did you stop following her spoor, the trail she left of ambient energy structures bombarding your sensory surfaces? When did the original mode in which she was presented to you come to an end?

A dynamic mode of presentation that never came to an end would be, functionally, exactly the same as a "naive" Strawson-style mode of presentation. Each of the peculiar, distinctly unFregean traits that I have described for the latter modes would characterize the former as well. Whether Evans' dynamic modes really differ from Strawsonian modes in function depends, then, on whether a clear principle of individuation of sameness and difference could be drawn for ways of tracking or abilities to track. When did you leave off one way of tracking and start using another ability to track, or some different kind of ability to "know which object you are thinking about," as you collected information over time about Kate?

#### 11.5 Modes of Presentation as Ways of Tracking.

The concept of a substance consists, in part, of an ability to reidentify its object or to track it conceptually. One's conception of a substance, I have said, concerns how one is able to do this. To describe someone's conception of a substance is to tell how they would go about reidentifying or tracking it. If modes of presentation of substances were ways of tracking substances, then when the same substance is presented to a person through a variety of different modes of presentation and they understand these as presenting the same substance, their conception of the substance would have to be divisible into subconceptions, or discrete means of tracking. Each of these means would then be a distinct sense, capable, by itself, of uniquely determining that substance as referent.

First is the problem of division. The general method used for reidentification of every substance is the same. One relies on certain expected, that is, projected, continuities over times or occasions of encounter, for example, continuity in spatial projectory, in color, in shape, in odor, in general arrangement of parts, in manner of motion. Or one may rely on continuity in identity of parts or other associated features. Perhaps it is the shape of your face, or just your eyes that I recognize immediately as indicative of you, or your voice, or your signature, or your walk, or your humor, or your name, or your pocket watch with its distinctive pop-up cover (see Preface), each given the right context. The means employed to recognize a substance thus embed prior or more general means, not means that are unique, usually, to this substance. I follow the object's projectory, granted I can do this for objects generally, under a certain variety of conditions. My ability to track with my feet as well as my eyes and head may be involved here, hence my ability to walk over rough ground or to avoid slipping on ice. I can recognize blueberries partly by their color because I can reidentify colors generally under these and those sorts of conditions. I recognize squirrels by their shapes and characteristic motions, granted I can reidentify shapes and motions generally, big shapes, small shapes, motions in the open, motions partially obscured, shapes and

motions close at hand, shapes and motions in the distance. I recognize many people "by their voices," where this means catching the same regional accent again, along with the same vocal quality. I recognize individual old fashioned pocket watches by their shapes and markings, such as initials engraved on them. I identify individuals and kinds by their names, or by descriptions of them, where this requires recognizing the same word again, recognizing the same description put in different words, or put in a different regional accent, or a different language. Recognition by one such complex means or another of enough of these sorts of continuities, all reinforcing one another, often suffice for the practical act of reidentifying a substance. But that the various methods, actually or possibly employed, making up my ability to reidentify some particular substance, might be divided nonarbitrarily into discrete, countable "ways of identifying" simply is not coherent. Just as many integrated skills go into even an act of playing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" on the violin or, catching a ball, many integrated general skills, added to specialized bits of knowledge, go into any particular act of recognition or particular act of keeping track of a substance.

That a person's various means of recognizing a substance cannot be divided and counted does not imply, of course, that they cannot be described, or individually designated. Means are like places. There is no answer to how many places there are in London, but I can describe where I am, with greater or lesser exactness, and I even can designate this place entirely exactly, as, just, the place I am now in. Similarly, I can describe my means of identifying Kate on some occasion more or less exactly, as by sight, say, or as by noticing the shape of her nose, or I can refer to a way of having identified her as the way I used last Thursday in the park.

The second problem with identifying ways of recognizing with modes of presentation concerns the requirement that each mode of presentation be capable, by itself, of uniquely determining its referent: one mode yields one referent. What would it be for a way of identifying a substance to determine that substance uniquely? This would require that it be an infallible method of determining that particular substance, never catching another substance instead. But a second traditional requirement on modes of presentation is that the rational thinker always grasp the sameness when employing the same mode of presentation again, for the rational thinker must never make contradictory judgments about the same grasped through the same mode of presentation. We would need then to individuate ways of recognizing such that (1) each cannot fail to net always the same object and (2) this fact is guaranteed *a priori*. But ways of recognizing are always in principle fallible, or at the very least cannot be known *a priori* to be infallible, because they depend on certain external conditions being in place.

This is because "ways of recognizing," in this context, are not ways of holding an object up before the mind, but ways of knowing when one is receiving information about an object. And there is no such thing as an ability to interact in a given way with a distal object that isn't in principle fallible. That is the infamous Achilles heel of verificationism.

Perceptual evidence never guarantees its sources. Perceptual tracking is always fallible. There cannot be an *a priori* guarantee that one has kept track, or even that there is anything actually there to keep track of. The same is true for conceptual tracking. You

are surely able to identify each member of your immediate family in myriad ways, some of which ways a long look full into your spouse's face in full daylight, for example may (barring removal of your brain to a vat) actually be infallible. But if that is so, it is because the world, not anything in your mind, is constructed so as to make it so. It is because there is not in fact any other person in the world who looks just like that in the face (and no one *actually* able, and desirous of, putting your brain in a vat) a convenient fact but not one guaranteed *a priori*.

Similarly, recognition using identifying descriptions is never infallible. First, that the description is unique is always contingent. There might always be, within limits of discernability, two tallest or two oldest, for example, so that neither is really tallest or really oldest. And one can always make a mistake about which one is tallest or oldest because one perceives wrongly, or because one infers wrongly, or because one is informed wrongly by others. True, it has seemed to many that an identifying definite description is the surest sort of tool one could use to make fixed what one was thinking about. But the job that must be done by a method of recognition for incoming information is not to fix a thing before the mind. It is to effect *actual* reidentifications, to direct *actual* incoming bits of information about the same to a focus, so that they will interact with one another in inference. Used for this purpose, most definite descriptions are of severely limited value.

I conclude that given Strawson's model of sameness marking, there is no way to salvage the notion that there are such things as modes of presentation that will do all, indeed perhaps any, of what Frege wanted them to.