

Referring to God

WILLIAM P. ALSTON

Department of Philosophy, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244–1170

I

It is commonly supposed that one succeeds in referring to God only if one employs, or at least has in reserve, a description that uniquely picks out God, e.g., ‘the absolutely perfect being’, or ‘creator of the universe’. As the above disjunction indicates, the view might be that S refers to X only if S “has” a description true only of X, or it might be, more strongly, that S refers to X only if the description S is *employing* to pick out a referent is true only of X. It is the latter, stronger, view we shall be concentrating on, and that I shall call “descriptivism”. On this view, if the operative description is uniquely true of X then X is the referent; if it is not uniquely true of anything, then nothing has been referred to..

As against descriptivism, I shall be defending two theses. (1) There are other ways of referring, ways that do not require one to be using a description to fix the referent. I do not deny that reference can be carried out in the descriptivist way, but I do deny that it is the only way. (2) The other way I shall be describing, “direct reference”, is more fundamental than descriptivist reference in a way I shall bring out. Though my particular interest is in reference to God, I believe that issue to present basically the same problems as any case of reference. Hence I shall oscillate freely between more general and more particular considerations. Again, although I believe that these issues concern singular reference carried out by any device, I shall, for the sake of focus, limit consideration to proper names.

Before turning to what I regard as the most serious difficulties with descriptivism, let me mention a couple of problems one en-

counters in trying to work it out. First, it is often difficult, or impossible, to decide just what the crucial description is, the one on which the success of the reference and the identity of the referent hangs, especially when the referring device is a proper name. In many cases the subject can easily formulate a number of descriptions he believes to be uniquely satisfied by his referent, as I can when I refer to my wife as 'Valerie'. But which of these is such that I have succeeded in referring to my wife if and only if she uniquely satisfies that predicate? I wouldn't know how to pick out just one predicate that has that status. No doubt, some of these descriptions are more central than others; 'my wife' is much more central than 'the person who bought this jacket yesterday'. Nevertheless, there are many other descriptions that are just as central as 'my wife', referentially if not uxoriously; and how can we determine just which of these it is that I am using to determine my referent? A similar point can be made about referring to God; again one typically has a number of putatively identifying descriptions among which there is no obvious choice of a *primus inter pares*. There *could* be a practice of reference in which the psychological processes of speakers are so structured that exactly one putatively identifying description plays a central role in the process, and in such a way that this central description stands out in consciousness. But our referential practice is not of this sort.

John Searle developed a well known account of proper names that is designed to allow one to hang onto a form of descriptivism in the face of this point.¹ Contact with the referent is said to be carried by a *set* of descriptions, the ones S would be prepared to list if asked something like "To what were you referring?", rather than by one governing description. And, according to this more democratic descriptivism, S has referred to X *iff* "a sufficient number" of these descriptions are uniquely true of X. Now we can say, more plausibly, that when I say 'Valerie is coming to pick me up' I have referred to whatever "a sufficient number" of my "Valerie-descriptions" are uniquely true of. I shall henceforth be thinking of this Searlean variant of descriptivism.

Second, there is the problem of just how the description(s) are supposed to function to secure reference. Whether we think in terms of a single master description or in terms of a large set thereof, none of this is typically consciously appealed to by the

subject in the heat of reference. Then by virtue of what do *these* descriptions determine the reference, rather than many other descriptions that S “possesses” and to which she is not appealing at the moment? In formulating Searle’s view we have spoken of S’s readiness to list the descriptions in the set in answer to some such question as: “To what were you referring?” But how does this readiness enable the speaker to refer to what uniquely satisfies most of *those* descriptions? Little light is thrown on this by descriptivists. But I will not pursue this point, partly because a satisfactory account of the mechanism of reference has not been worked out for any mode of reference. In this paper I shall speak of the descriptions that, according to descriptivism, fix the reference as the “associated” descriptions.

Now let me just briefly remind you of Saul Kripke’s main objections to a descriptivist account of proper name reference in “Naming and Necessity”.² But first I want to note Kripke’s useful distinction between two sorts of descriptivist views about proper names: (I) definite descriptions “give the meaning” of, or are synonymous with, proper names and (II) definite descriptions “fix the reference” of proper names. It is the latter view I am considering here, and so I will only be concerned with Kripke’s objections to that position. But note that we are taking (II) to claim not just that this is one way of reference fixing for proper names, but that it is the only way.

Kripke’s principal objections are the following. (1) There are cases of successful reference to X in which S does not have (in her mental storage), and does not suppose herself to have, any description that uniquely applies to X. Here the reference is clearly not fixed by a description or set of descriptions. Thus Kripke suggests that many people use ‘Aristotle’ to refer to the famous ancient Greek philosopher of that name without being able to specify anything more nearly uniquely identifying than, e.g., ‘a philosopher that lived a long time ago’ or ‘an ancient Greek philosopher’. (2) Even where S does have one or more associated descriptions that she takes to fix the reference, they don’t always do so. These cases are divided up into (a) those in which nothing uniquely satisfies the description(s), but S nevertheless succeeds in referring to X, and (b) those cases in which the description(s) are uniquely true of Y, but S is referring to X.

Kripke illustrates (a) with the case of Jonah, on the assumption that none of the putatively uniquely true predicates from the story are uniquely true of the prophet about whom the legend grew up or of anyone else; and he illustrates (b) with his famous fantasy about someone other than Godel's having proved the incompleteness of arithmetic (where the speaker's only putatively identifying description associated with 'Godel' is 'the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic').

I believe that all these criticisms can be successfully urged against the application of descriptivism to reference to God. To be sure, the first criticism is less important here just because the ways in which God is unique are much more widely advertised than is the case for any creature. Nevertheless, there may be persons who are incapable of forming putatively identifying descriptions, or of considering them as such, whether by reason of tender years or otherwise; and such persons may nevertheless succeed in referring to God by non-descriptivist means of the sorts I shall be describing shortly. Kripke's second criticism, however, seems to me much more crucial here. In defending my second thesis I shall illustrate this by presenting religious cases in which the associated descriptions fail to fix the reference.

But first I want to look at the other side of the picture. How is reference secured if not through descriptions? Kripke provides what he calls an alternative "picture", and this is as essential a part of his attack on descriptivism as his negative point that the referent is not always fixed by descriptions. Here are two of his statements.

"Someone, let's say, a baby is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the market place or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can't remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman was a famous physicist. A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can't identify him uniquely."³

"A rough statement of a theory might be the following: An initial baptism takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is 'passed from link to link', the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it."⁴

This account is often termed a "causal theory of reference". The basis for the appellation is simply that when reference is thus secured it is by virtue of some real (causal?) connection with the referent. However, I shall not be stressing whatever distinctively causal aspect there may be. I shall, rather, use the term 'direct reference' for my version of Kripkean reference.

But is this mode of reference really an alternative to descriptivist reference, or is it just a particular form of that mode? One who takes the latter alternative may claim that Kripke has only pointed to the important role of descriptions that are different from those usually stressed by descriptivists. On the initial baptism end of the chain he explicitly allows that the reference may be fixed by a description; but his other alternative (by ostension) can be construed descriptively too. When a person fixes a reference by labelling an ostended object, he is, in effect, fixing the reference by the description 'the item I am currently ostending', or some such. And at subsequent stages, users of the name fix the reference by the description 'what the person from whom I got this name uses it to refer to'.

Now Kripke considers this latter part of this descriptivist counter-argument. He points out that the person who picks up the name 'George Washington' may have forgotten from whom she acquired it, or she may have a thoroughly mistaken idea on this point, and even so be using the name to refer to the famous person commonly so called. Even the unique satisfaction of this kind of description is not required for successful reference. Of course, S may employ a less specific description like 'the object referred to by this name by the person from whom I acquired the name, whoever that was'. Or perhaps 'the person most commonly called by this name in such-and-such a social group'. But these descriptions too may fail to be satisfied by S's referent. No doubt, the descriptivist can keep modifying his suggestions to meet any given counter-example. Suppose that he finally comes up with an ab-

solutely fail-safe description like 'the object this name is used to refer to by the people involved in the referential practice by contact with which I have acquired this use of the name'. Since that description is modelled directly on Kripke's picture of how reference is secured, it is guaranteed to fit whatever Kripke's account would pick out as the referent. Even so the following point will remain. A descriptivist account will apply in these cases only where such a specially tailored description is employed by S to fix the reference. And surely it is obvious that in most cases no such description is operative. Our wily descriptivist has succeeded only in showing that reference *could* always take place via a description. He has failed to show that it always does.

The same point is to be made about the descriptivist's suggestion that when the name is bestowed ostensively, the object will fall under some such uniquely identifying description as 'the object I am currently ostending'. This only shows that a description *could* play a crucial role; it fails to show that a description must be employed. The subject can just attach the name to the object and form the intention to use the name for that; whereupon she has acquired what it takes to refer to the object with that name.

II

Now I want to indicate how I am thinking of direct reference to God. I want to concentrate on the most radical alternative to descriptivist reference, the alternative in which not only derivative reference along the chain of social transmission, but also the initial "baptism" (to reverse the theological order of priority) is secured otherwise than by the unique satisfaction of some predicate. We will think of a non-derivative reference to God as secured by labelling something presented in experience. This presupposes, of course, that God can be presented to one's experience in such a way that one can make a name the name of God just by using that name to label an object of experience. This is controversial, and I am prepared to argue for it, but this is not the place.⁵ Note that I am making something explicit that was implicit in Kripke's formulations, that when one ostensively

indicates *x* as the referent, one is perceiving *x*. Ostension, in the literal sense, is not available for fixing a reference to God, and so I am thinking of an initiator of a reference chain here as first fixing the reference for himself by focusing attention on a perceived entity. To be sure, if that referential practice is to be shared by others, there must be some way in which it is communicated to others what entity it is to which the initiator was referring with 'God'. I shall take it that the communal worship, and other practices, of religious communities provides resources for this, though I shall not be able to go into the matter in this paper. (See the next paragraph for some hints.) Given such resources, we will think of members of religious communities as picking up this referential practice much as Kripke suggests, though many more details need to be filled in before we have a full blown view.

Let me say why I think direct reference to God is not only an actualised possibility but is prominent in the religious life. First, it is obvious that we, at least most of us, acquire our religion, including our practices of talking to and about God, from a community. We did not think it all up ourselves; nor were most of us privileged with special revelations from God. (Those who have been so privileged have themselves typically received this privilege in the context of a functioning religious community.) To be sure, this point does not by itself dispose of descriptivism, for it leaves open the possibility that the community initiates us into this referential practice precisely by providing us with identifying descriptions. No doubt, we do acquire such descriptions in the course of normal religious training. But initially we learn to refer to God (in praying to God, praising God, etc.) by being exposed to the practice of worship, prayer, confession, reception of the sacraments, and so on; we were given instruction as to how to engage in them; we were encouraged to do so. As a result of all this we were "drawn into" these practices; we learned, by doing, what it was like to come into contact or communion with God. By being initiated into the practice we picked up the sub-practice of referring to God, of referring to the object of worship our predecessors in the community had been referring to. And, if things go right, we also attain some first hand experiential acquaintance with God to provide still another start for chains of transmission.

Let's take it that direct reference mechanisms are operative in reference to God. I now want to explain and defend my second thesis, that direct reference is more fundamental than descriptivist reference.

III

I think of direct reference as more fundamental in more than one respect. First, genetically. I am not going to say much about this here, but it does seem to me that descriptivist reference always, or virtually always, presupposes prior reference. I will mention two indications of this. First, and less crucially, almost all uniquely identifying predicates themselves contain one or more singular referring expressions. ('The teacher of Alexander', 'the author of *Waverly*', 'my cousin'.) We can rarely identify something by purely qualitative predicates. And it seems very unlikely that a person could make enough references with purely qualitative descriptions to furnish an adequate foundation for our further descriptions that contain singular terms. Second, and more crucially, the use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus. For I refer descriptively by taking myself to be speaking of whatever uniquely satisfies certain predicates. And how could I understand that notion of *something's* satisfying a predicate without already having made some singular references, or at least having acquired the ability to do so? If any use of a description to pick out a referent presupposes the mastery of a referential apparatus, that presupposed referential capacity must be a capacity to refer in some other way. However I shall not pursue these difficult matters in this paper.

Instead I shall focus on a different sort of relative basicity. Where both descriptivist and direct reference are available, and even where they are both employed, it is direct reference that determines the referent. The crucial test of this claim will be a discrepancy between the indications of the two mechanisms; either one yields a referent and the other does not, or the two yield different referents. Since these are the two kinds of situations envisaged by Kripke's second argument against the pretensions of exclusivist descriptivism, in exploring such cases we will

be applying these Kripkean arguments to the case of referring to God. I will mostly be concerned with the second sort of case, that in which the mechanisms indicate different referents.

First, suppose that an impostor — the devil, one's internalized father figure, or whatever — represents himself as God. We are to imagine someone who, like the Old Testament prophets, takes himself to be addressed by God, to be given commissions by God, and so on. But, unlike the Old Testament prophets, as they have traditionally been regarded, our chap is really being addressed by Satan; or else some internalized figure from his past is responsible for the "messages". To make this the kind of case we want we must suppose that this impostor represents himself as the true God, creator of heaven and earth, righteous judge, merciful redeemer, and so on. Thus most of the operative descriptions (even if there are some Kripkean descriptions like 'He who addressed me at *t*' in the set) are uniquely true of God, while the direct referential contact is with, say, Satan. I think the right thing to say here is that our dupe is really speaking of Satan when he says 'God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword'. It is just that he has a lot of false beliefs about Satan; but one thing he does truly believe of Satan is that Satan addressed him at *t*. Moreover if a community grows up on the basis of these revelations and epiphanies, and the practice develops in that community of using 'God' to refer to the focus of the worship of the community, we will have a Satan worshipping community in which the members use the name 'God' for Satan.

If one is unconvinced by my reading of this case, I would commend to him the following reflections. In the Judaeo-Christian community we take ourselves to be worshipping, and otherwise referring to, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel", i.e., the being who appeared to such worthies of our tradition, revealed Himself to them, made covenants with them, and so on. If it should turn out that it was actually Satan, rather than the creator of the heavens and the earth, with whom they were in effective contact, would we not have to admit that our religion, including the referential practices involved, is built on sand, or worse (muck, slime), and that we are a Satan-worshipping community, for all our bandying about of descriptions that fit the only true God? One may protest that even if, in that case, we would be referring

to Satan in our worship and prayers, there are still more detached, more theoretical contexts in which the reference is determined by our descriptions; and this may be so. But with respect to the more fundamental undergirding substance of religious activity, thought, talk, and feeling, the diagnosis stands as given. It would be Satan whom we are addressing.⁶

Now let's consider the opposite possibility, that our descriptions (or most of them) pick out something else, but that we are still referring to God. Here the mechanisms of direct reference place our talk in the right sort of effective contact with God, but we radically misconstrue His nature, in such a way that most of our descriptions are true of something else. Consider the possibility that all religions are initiated by some experiential contact with the one true God, but that in most religions (and perhaps in all to varying extents) God's nature, doings, and purposes are misconstrued. God seeks to reveal Himself to people everywhere, but often, or always, the message gets more or less garbled in the transmission. Perhaps our sinfulness prevents us from getting it straight. Now in those cases in which the distortion is so great that most of the descriptions are not true of God it is likely that most of the descriptions are not true of anything, and so they would fail to pick out anything. But in a particular religion the descriptions might be mostly true of something other than God, some created supernatural being, let's say. In either case, assuming that the religion originated from some real contact with God and is sustained by continued experiential encounters with God, I think we would have to say that the people are referring to, addressing prayers to, worshipping, *God*, but, unfortunately, are radically misinformed about His nature and purposes.

Another variant concerns philosophers who attempt naturalistic reconstructions of theistic religion. Consider Henry Nelson Wieman, who thought of God as some complex of natural processes that is responsible for the realization of value in the world; or Julian Huxley, with his naturalistic trinity of the basic forces of nature (God the Father), the possibilities for the realization of value (God the Son), and human life that utilises the first in order to realize the second (God the Spirit). What is it that they are referring to when they think about, or address, their naturalistically conceived God-surrogates. Well, if their descriptions are the only

determiners of reference, they are referring to what uniquely satisfies those descriptions, if anything. But suppose, as may be the case for one or another of these souls, the person is in effective experiential contact with the only true God, but that his naturalistic predilections lead him to this radically false construal of what he is experiencing. Or perhaps, as may be the case with Wieman, he intends to be referring to whatever it is that people in the Christian community are referring to as 'God'. If that's the way it goes, then, once again, I would say that these people hold wildly heterodox views about God, rather than that they hold views about some being other than God. Since they mean their views to be about what they have encountered in certain stretches of their experience, and/or what is generally referred to as 'God' in a certain community, that is what their views are about, provided there is something that fills the slot in question.

"But wait a minute. Haven't you admitted that one can fix one's reference by what uniquely satisfies a certain description? And what if the people you have been talking about were doing that? What if Wieman said (thought) what he said (thought) as true of what uniquely satisfies the description, 'that complex of natural processes that is responsible for the creation of value, whatever that may be otherwise be'. Then he wouldn't have been referring to God, contrary to your ruling. And what if your dupe had resolved to refer to what satisfies the description 'the creator of heaven and earth'? Then he would have been referring to God, contrary to your diagnosis of the situation." I can't deny this. If these people had gone through these maneuvers they would have been in touch with a referent other than what I specified. But I was assuming that they hadn't; I was assuming that these were normal cases. Let me spell out my assumptions a bit more. I am supposing that direct reference is fundamental in still a third way, viz., that where the direct reference mechanisms are in place they will determine reference unless the subject makes special efforts to counteract this, e.g., resolutions of the sort just mentioned. That is, I take it that direct reference is the natural, baseline mode of reference; it takes place "automatically" without the need for any deliberate intervention. Whereas descriptivist reference requires more active involvement on the part of the subject. It does not strictly require anything as ex-

plicit as a consciously formed resolution, but it at least requires some implicit version of that. Since most of us most of the time take the path of least resistance, most of us most of the time will be making direct reference to what we are talking about. It is only in rather unusual and special circumstances that the descriptive mode will win a contest for referent-determination.

IV

I suspect that the main resistance to the contentions of this paper will come from the recognition that 'God' involves more descriptive meaning than the usual proper name. Though this meaning will vary from group to group, and even from person to person, still for a given person or group there will be certain descriptive constraints on its use. Let's say that you and I would not be willing to refer to any being as 'God' unless we were convinced that that being were perfectly good, all-knowing, and the source of existence of all things other than itself. In fact, reflection on these points has led many to deny that 'God' is, strictly speaking, a proper name, and to regard it rather as a title. This being the case, and however it is with proper names of creatures, how can it be maintained that the referent of 'God' is fixed primarily by mechanisms of direct reference rather than by associated descriptions? To be sure, so far we have only pointed out that people commonly take the possession of certain divine-making characteristics to be necessary for being God, but purely descriptive reference requires characteristics that are *sufficient* for the individuation of the referent, i.e., uniquely exemplified characteristics. But let's concede that as well; one will not be prepared to refer to x by the use of 'God' unless one takes x to uniquely exemplify the properties listed above. Where that is the case won't reference to God inevitably be descriptivist?

No. The points just brought out imply that one would not use 'God' to refer to x unless one firmly believed that x alone had certain characteristics. But that falls short of showing that it is the possession of those characteristics that makes x the referent. The arguments for the primacy of direct reference remain in full force. All of our above scenarios could be rewritten with the inclusion

of the above points about the descriptive meaning of 'God'. Our dupes of Satan might have a firm resolution to use 'God' to refer only a being that is absolutely perfect; but, mistakenly supposing the being with whom they are in contact to be absolutely perfect, they are using 'God' to refer to an imperfect being nonetheless. Wieman may have as a firm a disposition as you please to use 'God' to refer to x only if x is the unique constellation of natural forces that make for goodness. But, mistakenly supposing the being with whom he is in dynamic contact in the Christian community to exemplify that feature, he is using 'God', nonetheless, to refer to the eternal creator of nature. No doubt, if either of these come to realize the true nature of the situation they will stop using 'God' to refer to the being in question (provided the meaning they attach to 'God' remains constant); but that doesn't alter the point that when they are making a referential use of the name, it is the mechanisms of direct reference that are determining the referent.⁷

An analogy to Donnellan on the referential use of definite descriptions may help one to appreciate this point. In his famous article on the subject⁸ he points out that one may use 'the man in the corner drinking a martini' to refer to a man who is drinking water in a martini glass, since one may have some other way of picking out the referent than *that entity that uniquely satisfies the description*. Here too it could well be the case that one would not use that description to refer to x unless one believed that x uniquely satisfies the description; but the referent is determined otherwise nonetheless.

V

What difference does it make what determines reference in religion? That is, what practical religious or theological difference does it make, what difference does it make to the religious life? (Obviously it makes a difference to the theory of language, more particularly to the theory of religious language.)

A negative point is well brought out by Richard B. Miller in his article "The Reference of 'God'",⁹ the only extended published attempt, known to me, to apply recent ideas of direct

reference to the religious case. There Miller points out that if Kripke is right about reference this drastically alters the status of genetic arguments against theism. Attempts by the likes of Freud and Marx to discredit theism by providing naturalistic accounts of the origins of theistic religion are often dismissed by philosophers as irrelevant to the truth of theism. But if our claims, as Christians, Jews, or Moslems, to be referring to the creator of heaven and earth rest on the supposition that these referential attempts stem from some actual experiential contact with such a creator, then anything that strikes against that supposition will strike against the foundations of our faith. If Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, and John, not to mention Augustine, Francis, and ourselves, were not in experiential contact with God but rather with their own super-egos, then our faith is in vain and we are, of all men, the most miserable. This would still not *disprove* theism, as Freud was careful to point out, and one might still succeed in referring to God by way of descriptions. But theistic faith would not have the status deemed essential to it in all theistic religions.

There are also more positive implications. I will mention two. First, the primacy of direct reference provides a reassurance that God can be successfully referred to by the weak and foolish as well as the wise and the proud. One doesn't need fancy theological descriptions for the purpose. Tying onto one's experience, or the referential practice and/or the experience of others, will do the trick. Communion with God, including verbal communion, is not just for philosophers and theologians. Second, the prospects for taking radically different religious traditions to all be referring to and worshipping the same God are greatly increased. If one's referent in religious worship and discourse is determined by what one takes God to be like, then we, the Hindus, and the ancient Greeks and Romans cannot be credited with worshipping the same being. But if reference is determined rather by the real contacts from which a referential practice stems, then there may indeed be a common referent, in case these traditions, including their referential traditions, all stemmed from experiential contacts with the one God. For that matter, direct reference increases the chances of a common referent across major differences within a single religion like Christianity. There are theological differences within Christianity that threaten religious community, referential-

ly as well as otherwise, on a descriptivist account of reference. But if reference is direct, then persons even as diverse theologically as Tillichians and fundamentalists might all be worshipping the one true God, in spite of their radically different ways of thinking of Him.

I should also mention an implication I don't know whether to classify as positive or negative. Let me call it "neutral". The whole enterprise of theology looks different on our two conceptions of reference to God. On descriptivism the basic subject matter of theology is provided by certain concepts, the ones that uniquely pick out God. That means that we start with certain divine attributes that are not up for grabs; nothing not uniquely possessing those attributes would be what we are talking about in theology. The question then is as to how we can extend the account, by reasoning from the initial set, by revelation, experience of God, and so on. But on the direct reference view we start with a being presented in individual and communal experience, not with a set of attributes. The question is then as to what *this* being is like. No particular characterization is sacrosanct *by reason of our starting point*, though of course it may be rendered so by other considerations. It follows right away from this that natural theology has a more fundamental and a more important role to play on the first conception than on the second. On the direct reference approach we are pretty much exclusively thrown back on our experience of God, including His messages to us, to determine what God is like, at least initially, though we can, of course, proceed to reason from that.

Let me close by quoting Kripke's caricature of descriptivist reference. "This picture which leads to the cluster-of-descriptions theory is something like this: One is isolated in a room; the entire community of other speakers, everything else, could disappear; and one determines the reference for himself by saying – 'By "Godel" I shall mean the man, whoever he is, who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic'. Now you can do this if you want to. There's nothing really preventing it. You can just stick to that determination. If that's what you do, then if Schmidt discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic you *do* refer to him when you say 'Godel did such and such'. But that's not what most of us do."¹⁰ Add to this his amusing remark that "it is a

tribute to the education of philosophers that they have held this thesis (descriptivism) for such a long time".¹¹ The point of this last remark is that philosophers are in possession of many more characteristics uniquely satisfied by historically famous personages than are most people who refer to those personages. Transposing all this to our present concerns, we might say that it is a tribute to the education, though not to the piety of philosophers that they so readily assume that the unique satisfaction of descriptions is what enables them to refer to God, that referring to God is like going into a room by oneself, relying on ones own resources, without essential dependence on an environing and sustaining community of faith, articulating a theological predicate, and then saying to oneself, "God is the being that uniquely satisfies that predicate".

Notes

1. "Proper Names", *Mind* LXVII, No. 266 (1958), pp. 166–173.
2. In *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1972).
3. *Op.cit.*, pp. 298–299.
4. *Op.cit.*, p. 302.
5. For a defence of the presupposition see "Perceiving God", *Journal of Philosophy* 83, No. 11 (November, 1986), pp. 655–665.
6. There can also be mixed cases. Perhaps some of the founders of the religion were in touch with God and others were not. Or perhaps the founders were in touch with Satan, but in the practice of the religion so founded some believers achieve real contact with God.
7. One might try to save descriptivism by giving it a subjectivist twist. The referent is, not the x if any that actually uniquely exemplifies the properties in question, but the x if any that is believed by the subject to uniquely exemplify the properties in question. This construal is proof against the argument of the last paragraph. For, by my lights, the referent in the first case is the being S believes to be absolutely perfect, and in the second case the referent is the being S believes to be a certain unique constellation of natural forces. But this cannot be the basic account of what determines reference in these cases, since it presupposes that reference has already been secured. One can't form the belief in question about x without thereby referring to x, at least mentally. And what determines that reference? There seems to be no alternative to direct reference as what plays that role.
8. "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *The Philosophical Review* LXXV, No. 3 (1966), pp. 281–304.
9. *Faith and Philosophy* 3, No. 1 (January, 1986), pp. 3–15.
10. *Op.cit.*, p. 298.
11. *Op.cit.*, p. 291.