

# Descriptivism and Ontological Realism

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue that descriptivism and ontological realism are incompatible. To this end, I first consider two contrary views of the nature of reality and two contrary views of intentionality in order to bring into focus the views in question. I then present my argument that descriptivism and ontological realism cannot coherently be combined. This argument turns on the impossibility of there being an entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to, so I present my reasons for thinking such an entity cannot exist. I consider a likely line of response from those who might wish to defend a realist descriptivism and find that this line is unsuccessful. Hence, I conclude that there are two, unified positions regarding what the world is like and how the mind relates to it, and that a realist descriptivism is not one of them. This conclusion is significant, for if it is correct, it shows that one's account of how thought or language comes to be about the world precludes an account of what that world is like in itself, independent of thought or language. The conclusion is also interesting and, perhaps, surprising, for the two accounts—descriptivism and ontological realism—are not obviously discordant and there are many eminent philosophers who embrace both.

## Introduction

In this paper, I argue that a certain view of the nature of intentionality, namely, descriptivism, and a certain view of the nature of reality, namely, ontological realism, are incompatible. This conclusion is significant, for if it is correct, it shows that one's account of how thought or language comes to be about the world *precludes* an account of what that world is like in itself, independent of thought or language. The conclusion is also interesting and, perhaps, surprising, for the two accounts—descriptivism and ontological realism—are not obviously discordant. On the contrary, many prominent philosophers, including Frege, David Lewis and Frank Jackson, have assumed, without question, that the two can and do go together. Nonetheless, I think this is false.

The argument, in essence, is this: if in order to engage cognitively with some entity, one's mind must first assume a nature that fits uniquely that thing, then, if there are things whose existence in no

way depends on the mind, this allows for a cognitively inaccessible entity, one that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to; yet, I maintain, such a necessarily elusive entity is impossible.

Before developing this argument, I articulate the notions crucial to the present discussion. Thus, I consider two contrary views of the nature of reality in order to bring into focus ontological realism, then two contrary views of intentionality in order to bring into focus descriptivism. I then present in detail my argument that descriptivism and ontological realism cannot coherently be combined. As noted above, this argument turns on the impossibility of there being an entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to, so I present my reasons for thinking such an entity cannot exist. I believe that there are but two unified positions regarding what the world is like and how the mind relates to it. Once I have argued that a *realist descriptivism* is not one of these positions, I consider a likely line of response from those who might wish to defend it. I maintain that this line is unsuccessful.

An upshot of my discussion is that intentionality—and semantics—and metaphysics are linked in ways that have not been recognized. Therefore, insight into the nature of mind and of semantic issues, such as reference, might be obtained by acquiring insight into how the world is in itself, that is, by settling certain ontological issues. Indeed, I think such a strategy provides the most promising means of resolving long-standing controversy over whether descriptivism is the correct view of how the mind relates to the world.

## **I. Two Views of Reality**

*Ontological realism* is a view of the nature of reality according to which there are individual *objects* and many *kinds* that exist independently of thinking beings. Such entities have natures that depend in no way on conscious beings and so would exist as the very entities they are even had there never been any linguistic or mental activity or any minds. On this view, for some entities, when it exists and what it is like and, consequently, what changes it can undergo and when it ceases to be are

determined only by that entity itself. The picture that accompanies ontological realism is one on which, had there never been any thinking beings with their sundry needs and interests, interacting with the world, many mundane features of the world would be different—there would be no money, no universities, no baseball games, no garbage cans—and yet many would be the same—there would still be, for example, stars and trees and water.<sup>1</sup>

In opposition to this is *ontological antirealism*. On this view, what individual objects there are and what kinds of object exist depend on thinking beings. The ontology of the world depends on the classificatory activity of such beings, conducted via thought and language: it is how conscious beings assemble properties through interacting with their surroundings, cognitively and socially, that determines what objects and what kinds of objects there are, and it is conditions that conscious beings associate with these entities that determine what changes they can undergo and when they cease to be. The ontological antirealist need not be committed to *idealism*, the ontological view that there is *nothing* independent of mind, for he might hold that there is indeed a world independent of thinking beings and that this world even includes *stuff* from which the familiar world is, in some way, fashioned.<sup>2</sup> Yet he does deny that this world, in itself, contains any kinds or individual instances of these kinds; in itself, the world is *differentiated*, that is, it bears different properties, but is *amorphous*. The picture that accompanies ontological antirealism is one on which, had there never been any thinking beings, the world around one would be entirely different: none of the objects and kinds one ordinarily encounters would exist. An important feature of this view is that the metaphysical and epistemic notions of *individuation* come together: *what makes an object the very object it is is precisely those properties that enable one to identify and recognize an object as the object it is.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *ontological* view that I characterize here is distinct from certain *meta-ontological* views that go by the name of ‘ontological realism’. For a discussion of the latter see Jenkins 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Sidelle 1989: 54, in particular Note 11 and Jubien 1993: 1-7.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of individuation, see Lowe 2003. Lowe distinguishes the metaphysical and epistemic senses of ‘individuate’ in the first section.

## II. Two Views of Intentionality

A thinking being has the capacity to direct his (or her) attention to features of reality that are not in his immediate perceptual environment, to features that are far away or nearby but hidden; too small or faint to be observed; immaterial, abstract or merely imaginary. Through the use of language, he is able to direct the attention of others to such features. The capacity of a mind to be directed at such features of reality and thereby to stand in a cognitive relation to them is *intentionality*.

There are two opposing views of the basic nature of intentionality. On one, *descriptivism*, the mind can be cognitively related to some feature of reality only by first preparing itself in an appropriate way; it must assume, by some means, a nature that fits uniquely whatever feature of reality to which it is to be related. On this view, then, intentionality is essentially *spontaneous* in that the establishment of a cognitive connection to something in the world *proceeds from within the mind*. One way it might establish such a connection—a way to be regarded as paradigmatic for the purposes of the present discussion—is indirectly, by associating with an intermediate abstract entity that captures certain properties or encapsulates specific conditions.<sup>4</sup> Such an entity *describes*, in a non-linguistic sense, and it is the descriptive fit between this intermediate entity and something in the world that determines whether, and to what, a mind is cognitively related. One's mind is cognitively related to whatever in the world uniquely fits the properties captured or the conditions encapsulated by the intermediate entity. If nothing does, one's mind is not related to anything (beyond the intermediate entity); if more than one thing does, one's mind is related to none of them.

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<sup>4</sup> Another way a mind might assume a nature that appropriately fits a feature of reality is by *standing  $\Phi$ -ly*, where  $\Phi$  is a complex way of being that reflects certain properties or specific conditions. I do not believe that the crucial argument of this paper would be affected by considering this *adverbial* variation of descriptivism, for the argument turns on the *spontaneity* of this view of intentionality, not its *indirectness*. I prefer the variation above, articulated in terms of intermediate abstract entities, because it is more familiar and fits more easily with a discussion of the semantics of natural language.

This view of intentionality provides a corollary account of the semantics of natural language. A linguistic item is about something in the world in virtue of having associated with it some intermediate abstract entity that captures certain properties or encapsulates specific conditions and thereby describes that thing. Such intermediate entities determine, in the case of a simple linguistic item, to what that item refers and in the case of a more complex item, such as a sentence, which feature(s) of the world that item represents. Descriptive fit is also of crucial importance here: if the intermediate entity associated with, say, a name does not uniquely characterize something in the world, that name does not refer. On this account, reference is always mediated and, so, *indirect*.

Intentionality is certainly, to some extent, a voluntary capacity, in that one can choose what one thinks—one can choose to what one directs one's mind. One can, in many instances, choose certain features of the world to which to draw the attention of others and can conveniently do this by using language. These observations jibe with the spontaneity of descriptivism. In either the subjective or intersubjective case, when one chooses to think or speak about something in the world, one must bring before one's mind an intermediate entity that determines that thing (or those features of the world). On this view of intentionality, there is no other way of establishing a cognitive connection to a thing or to the world more generally. Thus, in order for me to think of my cat, I must bring before my mind some abstract entity that uniquely characterizes and, hence, fits my cat (in order for me to get another to think of my cat, I must, by some means, incite her to bring before her mind some entity that uniquely characterizes my cat). If I do not do this, I do not think of my cat; if I cannot do this, I cannot think of my cat. So thinking about a thing in the world requires one to think about that thing in a particular, individuating way—as having certain properties or meeting specific conditions that distinguish it from all other things—otherwise one cannot bring before one's mind an abstract entity that fits it in the requisite way.

The opposing view of intentionality is *anti-descriptivism*. On this view, it is possible for one's mind to be cognitively related to some feature of reality without first preparing itself, without first assuming a nature by which it fits, in some way, that to which it is to be related. This view permits a *lack of spontaneity* in intentionality: a cognitive connection might be established between a mind and the world *from without*—merely by some object or some feature of the world impressing itself upon the mind. Thus, one's mind can be directly and passively related to the world beyond it; an intermediate abstract entity is not a necessary component of every cognitive relation. A cognitive relation to something in the world might be effected by a causal connection or some other metaphysical tie. The key point here, however, is that on this view of intentionality, in fundamental cases, a cognitive relation need not be determined by the descriptive fit between an abstract entity before one's mind—or how the mind antecedently stands<sup>5</sup>—and something in the world. Note that the anti-descriptivist does not hold that the mind *cannot* relate to some feature of reality via the means of descriptive fit; though he does hold that such descriptive fit is not necessary and, therefore, allows for a direct and passive connection between one's mind and the world.

This view of intentionality also provides a corollary account of the semantics of natural language. This account is more permissive and, hence, less defined than the one that complements descriptivism. Given anti-descriptivism, some linguistic items can be about things in the world in virtue of having associated intermediate abstract entities that capture certain properties or encapsulate specific conditions and thereby describe the things those items are about—and yet some linguistic items can be about things *without being associated with any such intermediate abstract entities*. Thus, anti-descriptivism allows that the reference of a linguistic item might be *direct*, in that the item does, semantically, nothing more than stand for a thing in the world. This sort of direct connection between language and world is naturally explained in causal terms, but perhaps need not be.

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<sup>5</sup> See Footnote 4 above.

### III. The Incompatibility of Descriptivism and Ontological Realism

My purposes in this paper do not include criticizing either view of the nature of reality or either of the two views of intentionality. Rather, my primary purpose is to present recognizable and plausible articulations of these views and then show that interesting relations hold among them. Indeed, certain pairs must go together: descriptivism must be conjoined with ontological antirealism, and anti-descriptivism must be conjoined with ontological realism. Each pair yields of necessity a unified position regarding what the world is like and how one's mind relates to it.

#### 1. Ontological antirealism entails descriptivism

If ontological antirealism is true, then descriptivism is the correct account of intentionality. To see this, assume ontological antirealism. On this view, the world in itself is an amorphous array of instantiated properties. (What it is that instantiates these properties is hard to say, perhaps it is primordial *stuff* or *points* of some sort; it should be clear, though, that it is not familiar objects of any kind.) It is how thinking beings, guided by their needs and interests, cognitively assemble these properties that determines what individual objects there are. It is these properties, assembled in distinguishable ways, that determine the existence of a kind of object. Furthermore, it is these properties, associated by a thinking being, that metaphysically individuate both an object and a kind, i.e., that make them the entities they are. Therefore, without the spontaneity of mind—directing from within the assembly of disparate properties into discernible entities—there simply would be neither objects, nor kinds.

Consequently, the very existence and nature of an object, *o*, depend ultimately on the activity of a mind. Since without the spontaneity of a mind assembling certain properties there would be no

object—and, hence, nothing there to think or speak about—there is no other way to think or speak about *o* than by having in mind, in some way, just those properties that individuate it from among the amorphous array of instantiated properties. Similarly, the very existence and nature of a kind, *k*, depend on the activity of a mind. Since without the spontaneity of a mind assembling certain properties there would be no objects, no instances of *k*—and, thus, no *k*—there is no other way to think or speak about *k* than by having in mind, in some way, just those properties that instances of *k* embody. To think that one's mind could establish a cognitive connection to *o* (or to *k*) directly or passively, that is, that *o* might, from without, impress itself upon one's mind, is to assume that the object exists and has some nature prior to those properties being assembled by a mind. Of course, given ontological antirealism, it has no such existence or nature. This indicates that in order for one to be cognitively related to either *o* or *k*, one's mind must actively prime itself to fit uniquely either entity. It must prepare by assuming a nature that fits uniquely those very properties on which the existence of *o* or (the instances of) *k* depends in the first place. Descriptivism, therefore, follows from ontological antirealism.

Perhaps the point can be made even more clear—or could have been made more simply—by assuming that ontological antirealism is true and descriptivism false. If this view of intentionality is false, then one can think or speak about an entity, *e*, without one's mind assuming, by some means, a nature by which it uniquely fits *e*. So, for example, one's mind might be directly or passively cognitively related to an object, *o*. Given ontological antirealism, however, *o* depends for its existence on the spontaneity of mind, on certain properties being assembled by a mind. Without one's mind actively assembling properties in the requisite way, there simply is no object. Clearly, one could not be cognitively related, directly or passively, to something that cannot exist without first being actively assembled by one's mind. So if ontological antirealism is true, descriptivism must be, as well. The only way, therefore, to think of an entity that is metaphysically individuated by the spontaneity of a mind, that is, an entity

whose existence depends on certain properties being associated, is to have in mind, in some way, just those properties.

To illustrate this connection between ontological antirealism and descriptivism, suppose that *water* is a kind. Given ontological antirealism, *water* is a kind in virtue of having instances that embody a certain complex of properties assembled via the classificatory behavior of a thinking being. This complex might involve superficial observable (*being odorless, being clear*) or deep structural (*having a certain chemical composition*) or functional properties (*falling from clouds, filling lakes and streams*). A portion of water just is an entity that satisfies these properties. To be cognitively related to this kind, then, requires that one have exactly these properties in mind, assembled in the appropriate way. Unless this is so, there is literally no kind of object before one, merely a plurality of disparate properties; there is no instance or portion of water and, hence, no kind to cognize.

## **2. Descriptivism entails ontological antirealism**

Perhaps it is not surprising that ontological antirealism entails descriptivism: a view of reality, one might suppose, would naturally bring with it a view of how a mind can come to be directed at features of that reality. So if one assumes that what individual objects and what kinds there are depend on how thinking beings interact with the world—on which properties a mind assembles from the differentiated yet amorphous world in itself—then maybe it is obvious that a mind cannot get at, in a manner of speaking, an object or kind without recourse to just those properties on which the existence of that entity depends.

It is, however, surprising that a certain view of intentionality, of how a mind can establish a cognitive connection to the world, entails a view of what the world is like in itself. Nevertheless, as I argue in this section, this is so: descriptivism entails ontological antirealism.

## 2.1. Why there cannot be a necessarily elusive entity

As I mentioned above, central to my argument that descriptivism is incompatible with ontological realism is the claim that it is impossible for there to be an entity that could not be thought of or referred to, that is, there could not be an entity that, in principle, cannot be attended to. Hence, I maintain there could not be a *necessarily elusive entity*. In denying the possibility of such a thing, I am not claiming that it must be the case that any one mind, any particular conscious being, is able to think of every single thing that exists. Nor that for everything that exists some mind or other is now able to think or refer to each existent entity, for perhaps there are any number of entities that have yet to be discovered, and might never be. I am, furthermore, not claiming that for anything that exists, its nature is entirely accessible, in that for every feature it has, it is knowable that it has that feature. Complete understanding of the nature of every (or any) existing entity is perhaps unobtainable. What I deny is that there could be an entity that could not be considered via thought or language—a thing that one could not even begin to understand because one could not engage it with one's mind at all. So what I am claiming is that there could not be an entity that cannot be merely thought of, by some mind or other, removing any practical impediment that might prevent one from thinking of (or referring to) an entity, such as its being very faraway or exceedingly bizarre or obscured by something else.

I contend that the claim that there is a necessarily elusive entity is self-contradictory. If such an entity were possible, there would be either a unique such entity or more than one.

Suppose that there is a unique entity, *e*, that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to. If this is the case, *e* has a particular property that distinguishes it from every other existent thing: it is the sole entity that cannot in principle be thought of or referred to. Given this, though, *e can* be thought of or referred to; one need only bring before one's mind an abstract entity that captures this singular

property of  $e$  and thereby descriptively fits  $e$ . (The needed abstract entity might be the property or complex expressed by the definite description ‘the unique entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to’.) This is sufficient for a mind to establish a cognitive connection to  $e$  on either view of intentionality. But then  $e$  both cannot be thought of (or referred to) and can be thought of (or referred to). This is a contradiction and shows that the initial assumption, that there is a unique necessarily elusive entity, must be false.

Suppose, then, that there is more than one entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to. There is a particular property,  $P$ , that each one of these things bears, that distinguishes them from all others, namely, the property of being an entity that cannot in principle be thought of or referred to. Given the initial assumption, it is true that there is something that is  $P$ . It follows that  $e$  is  $P$ , where ‘ $e$ ’ is a name for one of those entities that bears  $P$ . But then an entity that is supposed to be such that it cannot be thought of or referred to *can* be thought of—as  $e$ —and *can* be referred to—by ‘ $e$ ’. Consequently,  $e$  both cannot be thought of (or referred to) and can be thought of (or referred to). This is a contradiction and shows that the initial assumption, that there is more than one necessarily elusive entity, must be false.

The reasoning here is, in informal terms, precisely that captured by *existential instantiation*, the rule of First-Order Logic by which one can validly infer  $Pa$  from *There is some  $x:Px$* , where ‘ $a$ ’ is a term that does not appear previously in one’s proof. Insofar as this rule is appropriately included in any sound system of First-Order Logic (and it is universally accepted) it seems to capture an acceptable inference and, thus, seems legitimate here. The assignment of a value to a quantified variable is taken to be a paradigm of reference; reference that does not require any associated uniquely characterizing description.<sup>6</sup> However, if, in this particular case, a description is wanted, one seems at hand: the referent of ‘ $e$ ’ is the unique entity, from among those that have  $P$ , that is being considered for the

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<sup>6</sup> See Salmon 1986: 4-5. The argument that Salmon presents here is derived from one advanced in Kaplan 1989.

purposes of discussion. Perhaps nothing more can be said about *e*, but nothing more needs to be said to generate a contradiction.

So both the claim that there is a unique entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to and the claim that there is more than one such entity lead to contradiction. I conclude, therefore, that such a necessarily elusive entity is impossible. Consequently, any position that entails that there could be one is untenable.

The incoherence of the notion of an entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to is corroborated, I believe, by the following consideration. It seems that any entity that could exist can be supposed to exist and, with this supposition, considered—that is, thought of—as the very entity it is supposed to be. Of course, in merely supposing an entity to exist, one is not cognitively related to that entity itself, for that entity need not exist—supposing existence does not entail existence. Yet even in supposing existence, it seems that one can think of an entity as the very entity it is supposed to be. Thus, in supposing that a unicorn or a mountain of gold exists, one can think of that unicorn or gold mountain as a unicorn, as a gold mountain. In supposing to exist an entity that cannot, in principle, be thought of, however, one cannot, with this supposition, consider the entity as the very entity it is supposed to be: one cannot think of the entity as a thing that cannot be thought of. This seems to show that the very supposition that there is a necessarily elusive entity is incoherent and, hence, that such an entity is impossible.

The discussion here yields a momentous conclusion: Everything that exists—universal or particular, substantial or non-substantial, concrete or abstract—is by some means accessible to the mind. To exist is to be part of reality and insofar as the mind can engage what is real, it can engage, through thought or language, anything that exists. So no part of reality is hidden from mind, even if mind is incapable of completely comprehending the nature of each thing.

## 2.2. The crucial argument

I contend that it is a consequence of a *realist descriptivism*, that is, a position that combines ontological realism and descriptivism, that there could be a necessarily elusive entity. Since such an entity is impossible, I conclude that a realist descriptivism is not a coherent position and, hence, is untenable. Another way of making the present point is that if descriptivism is true, then ontological antirealism must be so, as well. This point has not heretofore been recognized. Indeed, many eminent philosophers hold that descriptivism and realism are compatible. Although this is certainly not implausible, it is, I believe, false.

To see this, suppose that both descriptivism and ontological realism are true. If ontological realism is true, then there are individual objects (and kinds) that exist independently of thinking beings. It seems, then, that there could be an object that has never been thought of (or referred to). Indeed, it is certainly plausible that not every object that actually exists has been thought of, in a singular way, as the very object it is<sup>7</sup> (even if every *kind* of object has been thought of, which seems to me farfetched). So assume that there is some object, *o*, that has never been thought of or referred to.<sup>8</sup> Given ontological realism, the nature of *o* or what kind it instantiates depends in no way on conscious beings and their linguistic or mental activity; the nature of *o* is determined by *o* itself and so the properties that characterize it *per se* and, hence, distinguish it are entirely independent of any thinking being.

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<sup>7</sup> I add this qualification lest it be possible to think of or refer to, in some general way, every existent entity when one considers a claim like *everything that exists is self-identical*.

<sup>8</sup> Nota bene: the entities under consideration here are ones that are supposed to *have merely not been* thought of (or referred to); they are not supposed to be entities that, in principle, *cannot be* thought of or referred to. In this important respect they differ from the putative entities considered in the previous section. Note, as well, that given the further, forthcoming assumption about the nature of the entity under consideration—to wit, that it is a thing distinguishable only by some property outside the ken of any thinker (or speaker)—it does not seem possible to show, along the lines of the argument in the previous section, that this entity is being thought of (or referred to) or must be able to be. Neither the property *being the unique entity from among those with P* [some property] *being considered for the purposes of discussion*, nor, more specifically, the property *being the unique entity distinguishable only by some property outside the ken of any thinker (or speaker) being considered for the purposes of discussion* is outside the ken of any thinker (or speaker). Thus, neither property distinguishes the entity under consideration.

However, if *o* is possible, then, if descriptivism is true, it could be the case that *o* is such that it cannot, in principle, be thought of or referred to—*o* could be a necessarily elusive entity. Consider: if descriptivism is true, then the mind can be cognitively related to some entity only by first preparing itself in an appropriate way. It must assume a nature that fits uniquely whatever entity to which it is to be related, by, for example, associating with an intermediate abstract entity that captures certain properties (and thereby descriptively fits only that entity). On this view, intentionality is essentially spontaneous, an active capacity; in choosing what to think about, one must choose a particular way of thinking about that thing. Thus, the properties captured by the intermediate abstract entity are assembled by the mind of the thinker (or speaker) himself or, at least, association with this abstract entity is determined by his mind. But given ontological realism, there are many individual objects and kinds that exist independently of thinking beings. The properties that individuate an object, *o*, and distinguish it from all others, can, therefore, be entirely independent of any thinking being. When this is so, the property (or properties) that distinguish *o* might never have been experienced or might, in some other way, be beyond the ken of any thinker (or speaker). In which case, no one could assemble the properties or associate with an abstract entity that captures those properties in the way required by descriptivism to establish a cognitive connection to *o*.

In the simplest case, *o* might be discernible by a single property, *P*; *P* might be the one property that distinguishes *o* from all other entities. If *P* is beyond the ken of any thinker (or speaker), then no thinking being can bring before his or her mind *P* and so no mind could prepare itself—by assuming a nature that fits uniquely *o*—in the way required by descriptivism to cognitively relate to *o*. Consequently, *o* is a necessarily elusive entity.

One might deny that these considerations show that *o* is necessarily elusive, for one might suppose that a thinker could acquaint himself with the crucial property, *P*, by some means—by chance, by constructing it in some way, by hook or by crook—and then have it in his repertoire. Perhaps this is

feasible in some cases, but, it seems, it is also possible that *P* is an irreducible property (that is, one that cannot be constructed) that is exemplified only by *o*. In which case, a thinker could encounter *P* *only by encountering* *o*. Without *P*, however, one cannot relate cognitively to and, thus, encounter *o*. And so *o* would be in principle inaccessible to thought and to language: a necessarily elusive entity.

Therefore, if ontological realism is true, then given the constraints of descriptivism—imposed by the essential spontaneity of this view of intentionality—it follows that there could be an object that is such that, in principle, it cannot be thought of or referred to. On this combination of views, there could be something about which one could not think or speak at all, regardless of what one did! As I argue above, however, such a necessarily elusive entity is impossible, and so a realist descriptivism is incoherent.

### **2.3. This is, specifically, a problem for a realist descriptivism**

The possibility of a necessarily elusive entity is not a general problem for ontological realism, nor a general problem for descriptivism. It arises specifically for a position that combines this account of the nature of reality with this understanding of intentionality.

The problem arises on a realist descriptivism because of the need for one's mind to prepare itself in the requisite way to engage cognitively an entity the nature of which is wholly independent of any mind; in order to think of (or refer to) an object that could very well exist, one would need to bring before one's mind or associate with some inaccessible property—yet this one cannot do. This problem, however, can be avoided in two ways: One can deny that the mind must assume a nature that fits uniquely whatever feature of reality to which it is to be related, that is, one can accept anti-descriptivism. Or one can deny that the nature of an individual object can be wholly independent of the activity of any mind, that is, one can accept ontological antirealism.

Hence, the possibility of a necessarily elusive entity is not a consequence of a position that combines anti-descriptivism and ontological realism. Were there some entity individuated or distinguished only by some property initially outside the ken of a thinker (or speaker), a cognitive connection between him or her and that entity might nonetheless be established—by that entity simply impressing itself upon the mind. Once the connection is made, the mind might acquaint itself with the formerly unknown property and come to some understanding, more or less thorough, of the nature of that entity. Moreover, given anti-descriptivism, even without having before one’s mind certain properties or specific conditions that uniquely determine, via descriptive fit, that entity, one could still refer to it (simply, it seems, by using a demonstrative term or naming it outright).

Nor is the possibility of such an entity a consequence of a position that combines ontological antirealism and descriptivism. On such a position, there could not be an entity individuated or distinguished only by some property outside the ken of every thinker, for the very existence of an object depends on the classificatory activity of some thinking being(s). Whether an object exists at all depends on some mind assembling properties in the requisite way. If a mind is to include a property in such an assemblage, it must first have a cognitive connection to it—it must be within one’s ken. Even if there were a thinker who were unfamiliar with some property and so, initially, could not establish a cognitive connection to a particular entity, some other person, it seems, could articulate a uniquely characterizing description of the elusive entity and thereby put the former into cognitive contact with it.<sup>9</sup>

I have argued above that ontological antirealism entails descriptivism and descriptivism entails ontological antirealism. Ontological antirealism and ontological realism are contrary views, but given the assumption that there are individual objects, they are contradictory. Likewise, descriptivism and anti-descriptivism are contrary, but with the assumption that the mind can be directed at features of reality, that is, that intentionality is a genuine capacity, then the two views are contradictory. There are,

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<sup>9</sup> I have some concerns about whether this is indeed the case. However, since these concerns amount to a critique of descriptivism—and criticizing descriptivism is not my concern in this paper—I set them aside for now.

therefore, given these plausible additional assumptions, two tenable unified positions regarding the nature of reality and one's ability to engage it with one's mind: realist anti-descriptivism and antirealist descriptivism. The foregoing considerations, which show that the possibility of a necessarily elusive entity does not arise on either unified position, corroborate this conclusion. So if one accepts anti-descriptivism, one must reject ontological antirealism and, more surprisingly, if one accepts ontological realism, one must reject descriptivism.

#### **IV. A Likely Response to the Crucial Argument**

The crucial argument above, which concludes that descriptivism entails ontological antirealism, turns on the claim that a realist descriptivism allows for a necessarily elusive entity (which is impossible). This claim rests on considerations that purport to show that one could fail to assemble uniquely characterizing properties (or associate with an abstract entity that captures those properties) in the way required by descriptivism to establish a cognitive connection to an entity. That is, they purport to show that one could lack an identifying description—something that provides the requisite descriptive fit between mind and world—and therefore be incapable, practically and in principle, of establishing a cognitive connection to a particular entity. This argument bears a key similarity, namely, the apparent unavailability of an identifying description, to a familiar, cogent and influential objection to descriptivism. This is the so-called *Objection from Ignorance*.<sup>10</sup>

This objection to a descriptivist view of intentionality is that one might be ignorant of any identifying description of some entity, a kind or an object, and nevertheless be able to refer to it. This is supposed to show that it is not necessary to have in mind a uniquely characterizing description in order for one to think of or refer to an entity. One's mind need not be prepared, by assuming a certain nature, in order to engage cognitively with an entity in the way required by descriptivism and, hence, this view

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<sup>10</sup> The name comes from Devitt and Sterelny 1987. See, as well, Jackson 1998: 208-212.

of intentionality is incorrect. The *loci classici* of this objection are found in the work of Donnellan, Kripke and Putnam.<sup>11</sup> Consider Putnam’s famous example: it is certainly plausible that one who cannot distinguish between two varieties of deciduous tree, beeches and elms—and so has not in mind any uniquely characterizing description of either—thinks of beeches (and not elms) when reflecting on beeches, and refers to a beech (and not an elm) when using the term ‘beech’.<sup>12</sup>

Although my crucial argument presents no objection to descriptivism *per se*, the key similarity between it and this classic objection might lead the proponent of a realist descriptivism to try to respond to the former along the lines that descriptivists have responded to the latter. I do not think this strategy is successful; it cannot show that a necessarily elusive entity is not a consequence of a realist descriptivism.

### **1. Causal descriptivism**

What has become the standard descriptivist response to the Objection from Ignorance is that those who make the objection “overlook obvious candidates to be the needed individuating properties”<sup>13</sup> in the uniquely characterizing descriptions that enable one to think about or refer to an entity (in those cases in which it seems possible for one to establish a cognitive connection without such an identifying description). Properties derived from the causal relation or mechanism by which any cognitive contact between a subject and entity is established are supposed to provide one with the means of uniquely characterizing that entity and, thus, provide the requisite descriptive fit between mind and world.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Donnellan 1970; Kripke 1980; and Putnam 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Putnam 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson 1998: 209.

Hence, this objection leads the descriptivist to a refinement of his view, *causal descriptivism*, which is simply “descriptivism...in which the descriptions are largely couched in causal terms”.<sup>14</sup> On this view of intentionality, identifying descriptions are necessary to establish a cognitive connection to an entity, but they need not and likely will not be in terms of familiar or patent features of that entity. So, using the example above, one who cannot distinguish between beeches and elms can still provide a uniquely characterizing description of the sort: “Beech trees are the causal source in such-and-such way of tokens in my speech and thought of ‘beech tree’”.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Lewis provides further illustration of the view, considering the name of a place: “The descriptive sense associated with a name might for instance be *the place I have heard of under the name “Taromeo”, or maybe the causal source of this token: Taromeo*, and for an account of the relation being invoked here, just consult the writings of causal theorists of reference [i.e. anti-descriptivists]”.<sup>16</sup>

This stratagem is thought to be clinching for the causal descriptivist. Those who reject descriptivism must, it seems, maintain that in any case in which there is a cognitive connection between a thinker (or speaker) and some entity there is *some* causal connection between that thinker and entity. The causal descriptivist, therefore, concludes: “Causal descriptions are always available when a causal [i.e. anti-descriptivist] theory works, and since there are causal theories which can explain the evidence, there are also causal description theories which can explain the evidence.”<sup>17</sup> In this connection, Frederick Kroon cites Kripke who seems to concede the plausibility of causal descriptivism when he claims that “there is a sense in which a description theory must be trivially true if any theory of the reference of names, spelled out in terms independent of the notion of reference [for example, in terms

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<sup>14</sup> The name is introduced by David Lewis at Lewis 1984: 226 for the view that he regards as a “halfway house” between a classical descriptivist account of reference and the “new” anti-descriptivist (causal) theory of reference.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis 1984: 223.

<sup>16</sup> This more developed account of causal descriptivism is presented in Lewis 1997: Footnote 22. The view is further developed and defended in Kroon 1987. Frank Jackson has advocated the view in many places, for example, Jackson 1998. See, as well, Loar 1976 and McKinsey 1978, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Kroon 1987: 1.

of causation], is available.”<sup>18</sup> The genius of causal descriptivism is supposed to be that it exploits this connection by basing any needed identifying descriptions on it. And so, the causal descriptivist’s position is thought to be at least as secure as the anti-descriptivist’s.

## 2. Why causal descriptivism cannot preserve a realist descriptivism

Setting aside whether causal descriptivism provides an adequate response to the Objection from Ignorance,<sup>19</sup> it seems clear that adopting this version of descriptivism cannot preserve a realist descriptivism.

The problem for a realist descriptivism is that it allows for a necessarily elusive entity (something there cannot be). Such a possibility arises given that an entity, *o*, might be distinguishable only by a property, *P*, beyond the ken of any thinker (or speaker); in which case, no thinking being could prepare his or her mind—by getting it to assume a nature that fits uniquely *o*—in the way required by descriptivism to cognitively relate to *o*. To preclude this possibility, the causal descriptivist must assume that given any entity whatsoever there is some way of uniquely characterizing it, accessible to some thinker (or speaker), in terms of the causal properties connecting that thinker to that entity. But, clearly, there is such a characterization *only if there is a prior cognitive connection between that thinker and the entity in question*; there must already be a cognitive connection in order for that entity to be characterized in terms of the causal process that yields that connection. Again, the problem for a realist descriptivism is that on this position there could be an entity to which one is not—and could not be—cognitively connected, that is, an entity to which there could be no cognitive connection. Such an entity

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<sup>18</sup> Kripke 1980: Note 38.

<sup>19</sup> For concerns that it does not, see Salmon’s discussion of meta-linguistic descriptions in Salmon 1990: Note 9 and Scott Soames’ explicit concerns regarding causal descriptivism in Soames 2005: 287, 300-303, 339.

cannot be uniquely characterized in terms of the causal process that yields a cognitive connection to it because there is no cognitive connection to begin with.

Thus, to address this problem, one cannot simply consider those entities to which there is supposed to be a cognitive connection; rather, the causal descriptivist must provide an account of how a cognitive connection can be established *in the first place* to an entity distinguished by a property beyond the ken of any speaker. The resources of his view, however, are no different from descriptivism *per se* on this score. Insofar as both views are descriptivist, on both the mind can be cognitively related to some feature of reality only by first preparing itself in an appropriate way; the mind must assume, by some means, a nature that fits uniquely whatever feature of reality to which it is to be related. Yet it is precisely this view of intentionality that allows for the possibility of a necessarily elusive entity (given ontological realism). Such a possibility is no less a consequence of causal descriptivism, and so this view, too, has a consequence that is impossible. Therefore, causal descriptivism cannot preserve a realist descriptivism.

### **3. What this shows about causal descriptivism and intentionality more generally**

This consideration of causal descriptivism shows something about this view *per se*, but also something important about the more general intentional and ontological issues with which I am concerned here.

It is quite plausible that there is a way of uniquely characterizing in causal terms—or very similar ones—any entity that one can in fact think about or refer to. If one grants that this unique characterization is accessible, in an appropriate way<sup>20</sup>, to a thinker (or speaker), then, in those cases in which there is clearly a cognitive connection between a thinker and some entity, there seems to be little

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<sup>20</sup> For discussion of this point, see Jackson 1998: 211.

reason to prefer a causal descriptivist over an anti-descriptivist view of intentionality (and vice versa). The data, it might seem, is accounted for equally well by either view. Of course, it can be argued that one view has problems that the other lacks<sup>21</sup>, but these arguments are quite subtle and for this reason controversial. These subtleties and controversies provide partisans of either view opportunity to dig in his heels.

So considering cases in which there is clearly a cognitive connection between a thinker and some entity does not provide a vantage of the gulf between descriptivism and anti-descriptivism. The real difference emerges most clearly when one considers how a subject can come to think about or refer to something *originally*. Such cases have received little attention. Kripke does indeed consider cases in which initial, “baptismal”, reference occurs, but in each of these cases the thinker or speaker is in the position of providing a uniquely characterizing description.<sup>22</sup> He considers no case in which no identifying description is salient. If in such cases one’s mind must prepare itself, by assuming a nature that fits uniquely that to which it is to be related, then it seems the mind can only ever engage with things that are not alien, with those things that can be characterized by means of concepts or properties that have already been before one’s mind. If, on the other hand, one’s mind need *not* prepare, in order to establish a cognitive connection to a thing, one’s mind can relate to any entity that exists, any entity that could leave some impression upon the mind, regardless of how novel or strange that entity is. So here the clear difference between the two views of intentionality comes out.

Once brought into focus, the central point seems quite obvious: if intentionality need always be spontaneous, then one’s mind could encounter only those entities with which it had some prior familiarity or which depend crucially for their existence and nature on the activity of such a mind. If ontological realism is true, however, there could be entities with which no mind is familiar and which depend in no way on any mind for their existence and nature. Therefore, this view of the nature of

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance, Salmon and Soames, *op. cit.*, on the one hand and Kroon, *op. cit.*, on the other.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Kripke 1980: 96-7.

reality is incompatible with the essential spontaneity of descriptivism (assuming, as I have argued, that there could not be an entity that, in principle, could not be thought of or referred to).<sup>23</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The upshot of the preceding discussion is that one's view of the ontological nature of reality brings with it a particular view of how the mind of a subject can encounter and relate cognitively to that reality. Or, conversely, one's view of how a mind can encounter and relate cognitively to the world brings with it a particular view of what the world is like in itself. If this is so, there are two tenable unified positions regarding the nature of reality and one's ability to engage it with one's mind: *realist anti-descriptivism* and *antirealist descriptivism*. If one grants that there are indeed objects and that the mind can relate cognitively to them, then these are the only coherent positions.

This conclusion is surprising. It will, undoubtedly, be resisted, for there are eminent philosophers who think that there are objects and kinds that exist independently of thinking beings and yet maintain that the only way to think about or refer to these entities is by first preparing one's mind in some way to fit descriptively with them. David Lewis is explicit about his realism and his descriptivism.<sup>24</sup> Frege, too, certainly seems to be a realist and is the arch descriptivist.<sup>25</sup> Frank Jackson expresses realist

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<sup>23</sup> There is an interesting connection here to Tyler Burge's discussion of de re belief in Burge 1977 (especially §II). Burge's understanding of de re belief seems to be clearly *anti-descriptive*, allowing for a cognitive relation between a subject and the world without that subject's mind first assuming a nature by which it fits, in some way, that to which it is to be related. Burge argues that de re attitudes are necessary for any use or understanding of language and any propositional attitudes at all. So Burge considers cases in which initial reference occurs, specifically, when one is first acquiring a language (and cognitive capacities). The tacit ontological realism underlying Burge's discussion indicates a close connection between this view of the nature of reality and anti-descriptivism—a connection that supports the one made in the text.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Lewis 1984.

<sup>25</sup> The ontological view underlying Frege's discussion in Frege 1892 seems to be realist, especially at points where Frege writes about an "object itself". It is very interesting, perhaps telling, to note that Michael Dummett finds, by examining other features of Frege's philosophy of language, a commitment to "[t]he picture of reality as an amorphous lump, not yet articulated into discrete objects," that is, to ontological antirealism. (See Dummett 1981: Chapter 16, especially page 577.) This seems to corroborate my claim that Frege's descriptivism is ultimately incompatible with ontological realism.

intuitions and attitudes in the writings in which he clearly and forcefully defends descriptivism.<sup>26</sup> These are but three prominent examples of those who propound a realist descriptivism; there are certainly others.

### **1. The allure of a realist descriptivism**

So a realist descriptivism is a prevalent position. Despite this, I believe it is incoherent—not preposterous or obviously farfetched or absurd—but incoherent nonetheless, in that a consequence of the position is the existence of something that is impossible, a necessarily elusive entity. Perhaps, then, it is worth considering why so many philosophers have accepted a realist descriptivism.

It seems to me that what explains the allure of descriptivism *per se*, and the plausibility of a realist descriptivism, is the very idea that makes intuitively compelling the claim that there cannot be a necessarily elusive entity. This is the idea that anything real has a nature; thus, it has distinguishing properties and can be described and, consequently, thought of or referred to, by means of those properties, as the unique thing with that nature. Then, if one considers only cases of conspicuous or well-known objects—in which there is already a cognitive relation between a thinker (or speaker) and that thing—it seems one can always uniquely characterize an object, at least in terms of the connection that underlies one’s cognitive relation to it. (This explains the plausibility of causal descriptivism.) Assuming that this is how the mind in fact works—and must—elucidates the many cases in which intentionality is clearly spontaneous, those cases in which one decides to think about a certain thing, and then directs one’s mind to that thing by conceptualizing it in a specific way.

What is missing here is simply a consideration of whether and how one could establish *initially* a cognitive connection to a novel or strange entity. If one insists that one’s mind must first assume a

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Jackson 1998 and 2007. In correspondence, Jackson insists that he is not an ontological antirealist in my sense.

nature by which it descriptively fits such an entity, as the descriptivist does, then this leaves open the possibility of the mind being incapable of establishing such a connection, if ontological realism is true. Failure to consider this sort of case leaves hidden the crucial problem with a realist descriptivism. In light of this problem, if one is to maintain this position, one must show either that it is not the case that the possibility of a necessarily elusive entity follows from it or, if it does, that such an entity is not impossible.

## **2. There are real differences between anti-descriptivism and descriptivism**

A further upshot of this discussion, an obvious consequence of there being but two tenable unified positions regarding the nature of reality and one's ability to engage it with one's mind, is that there are real and significant differences between descriptivism and anti-descriptivism. Such differences might seem obvious on the face of it. However, many have contended, since the details of an anti-descriptivism view of reference began to be developed, that there are, in the end, no substantive differences between the two views.<sup>27</sup> This is a point that continues to be pressed.<sup>28</sup>

By focusing exclusively on cases in which cognitive contact has already been established between a thinker (or speaker) and some entity, the real differences between descriptivism and anti-descriptivism can be difficult to discern.<sup>29</sup> This might give the impression that the two views are ultimately interchangeable or, at most, that any real difference between them is excessively subtle or esoteric. As I have tried to show, however, this is not so. The two views of intentionality are quite

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Wagner 1986, Forbes 1987 and Smith 1988. The last two are reviews of Salmon 1986. For discussion of the present point see Salmon 1990: §V.

<sup>28</sup> See Balaguer 2011. And, for a rather deflationary account of the differences between suitably developed versions of the two views, see Caplan 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Thus, for example, the exchange between Soames and Jackson, in Soames 2005 and Jackson 1998, 2007 begin at a theoretical point—considering cases in which there is a cognitive connection between speaker and the world—after which the real difference between the two views of intentionality is most obvious.

obviously different and each is part of a fundamentally different position regarding what the world is like in itself.

It might be, though, that by only considering the semantics of natural language one cannot expose the obvious differences, especially if such consideration limits one, as it seems it would, to those cases where there is a prior connection between a linguistic item (or speaker) and the world. One needs to look elsewhere to see the differences. One needs to consider, for example, how one might come to refer to a radically strange object, one that does not depend for its existence on any mind and is distinguishable only by some property, unique to that object, and never before encountered. Such a case leads one to consider one's ontological views, in particular, whether there could be any such object.

Thus, I think there is a more fruitful way to approach basic questions about reference, and intentionality more generally, than by examining the semantics of familiar terms or names. Instead of trying to show definitively that descriptivism or anti-descriptivism is true by considering issues and examples tied to a natural language, one should begin with the underlying metaphysics: one should attempt to ascertain which ontological view of the nature of reality is true.

If everything I have argued in this paper is so, then there are two unified positions regarding the nature of reality and how the mind relates to it. If indeed there are objects and one can think about or refer to them, one of these two positions is correct. Nothing I have said in this paper, though, indicates which is the correct one. Yet the last point—that one should begin with the metaphysics, in particular, broad questions of ontology—shows how I think this issue should be approached and might be resolved.

In fact, I think ontological antirealism is demonstrably false and so, consequently, is descriptivism. But arguing for this grand claim must be taken up elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

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