Russell’s theory of definite descriptions has long been viewed as a classic example of how careful philosophical analysis can dissolve puzzles within a relatively clean ontology. Despite many attacks and the development of alternative views, Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions has survived as the accepted theory because it provides the most straightforward philosophical account of the following data: (1) that meaningful assertions can be made using definite descriptions that fail to denote; (2) that there is something I believe when I believe that the $F$ is $G$ even when there is no $F$; (3) that certain intensional and modal statements using definite descriptions are referentially opaque. Other philosophical accounts of definite descriptions attempt to handle these same phenomena, of course, but what strikes so many of us is the simplicity with which Russell handles the problems. The uncontroversial facts about the behavior of definite descriptions are handled without such ontological nightmares as nonexistent entities, with machinery no more complex than the quantifiers of predicate logic.

Given the nature of the problems Russell’s theory of definite descriptions was designed to solve, it is no wonder that he and others tried to extend the analysis to ordinary proper names. It certainly appears that there can be meaningful false statements expressed using proper names that fail to denote, that there can be belief in such statements, and that there is failure of substitutivity of co-referential names in belief contexts and (more controversially) modal contexts. What could be more natural for a Russellian than to construe ordinary proper names as disguised definite descriptions? The analysis of definite descriptions could resolve not one but two sets of puzzles.

As anyone who follows the literature knows, Russell’s attempt to apply his analysis of definite descriptions to ordinary proper names has not fared as well as the theory of definite descriptions itself. It is now in danger of being displaced as the received view by the so-called causal theory. The causal theorists succeeded in putting Russellians on the defensive with a number of persuasive arguments. You can’t keep a good Russelian down, however, and attempts were made to recover from these objections. One such attempt involves an effort to “steal”
whatever is plausible in a causal theorist's account of how names refer and simply incorporate the relevant aspect of the causal theory in the very definite descriptions that Russelians offers as capturing the sense of ordinary names. Needless to say, some causal theorists have cried foul, and it is the legitimacy of the Russelians' attempt to borrow from the causal theory that I wish to explore in the remainder of this paper. Let us begin, however, by providing at least a brief sketch of the causal theorists' attack on the Russelian theory of names and the alternative they provide.

Objections to Russell's Analysis of Names

I shall focus on just two sorts of criticisms directed by causal theorists at Russelian analyses of ordinary names. The first involves modal considerations and the charge that there are simply too many definite descriptions associated with many names to allow anything but an ad hoc selection of one as the meaning of the name. The second argument is that for some ordinary names that we successfully use in making assertions, we find ourselves unable to associate with those names any definite description at all. Let us examine each of these in turn.

The modal arguments against Russelian analyses of ordinary names gained prominence in Kripke's now classic "Naming and Necessity." Unfortunately, a great deal of needless confusion was generated by somewhat careless presentations of these arguments, presentations that often seemed insensitive to critical distinctions between de re and de dicto modality. Thus Kripke sometimes seemed to argue that one could not identify the meaning of "Aristotle" with some definite description, the F, for it is obvious that Aristotle did not have to be F. As stated, the argument seems to involve a non sequitur, however, for the most natural reading of the modal operator in this context is de re. It is true that Aristotle did not have to be F, but then the F did not have to be F either, and so this de re modal claim cannot constitute an argument against viewing "Aristotle" and the F as synonymous. Kripke is perfectly aware of the relevance of making this distinction between de re and de dicto modality (which he seems to view as analyzable in terms of scope distinctions), but I fear his original arguments still gain too much initial credibility by capitalizing on the equivocation.

Having made the distinction between de re and de dicto interpretations of modal claims, Kripke and his followers still seem to think that one can distinguish names from definite descriptions by pointing out that the former are rigid while the latter are nonrigid designators. A rigid designator is an expression that names the same thing in all possible worlds. But once the metaphor of possible worlds is dropped, a rigid designator is only an expression with which we can talk about the individual designated in all counterfactual situations, and it is obvious that definite descriptions can be used as rigid designators. We can talk about what would have happened to the F if it had not been F. If one wants to accommodate Kripkean intuitions about the rigid reference of names, one can do so by constru-
ing them as equivalent to definite descriptions but with the added convention that modal statements involving names should always be given de re interpretations.

Although the causal theorist may not agree, it seems to me that if one wants to use modal considerations to attack Russellian analyses of ordinary names in terms of definite descriptions, the clearest, and still very effective, way is to focus on analyticity. To claim that “Aristotle” has the same meaning as some definite description, or conjunction of definite descriptions, or disjunction of conjunctions of definite descriptions is, trivially, to claim that certain statements using the term “Aristotle” are analytic. If “Aristotle” means “the F,” then the statements “If Aristotle existed he was F” and “If one and only one thing was F that thing was Aristotle” are analytic. And causal theorists are certainly right in suggesting that it is extremely difficult for most of us to come up with some definite description “the F,” such that we can confidently claim the analyticity, and the a priori knowledge, of the statement that if Aristotle existed he was F and if something was the only F that thing was Aristotle. This problem seems particularly difficult when there are a great many definite descriptions we associate with a name and it seems so very arbitrary to select some one or a few as more central than the rest. To be sure, one can make some sophisticated moves to counter the problem of having to make ad hoc choices. The so-called cluster theory attempts to reconcile our intuition that there is no one definite description the satisfaction of which is necessary for the name “Aristotle” to denote, with the idea that it must be by associating “Aristotle” with descriptions that its having a denotation is possible. Thus one might hold that “most” of the definite descriptions we associate with a name must denote if that name is to successfully refer. More formally one can view the name as equivalent in meaning to a disjunction of conjunctions, with the number of conjunctions in each conjunction a matter too vague to admit of any precise specification. In rejecting this suggestion causal theorists might well turn to their second objection based on the observation that we use names with which we associate few or in some cases no definite descriptions.

It seems relatively uncontroversial, causal theorists argue, that I can successfully refer using a name with which I associate only one or two definite descriptions or even using a name when I cannot think of a single definite description denoting the individual about whom I am speaking. In the latter case the Russelians obviously have their problems, but even in the former we seem often unwilling to allow that successful reference using the name is parasitic upon the successful denotation of the definite descriptions. I vaguely recall that Dedefre was the Egyptian leader who built the second pyramid at Giza. That definite description and definite descriptions derived from it (e.g., the Egyptian leader who either had or did not have brown hair and who built the second pyramid at Giza) are about the only definite descriptions I can come up with that might denote Dedefre. On the other hand if I assert that Dedefre was an Egyptian (say, in answering the
$64,000 question) I will not view my statement as false just because it so happens that he built the third pyramid at Giza.

But surely this just shows that there must be some other definite description I associate with the name “Dedefre.” In the “Meaning of ‘Meaning ’” Putnam argues that language is so complex a tool that we will naturally need specialists to whom we defer concerning the reference of many terms. Perhaps Russelians can borrow this idea and argue that for most of us the definite descriptions we associate with “Dedefre” are parasitic for their denotation upon the successful reference of others. Perhaps, I mean by “Dedefre” the man who is called “Dedefre” by the experts in Egyptian history. But who are “the experts”? At best this must be viewed as an elliptical description. Suppose the experts on Egyptian history are split down the middle as to whether Dedefre built the second or the third pyramid and that the matter is so central to their concept of Dedefre that they define (for themselves) the name “Dedefre” in correspondingly different ways. Does this mean that I will fail to refer when I stand by my claim that, whatever else he was, Dedefre was an Egyptian?

Russelling a Causal Analysis

Causal theorists have a solution to all these problems, of course. Unless I am the first user of a name, the referent of my use of a name is parasitic upon the use of the person from whom I (causally) acquired the name. And unless that person initiated the use of the name, the referent of his use of the name is parasitic upon the use of the person from whom he acquired the name, and so on back to the original “baptism.” The referent of a name on a given occasion of its use is a function of its causal origin. The causal “theory” has justifiably been criticized as far too vague in its specification of the relevant causal chains determining reference. And efforts to make the view more precise must deal with counterexamples involving “deviant” causal chains. My concern, however, is not with the potential defects of the causal theory, but with an opportunity the causal theory offers those beleaguered Russelians trying desperately to come up with a definite description that they could view as synonymous with a name. To the extent to which Russelians find halfway plausible the causal theorists’ story, why not simply wait for causal theorists to work out the details of their view and then just take the theory itself as providing the definite description that captures the meaning of a name? Causal theorists insist that the referent of “Dedefre” is the individual whose being called by some name was the first link in a complex causal chain resulting in this use of the name. Fine. After causal theorists are satisfied that there are no counterexamples to their theory, we Russelians can offer causal theorists the italicized definite description as the one that captures the meaning of “Dedefre.” The nice thing about this maneuver is that we will not have to worry about counterexamples from our foes the causal theorists. When the causal theorists offer us a view of what determines the referent of a name on a given occasion of its use, they are
not describing some property of the referent it just happens to have. Causal theorists must surely admit that it is in virtue of certain conventions we follow that the name we use picks out the relevant first link in a causal chain leading to our present use of the name. Given the conventions of our language, a name will refer to the relevant constituent of its causal origin. But what is the difference between saying this and saying that as I use the term “Aristotle” it is analytic that Aristotle exists if and only if there is the appropriate first link in a causal chain resulting in this use of “Aristotle.” One traditional characterization of analytic truth, after all, is simply truth determined by conventions of language.

There are two objections I want to address to the Russellsians’ attempt to capitalize on the causal theorists’ insight. One is relatively easy to reply to, the other is more difficult.

First, causal theorists may well complain that it is surely a curious development that Russellsians waited the good part of a century to come to the conclusion that it was the causal theorists’ complex definite description that they “had in mind” as the meaning of ordinary names. It is even more absurd to suggest that the average person on the street had the causal theory “in mind” when he or she used, and understood others who used, ordinary proper names. The causal theory is an extremely sophisticated philosophical account of what determines the reference of ordinary names. The descriptions it makes available to Russellsians for their use in analyzing the “meaning” of names as used by ordinary people are far too complex to ascribe plausibly to people as the intentions in mind that their use of names expresses.

Is there anything to this objection? The answer must surely be that there is not. Any philosopher who views meaning analysis as a central part of philosophy must come to grips with what is sometimes called the paradox of analysis. Whatever the explanation is, it must be acknowledged that people can use an expression meaningfully but in some sense, the sense relevant to providing a philosophical analysis, not know how it is that they are using the expression.

To be sure, causal theorists may well argue that the correct solution to the paradox of analysis is to recognize that meaning analysis is misguided. Philosophers who have searched over the millennia for the correct analyses of knowledge, goodness, causation, and the like have made, causal theorists might argue, a fundamental error in assuming that one should look to the thoughts of people using these terms to find meaning. Meaning is simply reference, and reference is determined by causal factors that lie outside human consciousness. This claim, however, obviously presupposes a causal account of reference, and my concern here is only to point out that there are alternative ways of trying to resolve the paradox of analysis. 10

It is also useful to remember an observation made earlier. Causal theorists must surely in some sense recognize that language is governed by conventions. It is in part by virtue of certain rules we follow that the symbols we use have the
referents they do. Causal theorists, then, must be claiming that the conventions we follow now and always have followed in using names involve that sophisticated philosophical story developed within the last couple of decades. But, causal theorists protest, following conventions does not involve knowing what the conventions are. Unsophisticated people follow extremely complex syntactical rules of sentence structure without knowing how to formulate these rules, and we can follow conventions that determine reference without knowing how to formulate those conventions. Fair enough. But one cannot deny Russellians a similar response. Meaning, Russellians should counter, is a matter of convention. To use a term with a certain meaning is to use it following certain rules, but there is a world of difference between following rules and being able to describe the rules one is following. There is nothing to prevent Russellians from crediting causal theorists with providing an insight into the nature of the meaning rules we have been implicitly following governing the use of at least some ordinary proper names. That such an insight has taken so long in coming is no more surprising than that linguists are still making informative discoveries about the underlying rules we follow in constructing sentences.

The second objection to “Russelling” the causal theory is more ingenious. Classic causal theorists take the referent of a name on a given occasion of its use to be the individual whose being called by some name was the first link in the relevant causal chain leading to that use of the name. Russellians want to turn the tables on causal theorists by taking that description, “the individual whose being called by some name . . .,” and using it in their analysis of the meaning of a name on a given occasion of its use. But something odd happens, causal theorists can charge, when Russellians attempt to make good this theft. I say “Dedefre was an Egyptian.” Russellians bent on “Russelling” the causal theory suggest we view “Dedefre” as equivalent in meaning to the very description causal theorists use in identifying the referent of “Dedefre.” To be successful, causal theorists will argue, Russellians must be able to substitute for “Dedefre” that definite description without changing the meaning of my statement “Dedefre was an Egyptian.” But what would be the results of that substitution? We would get the following statement: “The man whose being called by some name was the first link in a causal chain resulting in this use of ‘Dedefre’ was an Egyptian.” “What use of ‘Dedefre’?!” causal theorists ask gleefully. The definite description mentions the word “Dedefre” but there is no longer any use of the word “Dedefre.” In removing “Dedefre” to substitute for it the relevant definite description, we removed an essential element in the causal chain determining the reference of that expression, according to causal theorists. Russellians who made the substitution, as their theory should allow them, are left with a definite description that either fails to denote or is meaningless. This criticism, causal theorists might argue, illustrates a fundamental difference between the causal theory and Russell’s view of names. Even if it is conventions that determine, in part, what language refers to, it is not some-
thing in the speaker’s mind that determines what the speaker is referring to when he uses language.

How might Russellsians recover from this difficulty in developing an analysis of proper names immune from attack by causal theorists? Note that the problem only arises for the attempt to “Russellize” that version of the causal theory that takes the referent of a name on a given occasion of its use to be the relevant constituent of the first link in a causal chain leading to that use of the name. Another causal theory might maintain that the referent of a name on a given occasion of its use is to be determined by the cause of the “linguistic community’s” use of that name. Such a theory would seem to provide a relatively unproblematic definite description for use in a Russellsian analysis of names as covert descriptions. “Dedefre” means “the man whose being called by some name is the first link in a causal chain leading to the present linguistic community’s use of the name ‘Dedefre.’” We could substitute this definite description for “Dedefre” in the sentence “Dedefre was an Egyptian” without losing its denotation. This view, however, encounters the difficulties mentioned before involving the attempt to construct a definite description whose denotation is parasitic upon the denotation of “the experts’” use of the name “Dedefre.” The community using “Dedefre” might, unknown to everyone, be split into two groups whose use of the name can be causally traced to quite different first links. There may have been two Egyptian pharaohs each named “Dedefre” and each being the element in causal chains leading to the use of that name by different historians. But it is far from clear that such a circumstance would affect my ability successfully to use the name “Dedefre” to refer to some Egyptian. This just illustrates, causal theorists will argue, that the most plausible causal theory will hold that the referent of a name on a given occasion of its use is a function of the causal origin of that use of the token on that occasion. And this causal theory, for the reasons given earlier, will not provide Russellsians with a synonymous definite description that they could have substituted for the name “Dedefre” in the sentence “Dedefre was an Egyptian.”

The battle, of course, is not yet over. There are any number of machinations available to Russellsians attempting to co-opt this causal theory. It is true that as soon as one eliminates the word “Dedefre” in my utterance “Dedefre was an Egyptian” one will be unable to substitute for it some successful description of its causal origin. But perhaps we can go counterfactual and substitute for the name a description of what would have caused me to use the name “Dedefre” had I used the name instead of the definite description. Thus for “Dedefre” in “Dedefre was an Egyptian” I can make the following substitution: the man whose being called by some name would have caused my use of “Dedefre” had I used that name instead of this description, was an Egyptian.

Now I am not sure this maneuver has any formal defects although it does introduce into the analysis all of the problems associated with counterfactuals, and, on some philosophers’ views, it may violate prohibitions against self-reference
designed to resolve the liar's paradox and Russell's paradox involving the class of all classes. I shall not pursue the issue here, however, for I think that there is a more elegant and interesting move that can handle the causal theorists' objection, a move entirely within the spirit of Russell's attempt to construe ordinary names as descriptions.

As so many others do, I have been discussing the debate between the causal theorists and Russell as to how names refer as though the issue is to be decided on the basis of whose view can best withstand counterexamples. As I noted in my introduction, however, there are a number of philosophical puzzles that a correct account of proper names must resolve. Causal theorists have a terrible time trying to explain how we can apparently understand and believe that which is expressed by sentences containing names that may not even refer (e.g., "Robin Hood"), and this is a major difficulty with the view. But even more fundamentally, Russelians, in proposing their analysis of proper names, are motivated by more basic views about language, mind, intentionality, and reference. Russelians are convinced (mistakenly, causal theorists may argue) that the ability of language to say something about the world is parasitic on the intentionality of thought. Words can represent individuals and states of affairs only because we can assign to them the intentional content of our thoughts, where the intentionality of thought is not to be assimilated to the intentionality of language. We who feel that names must be descriptions do so because we are convinced that names must have meaning, and names must have meaning because their representational character is parasitic upon the meaning or representational character of thought. "Russelians," as I have been using the term, do not all agree on the ontologically prior question of how thought represents, but we are agreed that, in their absence, we can only think about particulars "clothed" in properties. If I can think of Aristotle, it is only in terms of an individual exemplifying certain properties, and the ability of the term "Aristotle" to represent is parasitic upon the intentional content of my thought of the individual exemplifying those properties.

The preceding is not intended as an argument for Russell's conception of ordinary proper names. It is intended only as a very rough statement of some of the presuppositions of the view. These presuppositions, however, suggest a way to develop that analysis of ordinary names that will be immune from the causal theorists' objections. Let me explain.

We could not substitute for "Dedefre," "the man whose being called by some name eventually led to this use of 'Dedefre,'" for in making the substitution we would have lost the referent of "this use of 'Dedefre.'" Even as we use the term "Dedefre," however, we can be thinking of the individual whose being called by some name resulted in this use of the name, and we can hold that "Dedefre" has the intentional content of that thought. It is an interesting feature of language, one might argue, that one could not have used the definite description instead of "Dedefre" successfully to express that thought even though the thought expressed by
the definite description is the thought expressed by “Dedefre.” But it is no more than an interesting feature of language. One can still quite consistently hold that “Dedefre” has the meaning of the complex definite description. What we have here is simply an interesting counterexample to the claim that if two expressions have the same meaning, i.e., express the same thought, one could always have used the one instead of the other to express that thought. The ability of the one piece of language to express the relevant thought might itself depend on the use of the other piece of language.

This view about the meaning of proper names might strike some philosophers as particularly attractive by explaining away the intuition many have that there is something that makes names different from definite descriptions. One can always substitute one definite description for another synonymous definite description and preserve the meaning of the statement in which they occur. But if names express a thought in the way sketched earlier one cannot substitute for a name a definite description and preserve the meaning of the statement in which the name occurs even though the name will have the meaning of a definite description. We can accommodate the claim that there is something special about names, but do so within the spirit of a Russellian view about the meaning of names.

The distinctions made here have interest over and above their potential for undercutting causal theorists. One might hold, for example, that an expression such as “now” means “the time at which I am uttering this expression ‘now.’” Note, however, that such a view would encounter the same alleged difficulties discussed previously in the Russellian attempt to steal the causal theorists’ thunder. One could not have replaced “now” with “the time at which I am uttering the expression ‘now’” in the sentence “The ballgame is starting now” without losing the denotation of the definite description. But again, I see no reason preventing one from holding that the thought expressed by “The ballgame is starting now” is simply the thought that the ballgame is starting at the same time I am uttering the word “now.”

Before I conclude this essay let me emphasize and clarify a number of points. First, as I indicated earlier, I do not think that one should try to assess the plausibility of a theory of reference without placing that theory in the context of a more general account of intentionality and the puzzles an account of intentionality should solve. Second, I would not argue that one should construe all proper names as expressing thoughts about their causal origin. I am not at all convinced that one should not construe many ordinary names as equivalent in meaning to more straightforward descriptions. Why then have I spent so much effort trying to figure out how best the Russellites could incorporate the causal theorists’ account of what determines reference into their own descriptivist theory of names? For two reasons. I suspect that at least some names should be construed as disguised descriptions of their causal origin, and it is useful to know how we should construe such descriptions. But more importantly, in the dialectic between the
causal theorists and the Russellsians, it is surely useful to make the causal theorists realize that we Russellsians can always incorporate their intuitions in developing a descriptivist account of names, an account that will be impregnable to the causal theorists' criticisms. Since even most causal theorists acknowledge the power of Russell's view as a means of solving the philosophical puzzles mentioned at the start of this essay, they should surely find attractive a version of that view that can not only solve those puzzles but that can never be any less plausible than their own account of reference.

Notes

2. One must make some crucial distinctions in specifying which intensional and modal statements are referentially opaque. It is de dicto reports of beliefs and de dicto modal claims that are referentially opaque where the definite descriptions, in the case of beliefs, occur in characterizing the object of the belief.
3. It is clear that Russell did try to construe ordinary proper names as disguised definite descriptions—see his discussion of the issue in chapter 5 of The Problems of Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956). The question is complicated, however, by the fact that in a number of places, especially when he is explaining his views about definite descriptions, Russell seems to contrast the way in which definite descriptions denote with the way in which names refer. Presumably, the explanation is simply that Russell sometimes found it convenient to pretend that ordinary names were logically proper names for objects with which we can be directly acquainted. It is uncontroversial, however, that Russell believed that we cannot be directly acquainted with most of the things for which we have names.

In this essay I shall focus exclusively upon proper names. It is also tempting to extend the analysis to common nouns designating kinds of things. Thus one might analyze the meaning of a term such as "water" using the definite description "the kind of thing that presents a certain appearance, has a certain taste (or lack of taste), etc." Most of the comments I make about Russellsian treatments of proper names would apply equally well to Russellsian treatments of common nouns.
5. Ibid, p. 279.
8. The original introduction of the name could be construed as an act of mere "labeling" (as in Russell's conception of a logically proper name), as the act of assigning the name the meaning of a definite description (e.g., the person in front of me now), or as the act of "fixing the reference" of a name using a definite description. For a critique of the intelligibility of reference fixing see my Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 121-29.
9. This suggestion was made by B. A. Brody in "Kripke on Proper Names," in P. French, T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), Minnesota Studies in Philosophy, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 64-69 and has been discussed more recently by John Searle in Intentionality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapter 9. Searle certainly rejects the suggestion that it is always in terms of a description involving the causal origin of a name that we understand the name, but he admits that in certain limiting cases it may well be that this is the only sort of description we may have available. Searle stops short of claiming that names have the same meaning as definite descriptions although he does say that it is only by having thoughts of the sort expressed by
definite descriptions that one can have the intentional state necessary to assign to a name in order for that name to have a referent.


11. This objection was first suggested to me by David Kaplan in informal discussion following a paper he delivered at the University of Iowa.

12. I have presented my own view on this issue in *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception*, pp. 55-57.

13. It is not clear to me what Russell's view was about the possibility of being directly acquainted with particulars. He sometimes seemed to allow that we might use logically proper names to pick out particulars when we were directly acquainted with those particulars, and this suggests that he thought we could have access to particulars that are not parasitic upon our awareness of properties. (Otherwise, why would he not construe our thought of a particular, even in this case, as thought of the thing that exemplifies such and such properties?) Whatever Russell's view was, however, I am inclined to think that one can never be acquainted with, nor can one think of, a particular except in terms of the thing that bears certain properties.