A major locus in the debate between descriptivist and causal theorists of reference has been the theory of reference for proper names. Descriptivism with regard to proper names is the thesis that such expressions refer in virtue of being associated with a definite description or set of definite descriptions that are uniquely true of the individual to which the name refers. Thus the name ‘Benjamin Franklin’ refers to Benjamin Franklin because it expresses or has a descriptive content such as “the inventor of bifocals” or “the author of Poor Richard’s Almanac” that is uniquely true of the individual Benjamin Franklin. The descriptivist theory of proper names is supported both by its ability to account for puzzles that arise regarding the role played by proper names in determining the information content and truth-conditions of certain kinds of sentences (particularly sentences about existence and identity), and by the fact that it does justice to the intuitive notion that to use a name to refer to something, we must know something about the thing we are referring to. Causal theories of proper names usually embrace some version of the thesis that it is in virtue of a baptism or naming ceremony that fixes the reference of a proper name by ostension, followed by the dissemination of that name through a community of language users via a causal chain of communication, that the use of that name by any given speaker succeeds in referring to the individual named. On this view, an utterance of the name ‘Kurt Gödel’ refers to Kurt Gödel in virtue of being a terminus of a causal chain of communication that reaches back to the original ostensive naming (or baptism) of Kurt Gödel. The causal theory of proper names is supported a) by criticisms that its adherents have lodged against the descriptive theory and b) by discrepancies in basic modal intuitions regarding the referential function of proper names and definite descriptions respectively.
One major contemporary defender of the description theory of proper names is John Searle, who developed his theory first in the context of a theory of speech-acts and then in a more general theory of the intentionality of the mind. Here I will explore the viability of the description theory of proper names as formulated by John Searle. I will proceed by briefly summarizing the descriptive theory put forward by Searle in *Speech-Acts* [13], and then by considering in detail the criticisms offered by Kripke in *Naming and Necessity* and Searle’s response in *Intentionality* [14]. This will make possible an evaluation of Searle’s account of the description theory in terms of a) its ability to solve traditional puzzles of reference, b) its responsiveness to the criticisms of Kripke and c) the adequacy of Searle’s theory in accounting for the basic phenomena involved in the use of proper names.

I. Searle’s Speech-Act Account of the Reference of Proper Names:

In Chapter 7 of *Speech Acts* Searle recounts the basic history and issues associated with what has come to be called the ‘description theory’ of proper names. Acknowledging certain problems with the theory as it was initially developed in the work of Frege and Russell, Searle presents a modified account of proper name reference in the context of his more general account of reference as speech act [13: Ch. 4], which he argues is able a) to handle the problems that arose for the initial accounts of Frege and Russell, and b) retains the explanatory power of those accounts in being able to resolve certain puzzles about reference.

The description theory of names is usually characterized as a response to certain problems that arose for a doctrine of the reference of names most popularly held by J. S. Mill [7; 8; 11: pp. 9-11]. On Mill’s account, to the extent that it has meaning at all, the meaning of a proper name is entirely exhausted by its referent. Mill construes names as essentially unmeaning marks, labels that stand for on object directly; they have denotations (referents), but not
connotations (meanings in the sense that definite descriptions, general terms or sentences have meanings). Names are like labels that have been, as it were, physically tacked to the things that they are names of. For example, the name ‘Dartmouth’ refers to the town Dartmouth, not because the user of the name associates the Dart River with this particular town while using it, but simply because the town has been labeled ‘Dartmouth’. After all, Mill suggests, the town would not cease being called ‘Dartmouth’ even if the Dart River were to dry up or have its flow diverted.

Mill’s account runs into problems along three general lines, all of which are noted by both Searle and Kripke [13: pp. 164-5; 6: pp. 28-9]. First, Mill’s account of the actual reference relationship seems incomplete. While proper names might be used simply to stand for individuals in cases where the individuals are actually present and it is possible to connect the name to them by ostension, proper names are also used to refer i) to individuals whom one has experienced but are now absent and ii) to individuals whom one has never experienced. If ‘John Smith’ is just a label for a certain individual, how does it succeed in referring to him when he is not present? Similarly, how does ‘Aristotle’ pick out Aristotle or ‘Mary Sue’ pick out the first child of one’s neighbors (expected eight months hence), if there is no descriptive content or meaning whatsoever to these names?

The other two problems confronted by Mill’s theory of names have to do with certain puzzles about the contribution proper names make to the information content and truth-conditions of propositions in which they appear. The first of these puzzles is the problem of informative identity statements. If Mill’s account is correct and proper names have no meaning other than the object they denote, then sentences such as ‘Cicero is Tully’, ‘Hesperus is Phosphorous’ and ‘JLo is Jennifer Lopez’ should all be understandable as simple statements of
identity. But they are not. At least for certain people, learning that any one of these statements
was true would involve learning new information of some kind about an individual, not just the
fact that that individual was identical with itself. The second puzzle that arises for Mill’s theory
is the problem of existence statements that have proper names as their subjects. If proper names
just stand for the object they are names of, then ‘Bill Clinton exists’ makes reference to Bill
Clinton and then redundantly asserts that he exists, while ‘Hamlet never existed’ seems
paradoxically to refer to Hamlet and then assert of him that he never existed.

The description theory of proper names, arguably first developed by Frege in his
treatment of the problem of informative identity statements in “On Sense and Nominatum” [4], is
able to handle all of these problems. According to this version of the description theory, proper
names express a sense that is a uniquely identifying definite description for the object they are
names of, and it is in virtue of this description being true of the object that the name refers to it.
The descriptive theory provides a fuller account of the reference relationship. Whether an object
is i) present in experience, ii) has been experienced but is currently not present or iii) has never
been experienced, the name of that object can be used to refer to it just in case the descriptive
sense of the name is uniquely true of that object. The descriptive theory also provides a plausible
resolution for the puzzles that Mill’s theory confronted. Informative identity statements, such as
‘Hesperus is Phosphorous’ are or can be informative because ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorous’ each
express different descriptive senses, i.e. “The last star visible in the morning” and “The first star
visible in the evening” respectively. Similarly, existence sentences containing proper names as
subjects are neither redundant nor paradoxical. To say that ‘Aristotle never existed’ is simply to
say that there was not some object satisfying the descriptive sense expressed by ‘Aristotle’, for
example, “The greatest student of Plato”.

“Searle and Kripke on Description Theory” Draft; Andrew D. Spear, adspear@buffalo.edu
The description theory, as formulated by Frege and Russell, runs into two problems however, both of which are addressed by Searle, and it is these problems in conjunction with his commitment to providing a speech-act account of reference that motivate Searle’s own formulation of a “cluster theory” of description for proper names.

The first problem with the Fregean description theory is that it seems to be committed to holding that the descriptive content expressed by a name is definitionally equivalent to the name itself. Thus, if ‘Aristotle’ means “The greatest student of Plato”, then it seems true to say that ‘Aristotle exists if and only if the greatest student of Plato exists’. This formulation suggests that being the greatest student of Plato is a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of Aristotle, which seems false, since he could have existed without becoming a philosopher at all, or could have become a philosopher without having been a student of Plato. While there may be some exceptions, it will generally be the case that any given identifying description that might be expressed by a name will be contingently and not necessarily true of the individual named, and so this is a problem for the Fregean account. Another way of formulating the same problem is to say that since the description expressed by a name just is the meaning of the name, the two are synonymous and so any proposition in which the name is the subject and the description the predicate will be analytic in the same way that “All bachelors are unmarried males” is traditionally thought to be, and so necessarily true.

The second problem, which was explicitly addressed by Frege himself [4: p. 51, ftnt. 3] is that different people express or have in mind different descriptions for the same name. For example, John could understand by ‘Hank Jones’ “the only milkman in Brooklyn”, while Bill could understand by ‘Hank Jones’ “the man in apartment 45B in my building”. Though John and Bill both refer to the same individual, they mean something different when they do so and if
they were to talk about Hank in his absence, each may well not know to whom the other was referring. A theory of proper name reference should be able to account for this phenomenon without having to say that either Bill or John is wrong about Hank (or fails to refer), and so the Fregean account is confronted with a second challenge.

It is in response to these two problems that Searle introduces his own descriptive theory of proper names. Searle intends for his account to retain the advantages of the descriptive theory while responding to the two problems just discussed and couching the entire theory in the context of his more general account of reference as a speech-act.

Since the descriptive theory of proper name reference maintains that proper names have meanings (senses) of some sort, as opposed to Mill who maintained that names have denotation but not connotation, and since the Fregean descriptive theory has the consequence that a sentence predicating the description of the name is analytic and so necessarily true, Searle begins by posing the question: “Are any propositions where the subject is a proper name and the predicate a descriptive expression analytic?” [13: p. 166]. Searle breaks this question down into two separate questions:

a) Weaker version: are any such statements analytic?

b) Stronger version: are any statements where the subject is a proper name and the predicate an identifying expression analytic?

Searle contends that the answer to the weaker formulation is definitively “yes”. The most basic condition for the use of any proper name is that it can be used to refer to the same object at different times or after that object has undergone accidental changes. Thus language users refer to Mt. Everest using ‘Mt. Everest’ on many different occasions, and I will still use the name ‘Fred Stilts’ to refer to a friend, even if he has lost fifty pounds and gotten a haircut. In order for
this to be possible, Searle argues, there must be associated with the name by anyone who uses it some general description pertaining to the kind of thing the name names. Thus ‘Everest is a Mountain’ and ‘Fred is a human person’ are both candidate analytic sentences of type ‘a)’ above due to a basic and necessary feature of the institution of proper names.

Searle’s answer to the stronger version of the question, ‘b)’ above, comes in terms of the general account of reference as speech-act that he outlines in Chapter 4 of *Speech Acts*. In his account of reference as a speech-act, Searle distinguishes between “Successful reference”, an act of referring in which the object of reference may or may not be unambiguously identified to the hearer, and “Fully Consummated Reference”, an act of referring in which the object of reference is successfully identified by the speaker to the hearer, and proposes two necessary conditions for fully consummated reference:

1) There must exist 1a) one and 1b) only one object to which the speaker’s utterance of the expression applies.

2) The hearer must be given sufficient means to identify the object from the speaker’s utterance of the expression.

Rejecting Russell’s view that expressions such as definite descriptions implicitly contain assertions about the existence and uniqueness of their objects, Searle introduces his own interpretation of the definite article and thus of conditions 1a) and 1b) above:

“it [‘the’] is a conventional device indicating the speaker’s intention to refer to a single object, not an indication that the descriptor which follows is true of only one object”. (13: p. 84)

By introducing the speaker’s intention to achieve definite reference, Searle connects condition 1 (that there be one and only one object the speaker’s utterance applies to) for the performance of a fully consummated act of referring to condition 2, that the listener be able to
identify the speaker’s object of reference on the basis of the speaker’s utterance of a speech-act. It is important to note that condition 2 can be satisfied either immediately in the utterance made by the speaker, or if the speaker is able to provide on demand sufficient information to uniquely identify the object of reference to the hearer, such as, a) demonstratives such as ‘this’ or ‘that’ along with pointing or context, b) descriptions in purely general terms such as “the first man to run a mile in under three minutes and 53 seconds”, or c) a mixed use of both demonstrative and descriptive expressions [13: p. 86].

The two conditions for fully consummated reference are formulated a) so as to do justice to the idea of singular reference and b) to do justice to what Searle calls “The axiom of identification”, that “If a speaker refers to an object, then he identifies or is able on demand to identify that object for the hearer apart from all other objects” [13: p. 79]. The basic intuition behind this axiom is that for anyone to meaningfully be said to refer to an individual, it seems that he/she must be able to identify that individual; otherwise there is a very literal sense in which it would seem that the speaker just did not know what he/she was talking about. Since there must be uniquely identifying information associated with a proper name for any individual to use that name to refer, and since commitment to such associated descriptive content seems to require commitment to the analyticity of sentences in which it is predicated of the proper name that it is associated with, Searle concludes that the answer to the stronger version, ‘b)’ above, must also be yes. As Searle writes, “Anyone who uses a proper name must be prepared to substitute an identifying description (remembering that identifying descriptions include ostensive presentations) of
the object referred to by a proper name. If he were unable to do this, we should say that he did not know whom or what he was talking about, and it is this consideration which inclines us...to say that proper names must have a sense, and that the identifying description constitutes that sense” [13: p. 168].

So for Searle, proper names have some kind of meaning or sense, and this meaning is descriptive and further, uniquely descriptive in nature.

In order to do justice to this fact while avoiding the problems of definitional equivalence and of different speakers’ associating different meanings with the same name, Searle proposes a “cluster theory” of meaning for proper names. Searle’s basic idea is this: ask all of the users of a name such as ‘Aristotle’ to report what they consider to be essential or established facts about him, and recognize their answers as a set of identifying descriptions. Searle continues, “what then are the conditions under which I could say of an object, “This is Aristotle”? I wish to claim that the conditions, the descriptive power of the statement, is that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements (or descriptions) are true of the object” [13: p. 169].

Thus, according to Searle, ‘Aristotle’ refers to Aristotle in virtue of the fact, not that there is some single identifying description that is the sense of the name ‘Aristotle’, but rather because the thing, Aristotle, satisfies most or a weighted most (perhaps those that are essential) or at any rate a sufficient number of the identifying descriptions in the cluster to count as the one and only unique referent of the name.

Searle’s account is clearly able to explain the fact that different speakers associate different identifying descriptions with the same name, but what about the objection based on definitional equivalence and analyticity? Searle’s response to this problem in Speech Acts is basically to argue that, while for any given description associated with ‘Aristotle’, that
description might be (or at least might have been) false of Aristotle, “does it make sense to suppose that everything anyone has ever believed to be true of Aristotle was in fact not true of the real Aristotle?” Regarding the cluster of descriptions introduced above, Searle then goes on to say that,

“It is a necessary condition for an object to be Aristotle that it satisfy at least some of these descriptions. This is another way of saying that the disjunction of these descriptions is analytically tied to the name “Aristotle”—which is a quasi-affirmative answer to the question “Do proper names have senses?” in its stronger formulation.” [13: p. 169]

Searle considers this account to be a much “looser” account of proper name reference than the traditional Fregean accounts. This is true insofar as the cluster conception of the way in which names refer leaves open for any given name the question of how many and which identifying descriptions need to be satisfied at any given time in order for a referring speech-act to be successful. Searle maintains that this feature of his account does justice to the difference between referring and predicating uses of language, and this is probably accurate. However, Searle’s talk of “looseness” and of “quasi-affirmative answers” notwithstanding, what he is committed to in Chapter 7 of *Speech Acts* is the thesis that the inclusive logical disjunction of identifying descriptions for any given name’s associated cluster is definitionally equivalent to that name, which is to say that a sentence predicating this disjunction of the name would be analytic and so necessarily true. In terms of possible worlds, this means that at least one identifying description from this logical disjunction will be true in each possible world, though not necessarily the same one.
This conclusion is not *prima facie* implausible, and it does resolve the more direct problems confronted by the traditional Fregean view, while retaining both the account of the reference relationship and the ability to resolve the puzzles associated with informative identity statements and existential sentences.

II. Kripke’s Criticism of the Description Theory of Proper Names:

Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* is simultaneously the source of the major criticisms of the description view of proper names and also one of the acknowledged fountainheads for the causal theory of reference [8; 11: pp. xiii-xv]. Here I will focus on the criticisms Kripke directs specifically at the descriptivist cluster theory of reference developed by Searle [12; 13: Ch. 7].

**Kripke’s Modal Arguments:**

Kripke’s modal argument is essentially the same as the arguments Searle himself considered against construing identifying descriptions as definitional equivalents for or as analytically contained in proper names. However, Kripke a) supports his criticism by appealing to more general underlying intuitions about differences in the modal status between proper names and identifying descriptions, b) develops his criticism in somewhat greater detail, which includes considering an alternative understanding of the description theory and importantly c) ultimately rejects even Searle’s inclusive logical disjunction of identifying properties as having untenable consequences in terms of analyticity and corresponding *de re* necessity commitments.

Kripke contends that proper names are, while definite descriptions are not, rigid designators. A rigid designator is an expression that refers to the same thing in all possible worlds. Thus Kripke’s argument is that ‘Nixon’ refers to Nixon in the actual world and that we, in the actual world, use ‘Nixon’ to refer to Nixon in other possible worlds as well (whether or not he is called ‘Nixon’ in those worlds). On the other hand, “the man who won the election in
1968”, while it designates Nixon in this world, will not designate Nixon in every possible world in which he exists, since it seems clearly to have been possible that Nixon lost the election in 1968. Since proper names designate rigidly and definite descriptions do not, proper names cannot stand for or express definite descriptions because then they would not be rigid designators.

To formulate the argument along the lines considered by Searle in *Speech Acts*, what Kripke is arguing is that if ‘Nixon’ just means “the winner of the election in 1968”, then ‘Nixon is the winner of the election in 1968’ is analytically and hence necessarily true, which means for Kripke, true in all possible worlds. If it is true of Nixon in all possible worlds that he is the winner of the 1968 election, then, Kripke concludes, it is a necessary property of Nixon that he won the election in 1968. But this fact about Nixon, as well as many others, seems clearly to be contingent, so the description theory of proper name reference must be false.

Kripke’s response to Searle’s claim, in accordance with the cluster theory, that at any rate it is a “necessary fact that Aristotle has the logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to him…” [12: p. 172], is to say that,

“This is what is not so. It just is not, in any intuitive sense of necessity, a necessary truth that Aristotle had the properties commonly attributed to him.” [6: p. 74]

If Searle’s view is accepted, then it is a necessary truth about Aristotle that at least one of the descriptions in the cluster of descriptions commonly associated with him in this world, is also true of him on each possible world in which he exists at all. So, necessarily Aristotle has at least one of the properties commonly associated with him in this world in every other possible world (though the property he has may be different in different possible worlds). It is precisely this
claim that Kripke rejects, maintaining that Aristotle could have existed without possessing any of
the properties that are commonly associated with him in this world.

“It would seem that it’s a contingent fact that Aristotle ever did any of the things
commonly attributed to him today, any of these achievements that we so much admire.”

[6: p. 75]

So Kripke rejects as implausible even the weakened modal commitment of Searle’s cluster
description theory of reference for proper names.

In the first lecture of *Naming and Necessity* Kripke considers two possible forms for a
descriptivist theory of reference: as a theory of *meaning* or as a theory of the way in which
reference is *fixed* [6: pp. 31-3]. The description theory as a theory of the meaning of proper
names is the theory I have been discussing so far and is the one that in various forms leads to the
modal issues discussed by both Searle and Kripke. Understanding the description theory as a
theory of how reference is fixed means that proper names do not mean or are not synonymous
with identifying descriptions, however reference for proper names is achieved or “fixed” on each
occasion of use by some identifying description or other. On this view ‘the winner of the 1968’
election is not synonymous with ‘Nixon’, even though it can be used to pick out the referent of
‘Nixon’ in this world, namely Nixon.

Kripke finds this view more plausible, but suggests that so interpreting the description
theory of names will render it incapable of resolving the puzzles concerning informative identity
statements and existence statements that were discussed above. The reason Kripke gives for this
is that, since the names are not synonymous with their identifying descriptions, a sentence
containing the name will not be synonymous with a sentence in which the description has been
substituted for the name, and so descriptions cannot be used to analyze identity or existence
sentences containing names, which was the method used by Frege and others to resolve these puzzles. Thus ‘Moses did not exist’ and ‘The man who led the Israelites out of Egypt did not exist’ may be materially equivalent in the actual world, but they are not synonymous, and so the second is not an analysis of the first that resolves the problem of apparent reference to a non-existent individual. **Kripke’s Counter-Examples to the Cluster Theory:**

In addition to the modal argument, Kripke constructs a series of counter-examples to the cluster theory of names, designed to show in each case that some condition that the cluster theory maintains is necessary for successful reference in fact is not. At the beginning of Lecture II Kripke formulates a list of conditions for successful reference characteristic of the cluster view. Of these, those that are relevant here are (1)-(4),

(1) “To every name or designating expression ‘X’, there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties \( \varphi \) such that A [The speaker] believes ‘\( \varphi x \).’

(2) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by A to pick out some individual uniquely.

(3) If most, or a weighted most, of the \( \varphi \)’s are satisfied by one unique object \( y \), then \( y \) is the referent of ‘X’.

(4) If the vote yields no unique object, ‘X’ does not refer.” [6: p. 71]

Kripke says that (1) is a definition [6: p. 80], which I take to mean that it is simply a statement of the basic idea behind the description theory, while (2)-(4) are substantive conditions for successful reference with which Searle would, it seems, be likely to agree. Kripke proposes three fundamental objections in the form of counter-examples, to each of these three conditions.
Counter-Example One: Uniqueness Failure-

Kripke’s first objection is directed against conditions (2) and (4). Kripke contends that there are many cases in which a) the individual does not believe that the cluster of descriptions he associates with a name uniquely picks out one individual apart from all others (condition (2)) and b) that in fact the cluster of descriptions does not pick out one individual apart from all others (condition (4)), and yet, when the individual uses the name, he still succeeds in referring. Kripke cites as examples the cluster of descriptions that the average person associates with a name like ‘Einstein’ or ‘Feynman’. Kripke contends that the average person’s cluster will include little more than descriptions such as ‘that famous physicist’, but not enough to uniquely identify anyone, and yet when the individual uses the name ‘Feynman’ or ‘Einstein’, he succeeds in referring. Therefore, according to Kripke, it is not a necessary condition for successful reference that the language user believe that he is able to uniquely identify what he is referring to using descriptions, nor is it a necessary condition for successful reference that the cluster itself actually specify one unique individual descriptively.

Counter-Example Two: Descriptive Error or Falsity-

A second objection Kripke offers is directed at condition (3). Kripke contends that the cluster of descriptions associated with a name could uniquely specify one individual, and yet the name could refer to some other individual. Kripke uses a fictional example involving Kurt Gödel. Suppose that all of the descriptions in a speaker’s cluster surrounding the name ‘Gödel’ have to do with Gödel’s incompleteness proofs, i.e. they are of the form “the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic”, etc. Now suppose that the real author of the incompleteness proofs was not Gödel, but someone named ‘Schmidt’. Thus all of the descriptions in the speaker’s cluster are not true of Gödel, but of Schmidt. According to Kripke, condition (3)
would require that when the speaker utters ‘Gödel’, in virtue of his associated cluster, he is actually referring to Schmidt. Contra this, Kripke maintains that in such a case the speaker is indeed referring to Gödel when he utters ‘Gödel’, not to Schmidt, therefore condition (3) is not a sufficient condition for successful reference insofar as it can be satisfied in cases where the name fails to refer to the individual it is a name of.

Counter-Example Three: Holistic Descriptive Falsity-

A final objection offered by Kripke is directed at all of conditions (2)-(4), and has both a weaker and a stronger variant. The basic objection is that most or all of the descriptive information associated with a given name could be false of the individual, and yet a use of the name could succeed in referring. A weaker example is ‘Columbus’, which for many people includes as part of its descriptive backing “the man who discovered that the earth was round” and “the man who discovered America”, both of which are false. A stronger example is Jonah. Kripke asserts that while Biblical scholars believe that there really was a person called ‘Jonah’, they also believe that all of the particular facts recounted about him in “The Book of Jonah” are in fact false. Here is a case where any descriptive backing that a speaker might have for the name is not only not true of Jonah, but not true of anyone, and yet, Kripke argues, when we utter ‘Jonah’, we are referring to Jonah, so the description theory must be false.

Kripke thus criticizes the cluster of descriptions theory of proper names advocated by Searle and others along two basic lines: the first are the modal arguments to the effect that the description theory as a theory of the meaning of names has radically counterintuitive modal consequences, while the second is that the conditions for successful reference laid down by adherents to the cluster theory are not necessary conditions insofar as they can be fail to be satisfied in cases where reference nevertheless occurs.
III. Searle’s Defense of the Cluster Theory of Names:

Searle responds to both lines of criticism initiated by Kripke in Chapter 9 of *Intentionality*. Searle retains the basic cluster of descriptions account for proper names, but formulates it in the context of his more general theory of intentionality. By doing this Searle is able to appeal to a number of features of the relationship between conscious subjects and the world in responding to Kripke’s criticisms. I will briefly outline Searle’s account of intentionality, and then articulate his response to Kripke’s arguments.

Intentionality:

For Searle, intentionality is the directedness or aboutness of the mental states of conscious subjects. Mental states that are intentional are directed towards or about objects of some sort. Searle distinguishes the psychological mode from the representational content of an intentional act. The psychological mode of an act is the kind of act that is being performed, whether it is an act of perceiving, believing, desiring, willing, etc. The content of an intentional act is the object or presentation that the act is about. The psychological mode of an intentional act determines its direction of fit: perceptual acts and most acts of judgment have a mind-to-world fit, whereas acts of desiring and wishing are world-to-mind. There are also intentional acts that have no direction of fit, such as congratulating someone, or declaring that one is going to throw a party. For intentional acts that have a direction of fit, the content of the act in conjunction with its psychological mode determine the conditions of satisfaction for the act. The conditions of satisfaction for an intentional act are those conditions under which the content of the act is realized, “fits” or is true of the world. Different psychological modes and different intentional contents determine different conditions of satisfaction, but all intentional acts that have a direction of fit have conditions of satisfaction.
It is essential in understanding Searle’s notions of intentional content and conditions of satisfaction to realize that the content of a given mental act and its conditions of satisfaction are generally not exhausted by what the subject of that act does or might say on a given occasion. There are a number of factors that are responsible for this, most prominent amongst which for Searle are 1) the self-referentiality of certain kinds of intentional acts and 2) the phenomena of the network and background.

According to Searle, there are two basic kinds of self-referential intentional acts: perceptual experiences and utterances of indexical expressions. Searle argues that intentional acts of perceiving have contents that are perceptual experiences of things, but are also self-referential in that the conditions of satisfaction for perceiving include the condition that whatever is being perceived is the cause of the perceptual experience currently being intended [14: pp. 47-50]. Thus, if I am currently having the experience of perceiving a yellow station wagon, its conditions of satisfaction include not only that there be a yellow station wagon out there in the world answering to the description of the one that I am experiencing, but also that that same station wagon is the cause of the perceptual experience that I am now having. That the station wagon is causing the experience is not itself part of the experience, nor is it anything that a normal subject would express or report if he was asked what he is experiencing, but Searle contends that it is there non-the-less as part of the conditions of satisfaction for the experience. Similarly, indexical expressions are self-referential in that their conditions of satisfaction will always include that the utterer of the expression or the entity indexically indicated stand in a certain relationship to the utterance of the expression itself. Thus to say ‘I am hungry’ is to indicate that “the person now uttering this expression is hungry”. Thus the utterance of the expression indicates that it stands in a certain relationship to the referent of the indexical it
contains (‘I’ in this case) as part of its conditions of satisfaction. Searle calls this the ‘self-referentiality’ of indexical expressions.

Two other elements that are often part of the intentional content and/or conditions of satisfaction for an intentional act are the network and the background. The network consists of the conceptual knowledge and frameworks within which a subject operates. It includes personal convictions, scientific knowledge and the existence of social practices and institutions, and it is usually in virtue of the existence of the network that a subject succeeds in having meaningful experiences or in saying meaningful things. One example Searle uses is an individual’s resolution to run for President of the United States. For an individual to resolve “I am going to become the next President of the United States” requires the existence of a complex social network of institutions and behaviors that are pre-requisites for the meaningfulness of such a resolution, and so comprise part of its conditions of satisfaction. As opposed to the network, the background consists of non-representational or sub-intentional presuppositions, such as habituated skills involving language use and body motion and the basic suppositions on which these things rest, such as that the earth is firm enough to walk on and that there is air to breathe. Searle provides a lengthy discussion of the background in Intentionality [14: Ch. 5], however, what is necessary here is simply to recognize that the background is unlike the network in being non-representational, but like the network in that it contributes to the conditions of satisfaction for intentional acts, even when the content of those acts is not explicitly and primarily about the information that it [the background or network] contains.

Searle’s Response to the Modal Argument:

Searle responds to Kripke’s modal argument along three general lines. Though Searle does not explicitly reaffirm his commitment to the inclusive logical disjunction of identifying
descriptions from the cluster associated with a name being analytically tied to that name [13: pp. 169 & 173], he does provide two lines of defense that suggest he is willing to accept the description theory as a theory of the meaning of names, but deny that this must have the consequences that Kripke suggests. Alternatively, Searle briefly considers whether an account of descriptivism in terms of fixing reference would really have to suffer from the defects that Kripke says it would. I will consider each of these strategies in turn.

Searle’s direct responses to Kripke’s modal argument are two. First, taking Kripke to be maintaining that there are no analytic propositions containing a proper name as the subject and a definite description as the predicate, Searle points out that there are definite descriptions that are rigid in Kripke’s sense [14: pp. 257-8]. In particular, any definite description or set of definite descriptions that expresses identity conditions for an individual, such as Aristotle, will be rigid in just the way that Kripke claims that proper names are (it will refer to the same individual in every possible world). A statement attributing to Aristotle the conditions necessary and sufficient for being Aristotle would seem to be both analytic and necessarily true. If this is the case, then there are at least some analytic propositions with proper names as subjects and definite descriptions as predicates, and so Kripke’s claim is false. It is not clear how far this argument works in favor of the description theory of names in general, but Searle does not develop it any further. He turns instead to his primary response to Kripke’s modal objection.

It is Searle’s second response that is a) his most fundamental and b) the one that seems like the best answer to modal arguments for a descriptivist theory of the reference of proper names. Searle points out that it is perfectly possible to maintain that a cluster of descriptions is the meaning of a proper name while avoiding Kripke’s objection because
“Any definite description at all can be treated as a rigid designator by indexing it to the actual world. I can, by simple fiat, decide to use the expression “The inventor of bifocals” in such a way that it refers to the actual person who invented bifocals and continues to refer to that very person in any possible world, even in a possible world in which he did not invent bifocals.” [14: p. 258]

Thus the cluster of descriptions associated with a name, indexed to the actual world, can perfectly well be construed as providing an account of the meaning of the name, without entailing that each of the properties described is necessarily attached to the individual named. Nathan Salmon has noted that this strategy only pushes the issues back a step, insofar as including ‘actual’ in all of the descriptions associated with a name introduces an indexical element that will itself require a non-Fregean explanation for the way in which it refers [11: p. 27]. This objection is not pivotal for Searle’s account of the reference of proper names a) because it is about indexicals, not proper names and there is no rule that says that the theory that is true for the referential function of indexical expressions must be the same theory that is true for proper names, but much more importantly b) as mentioned above, Searle has an account of indexicals that makes them part of the conditions of satisfaction for an intentional act, which is just what Searle has in mind in *Intentionality* when he speaks of Fregean senses. Thus there is no reason to suppose that indexing all of the descriptions in a proper name’s associated cluster to the actual world somehow gives the game away to the Kripkean causal account without further argument.

Searle also comments, however, on Kripke’s proposed distinction between a description theory as a theory of name meaning and a description theory as a theory of how reference is fixed or secured, by saying that,
“The distinction is not as sharp as he suggests, for the following reason: the Intentional content associated with a proper name can figure as part of the propositional content of a statement made by a speaker using that name, even though the speaker’s associated Intentional content is not part of the definition of the name.” [14: p. 256]

Searle goes on to illustrate this point in the following way. The name ‘Hesperus’ can have associated with it in the mind of a conscious subject the description ‘shines near the horizon’, even if ‘shines near the horizon’ is not part of the meaning of or synonymous with ‘Hesperus’. Just as this description will be part of the intentional content that such a speaker has when he contemplates Hesperus, so it will be part of the propositional content of the utterance of a sentence in which ‘Hesperus’ occurs, for that speaker. Thus, the intentional content associated with a proper name for a given speaker can also be part of the intentional content of an assertion containing that name for that speaker, and this could be generalized to a community of speakers as well, in such a way that ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ will be informative just because the descriptions commonly associated with ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ will have been asserted to be true of the same individual.

This sort of response is open to Searle because of his intentional theory of language, according to which what a speaker means by a given expression will primarily be determined by the intentional act (psychological mode + content) of that speaker in bestowing meaning upon the words (though, of course, social elements enter into this). Kripke analyzed the idea of a reference-fixing descriptivist account for names in terms of the synonymy or non-synonymy between sentences in which descriptions are replaced for those names and sentences in which the names themselves occur. Since the sentences themselves would not be synonymous simpliciter, Kripke suggested that such an account would block the general descriptivist strategy for
resolving the traditional puzzles regarding proper name reference. Searle is able to analyze the same issue in terms of sameness or difference in the conditions of satisfaction for an utterance of the name as opposed to the utterance of a sentence in which a description associated with the name has been substituted for the name. Where Kripke compares sameness of meaning as an objective property of names and sentences, Searle is able to compare sameness of belief content, and so provide an alternative answer.

Nevertheless, Searle’s primary answer to Kripke’s modal criticism of the descriptivist theory seems to be that the cluster of associated descriptions for a name can simply be indexed to the actual world, which is highly plausible on Searle’s account in virtue of the functioning of the network and background, as while as the indexical self-reflexive nature of intentional acts, in determining the conditions of satisfaction for intentional events of name/expression use.

Searle’s Response to Kripke’s Counter-Examples:

Searle’s basic responses to Kripke’s counter-examples all involve the fact that a speaker’s intentional content can and usually will contain more information than he actually expresses in words on any given occasion, including occasions of the use of proper names to refer. Already in *Speech Acts* Searle had included amongst the possible identifying descriptions that a speaker might use to secure reference non-linguistic contextual features such as demonstrative pointing or the ability to recognize the object referred to on sight, and to indicate it by non-linguistic means to a hearer [13: p. 86]. In *Intentionality* Searle is able to make even more extensive appeal to non-linguistic intentional content in terms of the self-referentiality of intentional states, the phenomena of the network and the background, and also the phenomena of parasitic intentionality. Parasitic intentionality involves cases where a speaker is able to succeed in referring to something on the basis of some other speaker’s capacity to do so directly. It is in
terms of these phenomena that Searle formulates or is able to formulate responses to each of Kripke’s counter-examples.

To Kripke’s “uniqueness failure” counter-example involving the average speaker’s associated cluster for names such as ‘Einstein’ or ‘Feynman’, Searle has it open to him to respond a) that even in these cases speakers will have a more comprehensive set of identifying descriptions than Kripke suggests, but more to the point b) that in such cases speakers can succeed in uniquely referring to an individual parasitically by including amongst their identifying descriptions something like “the famous physicist referred to and known about by most members of my linguistic community as ‘Einstein’”. Parasitic uses of proper names to refer must ultimately bottom out, either in virtue of the termination of a chain of intentional communication leading back from the current speaker to some subject’s immediate experience of and introduction to Einstein, or in the cluster of some speaker whose identifying descriptions are able to uniquely identify Einstein. But so long as one of these two things is the case (and it usually will be), Searle contends that there is nothing wrong with a speaker’s parasitically referring to ‘Einstein’ or ‘Feynman’ or anyone else. Searle can thus maintain that, if the cluster of identifying descriptions associated with a name fails to uniquely specify some individual, then that speaker cannot use that name to refer, but that the cases offered by Kripke would not in general be such cases.

To Kripke’s “descriptive error/falsity” example involving Gödel and Schmidt, Searle responds that who is being referred to will depend on the speaker’s intentional content, and more generally on the speaker’s intention in a given case. Thus, in uttering the name ‘Gödel’ the speaker could mean to refer to the individual identified by the cluster of descriptions which includes “the famous twentieth century mathematician and logician”, “the first to prove the
incompleteness of arithmetic” and “the individual referred to as ‘Gödel’ by speakers in my linguistic community”, or the speaker could have in mind or intend to refer specifically to “the author of the first incompleteness proof for arithmetic, whomever he may be”. In the first case, the fact that one description turns out to be false of the individual it is thought to be an identifying description for is not especially a problem for Searle’s cluster theory of names. Since reference succeeds, according to Searle, in virtue of most or some weighted most of the descriptions being true of some unique individual, the fact that one description fails to be so will not in general affect the successfulness of the speaker’s attempt to refer, especially when the speaker’s cluster or intentional content includes background information and parasitic reference based on the practices of his community. In the second case, it is not really Gödel whom the speaker intends to refer to by his utterance of ‘Gödel’, but merely the author of the first proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic, whomever he may be, in which case the fact that he does not refer to Gödel, but to Schmidt, is not particularly a problem [14: pp. 250-2].

To Kripke’s objection based upon “holistic descriptive falsity”, Searle can respond that, even in a case such as ‘Columbus’ or ‘Jonah’, if reference occurs it occurs in virtue of the satisfaction of most or a weighted most of the descriptions in an associated cluster. The cluster could include such descriptions as “the man whom most people falsely attribute the discovery of America to” in the case of Columbus or “the man of whom it was falsely written in the Old Testament that he spent time in the stomach of a whale” in the case of Jonah. Such descriptions, along with parasitic intentional reference along a chain of communication that goes back to the original individuals would be, on Searle’s account, sufficient to secure reference. So, Searle’s response to the claim that reference could occur even if the individual referred to satisfied none of the associated identifying descriptions is simply that this is false, and that anyone who
believes otherwise has simply failed to look at the associated cluster (intentional content + conditions of satisfaction) carefully enough.

Searle is thus able to respond to all of Kripke’s counter-examples by appealing to elements of intentional content such as the network and background, and in particular the phenomenon of parasitic intentional reference. It is in general the discrepancy between what an individual might actually say in words and what is actually present in the intentional acts of the individual when he uses these same words that is responsible, both for the initial plausibility of Kripke’s criticisms, and for the ability of Searle’s theory to respond to them.

It is worth noting that names can be used i) to refer to objects of present experience, ii) to refer to objects that have been experienced but are not currently present and iii) to refer to objects that have never been experienced. Kripke himself concedes that a descriptivist will in general have a sufficient amount of identifying information to successfully refer in cases i) and ii), however it is cases that meet the description of iii), specifically the names of famous contemporaries or historical figures that Kripke uses as his counter-examples. In such cases, Kripke believes that what is essential to successful reference is the existence of a causal chain of communication going from the speaker and his use of a name back to the baptism or initial dubbing of the individual with the name. Searle agrees that there must be such chains, but contends that what is essential to such chains is precisely the transfer of intentional content, however minimal, from speaker to speaker [14: pp. 248-50]. Kripke himself seems inclined to take the causal element in the chain as fundamental, and to see these examples as revealing an important truth about the nature of singular reference for proper names that applies to cases i) and ii) above as well.
Conclusion:

Here I have explored the viability of the description theory of reference for proper names, specifically the cluster theory of proper names developed by John Searle in *Speech Acts* and defended and elaborated in *Intentionality*. Considerations in Section I established that the description theory in general, and Searle’s account in particular, is able to explain the traditional puzzles for proper names involving informative identity statements and existence statements. In Sections II and III I explored the ability of Searle’s theory to respond to the criticisms leveled against it by causal theorists, specifically those of Saul Kripke. While the adequacy of Searle’s responses in each case will ultimately rest on the adequacy of his account of intentionality and its attendant phenomena, such as the network, self-referentiality and the notion of parasitic intentional reference, Searle’s account in general stands up well and is able to respond to Kripke’s criticisms. The primary reason for this is Searle’s identification of the conditions of satisfaction for an utterance of a proper name in *Intentionality* with the associated cluster of identifying descriptions for that name that was discussed in *Speech Acts*. Searle’s descriptivist theory is able to account for the mechanism of reference in the cases of use of names i) to refer to objects of present experience, ii) to refer to objects that have been experienced but are not currently present and iii) to refer to objects that have never been experienced in a plausible fashion. A final assessment of Searle’s theory of reference for names will be contingent upon an assessment of his broad-ranging theory of mind, however, the above considerations, along with the fact that Searle’s theory does justice to the intuitively plausible thesis that in order to refer to something an individual must be able to identify that thing, do lend the theory a good deal of plausibility.
Sources