

Roberts and Nelkin on Strawson on Presupposition

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In his *Introduction to Logical Theory*, P. F. Strawson says:

... if a statement S presupposes a statement S' in the sense that the truth of S' is a precondition of the truth-or-falsity of S, then of course there will be a kind of logical absurdity in conjoining S with the denial of S'.... But we must distinguish this kind of logical absurdity from straightforward self-contradiction. It is self-contradictory to conjoin S with the denial of S' if S' is a necessary condition of the truth, simply, of S. It is a different kind of logical absurdity to conjoin S with the denial of S' if S' is a necessary condition of the *truth or falsity* of S. The relation between S and S' in the first case is that S entails S'. We need a different name for the relation between S and S' in the second case; let us say, as above, that S *presupposes* S' (p. 175).

George Roberts¹ has argued that this account of presupposition does not allow Strawson to consistently hold something that he very much wants to: that 'The King of France is bald' presupposes 'There is at least one King of France'. According to Norton Nelkin² Roberts misinterprets Strawson, and a correct interpretation would require that his argument be modified in such a way that would render it invalid and therefore no threat to Strawson. I will argue that Roberts's argument is already invalid, even without the modification that Nelkin urges, so that there is nothing to defend Strawson against. And I will argue that this is just as well for Strawson, because Nelkin's defence fails – the 'faults' that he finds in the modified version of Roberts's argument are not faults at all.

I

I take it that Strawson is saying the following:

- (S1) If the truth of statement S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of statement S, say that S *presupposes* S'.
- (S2) If the truth of statement S' is a necessary condition for the truth of statement S, say that S *entails* S'.
- (S3) If S presupposes S' then the conjunction of S and the denial of S' is a logically absurd statement.
- (S4) If S entails S' then the conjunction of S and the denial of S' is a logically absurd statement.
- (S5) The type of logical absurdity in (S3) is different to the type of logical absurdity in (S4).

I take it, furthermore, that he understands the following terms in the following way:

- (S6) To say that the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S is to say that necessarily, if S is true or false then S' is true.
- (S7) To say that the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth of S is to say that necessarily, if S is true then S' is true.

¹ 'A Problem about Presupposition', *Mind* **78** (1969), pp. 270-1.

² 'Mr. Roberts on Strawson', *Mind* **81** (1972), pp. 405-6.

(S8) To say that a statement is logically absurd is to say that it is necessarily false.

Rather than calling (S1) to (S8) *Strawson's account* I will call it *Interpretation₁*. This is because it is possible to read Strawson as saying not (S2) but rather:

(S2') If the truth of statement S' is a necessary condition for the truth of statement S, and S' is not presupposed by S, say that S *entails* S'.

Call (S1) to (S8) with (S2') in place of (S2) *Interpretation₂*. Note that according to both interpretations if S presupposes S' then the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth of S: Suppose that S' is presupposed by S; then by (S1) the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S; so by (S6) necessarily, if S is true or false then S' is true; so necessarily, if S is true then S' is true; so by (S7) the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth of S (note that no use of (S2) or (S2') has been made). Let PRE be the class of pairs (S, S') for which S presupposes S', and NEC be the class of pairs (S, S') for which S' is a necessary condition for the truth of S. Then according to both interpretations PRE is a subclass of NEC. Indeed, it is a proper subclass because ('The King of France has two ears', 'The King of France has at least one ear') is a member of NEC but not PRE. Let ENT be the class of pairs (S, S') for which S entails S'. Where the two interpretations differ is in what they take ENT to be. According to interpretation₁ ENT is NEC, and so PRE is a (proper) subclass of ENT. In particular, it's possible for S to entail S' *and also* to presuppose S'. According to interpretation₂ ENT is the complement of PRE relative to NEC (i.e. NEC is the disjoint union of ENT and PRE), and so PRE and ENT are mutually exclusive subclasses of NEC. In particular, if S entails S' then S does not presuppose S', and if S presupposes S' then S does not entail S'.

I think that Interpretation₁ is the way we should read Strawson. But that is not my concern here - the distinction is just a terminological difference between the two interpretations. But Roberts and Nelkin seem to read Strawson in the way of Interpretation₂, so for the time being that's how I will read it too.

II

Roberts presents the following argument as one that Strawson ought to accept and ought to acknowledge as a problem:

Let S be 'The King of France is bald' and S' be 'There is at least one King of France'. Then:

- (R1) S' is presupposed by S.
- (R2) So, by (S1), the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S.
- (R3) But that is to say that the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth of 'S is true or false'.
- (R4) But the truth of S' is not a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of 'S is true or false'.
- (R5) So, S' is not presupposed but entailed by 'S is true or false'.
- (R6) So, S' is not presupposed but entailed by 'S is true'.
- (R7) So, S' is not presupposed but entailed by S.

The problem for Strawson is that the conclusion is something he wants to deny. So he needs a way to reject the argument as unsound. (R1) he accepts. (R2) follows by his own definition. (R3) follows from (R2). (R4) he would accept: “The King of France is bald’ is true or false’ is false, he would say, if ‘There is at least one King of France’ is false, so the truth of the latter is not a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of the former. (R5) follows by his own definition (according to Interpretation₂). (R6) follows from (R5), but not as obviously as Roberts suggests. He claims that it follows by the logical principle that a statement that A is B or C entails a statement P only if the statement that A is B entails P and the statement that A is C entails P. If we take ‘entails’ to mean ‘has as a necessary condition’ then I agree there is such a principle and that (R6) follows from (R5) by it. But Roberts is taking ‘entails’ to mean ‘has as a necessary condition *but not as a presupposition*’, and in that case I know of no such principle. Nonetheless, such a principle can be established, and (R6) does indeed follow from (R5). The only thing left for Strawson to deny is the inference from (R6) to (R7). And I think he should. Roberts says nothing more than that (R7) follows, presumably from (R6). But I do not see how. In fact, I think Strawson ought to say that it does *not* follow, precisely *because* (R7) is false even though (R6) is true. So I think that Roberts’s argument breaks down at the last step and is therefore no problem for Strawson’s account.

Is the problem with Roberts argument merely a result of his having adopted Interpretation₂ rather than Interpretation₁? Can he adopt Interpretation₁ and succeed with a modified version of the argument against it instead? No. The modified argument would be the same for (R1) to (R4), and then it would go (with the changes underlined):

- (R5´) So, S´ is entailed but not presupposed by ‘S is true or false’.
 (R6´) So, S´ is entailed but not presupposed by ‘S is true’.
 (R7´) So, S´ is entailed but not presupposed by S.

The apparent problem remains for Strawson, but the modified argument still breaks down at the last step, and for the same reason. So Roberts’s argument has no effect against Strawson’s account, no matter which of the two interpretations he adopts.

III

Nelkin offers a different defence of Strawson against Roberts. He claims that when Strawson talks of S´ being a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S he means ‘or’ in an exclusive sense, because “... surely, Strawson is not prepared to allow even for the logical possibility of a sentence ... being both true and false at the same time!” (p. 405). So, he claims, we should take ‘or’ in lines (R2) to (R5) of the argument in an exclusive sense. But then, he argues, (R6) does not follow from (R5). Roberts uses the following inference pattern:

From: Necessarily, if S is true or S is false then S´ is true.
 Deduce: Necessarily, if S is true then S´ is true and if S is false then S´ is true.
 Then deduce: Necessarily, if S is true then S´ is true.

Nelkin agrees that this is the inference pattern Roberts needs to use if he is taking ‘or’ in an inclusive sense, and that both steps are valid. But if he takes ‘or’ in an exclusive sense, as Nelkin thinks he should, then the inference pattern he needs is this:

From: Necessarily, if S is true or S is false but S is not both true and false
 then S' is true.
Deduce: Necessarily, if S is true then S' is true and if S is false then S' is true.
Then deduce: Necessarily, if S is true then S' is true.

But, Nelkin claims, the second line here does not follow from the first, and so, “of course” (p. 406), the last line does not follow from the first either.

I have two things to say about Nelkin’s defence. First, the second line *does* follow from the first. Indeed, the whole inference pattern is valid, and there is no problem for Strawson if he uses it instead of the first. Second, even if it did not it would not follow that the last line does not follow from the first. Consider this two step argument: Grass is green and snow is white; therefore the sky is blue and snow is white; therefore snow is white. The first step is invalid, but the last statement still follows from the first. So even if Nelkin was right about the second line in the inference pattern not following from the first, he would still need to argue that the last line does not follow from the first, or else he leaves open the possibility that with a single modification Roberts can fix the invalidity in his argument. So Nelkin’s defence of Strawson fails.

IV

For all that has been said so far, there is nothing wrong with Strawson’s account, no matter in which of the two ways it is interpreted. But there is one thing he says that strikes me as odd, and I suspect that it is the source of confusion about how to interpret the passage. It’s (S5) – that the type of logical absurdity in (S3) is different to the type of logical absurdity in (S4). By I ‘logical absurdity’ I take Strawson to mean a statement that is necessarily false, so if there are different types of logical absurdity then it must be because there are different types of necessarily false statements. That is undoubtedly true, but there are many ways that we can type them – syntactically, semantically, by length of expression in a certain language, and so on. What does Strawson have in mind? I suspect this: type the absurdity obtained by conjoining S with the denial of S' according to whether S presupposes or entails S'. So when he says that these types are different he means that these *relations* are *distinct*. I suspect that’s why it might be thought that he takes presupposition and entailment to be mutually exclusive relations (Interpretation₂) rather than the one being a subclass of the other (Interpretation₁). But to think that is wrong – it is quite possible for one relation to be a subclass of another from which it is distinct. Being a son of is distinct from being a child of, but the first is a subclass of the second.