PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 23: Avoiding Denotations

1. We have been considering a theory of meaning for a fragment of English which proceeds by specifying *denotations* for each expression of the fragment:

   a. Names denote particulars; ‘alan’ denotes alan.
   b. Verb phrases denote properties; ‘smokes’ denotes the property of smoking.
   c. Sentences denote truth conditions.
   d. ‘alan smokes’ is true iff the particular denoted by ‘alan’ has the property denoted by ‘smokes’. So ‘alan smokes’ is true iff alan has the property of smoking; that is, iff alan smokes.

   The denotation of an expression can be thought of as its *meaning*.

2. Davidson was actually against the idea of assigning things as denotations of verb phrases and sentences. For at least two reasons.

3. First: **Infinite regress**. What is it for a particular to *have* a property? We might say: it is for the particular to stand in the *having* relation to the property. But what is it for the particular to stand in the having relation? We might say: it is for the particular to stand in the *standing in* relation to the having relation. But what is it for the particular to stand in the standing in relation?

   Frege sought to solve this by saying that properties are unsaturated, and require saturation by particulars. But as Davidson points out, this seems to just label the problem rather than solve it.

4. Second: **The slingshot argument**. Suppose that sentences denote something (it doesn’t matter what kind of thing). And make two further assumptions:

   (A1) that logically equivalent sentences denote the same thing
   (A2) that co-referring singular terms can be interchanged without effecting the denotation of the sentences in which they occur.

   Then we can argue that any two sentences with the same truth value denote the same thing (no matter what denotations are):

   a. ‘Grass is green’ and ‘$\{x: x = x\} = \{x: x = x$ & grass is green$\}$’ are logically equivalent and hence have the same denotation.
   b. ‘$\{x: x = x$ & grass is green$\}$’ refers to the same set as ‘$\{x: x = x$ & snow is white$\}$’, so ‘$\{x: x = x\} = \{x: x = x$ & grass is green$\}$’ and ‘$\{x: x = x\} = \{x: x = x$ & snow is white$\}$’ have the same denotation.
   c. ‘$\{x: x = x\} = \{x: x = x$ & snow is white$\}$’ and ‘Snow is white’ are logically equivalent and hence have the same denotation.
   d. So ‘Grass is green’ and ‘Snow is white’ have the same denotation.

The same goes for any pair of sentences with the same truth value.

5. Davidson thought we should proceed in this way instead:

   a. ‘N VP’ is true iff VP is *true of* the particular denoted by N.
   b. So ‘alan smokes’ is true iff ‘smokes’ is true of the particular denoted by ‘alan’.
   c. ‘alan’ denotes alan.
   d. ‘smokes’ is true of x iff x smokes.
   e. So ‘alan smokes’ is true iff alan smokes.

   Note: no denotation is assigned to ‘smokes’.