IS THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICTING INTENTIONS A GENUINE PROBLEM? SOME REMARKS ON GÓMEZ-TORRENTE´S "ROADS TO REFERENCE"[1]

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Abstract: In this brief discussion piece I try to offer some considerations in favor of the so-called Simple Intention Theory of demonstratives, which is rejected by Gómez-Torrente. I try to show that the main argument offered against the Simple Intention Theory appears to be based on false data.

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The Kaplanian project of giving the character of demonstratives in terms of a description stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for their reference may be difficult to carry out, but philosophers usually believe it must be feasible[2]. One of the simplest theories of demonstratives in the Kaplanian spirit is the so-called Simple Intention Theory. This theory attempts to state the character of demonstratives as follows:

(SIT) The use of a demonstrative refers to an object *o* if and only if *o* is the thing the speaker intends to refer with her use of the demonstrative.

(SIT) is a very simple rule that states the necessary and sufficient conditions for demonstrative reference, one that can very easily be internalized by speakers. If the Simple Intention Theory is correct, then the Kaplanian project succeeds. But Gómez-Torrente (2019) and others[3] think that this theory is clearly false. The main argument is that it cannot deal with cases involving *conflicting intentions*. In such cases, (i) the speaker has more than one referential intention in a given use of a demonstrative, (ii) these intentions, unbeknownst to the speaker, point to different objects, and (iii) the token demonstrative *does not* refer to all of the intended objects. It is argued that the Simple Intention Theory yields the wrong results in these cases: it either predicts reference failure when there is clearly reference to one of the intended objects, or it predicts reference failure when the matter is really indeterminate. More importantly, Gómez-Torrente thinks that the inadequacy of the Simple Intention Theory (and of theories that try to amend it) is very

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[2] C.f. Speaks (2017).

[3] E.g. Speaks (2016) and (2017), King (2013).

strong evidence that the whole Kaplanian project is hopeless. He argues that "the demonstrative descriptivism … is just as wrong as the corresponding descriptivism about proper names presumably is" (Gómez-Torrente 2019: 12). He concludes that the character of demonstratives can be stated only in terms of *roughly sufficient* conditions for reference.

In this paper I offer some (indirect) considerations in favor of the Simple Intention Theory, and thus in favor of the Kaplanian project in general. It seems to me that the typical cases of conflicting intentions wielded against (SIT) describe impossible situations: such cases either involve situations in which the speaker has both a *referential* intention and an *attributive* intention in the sense of Donnellan (1966), or situations in which the speaker has conflicting referential intentions of *different* kinds. Both kinds of situation, I will argue, seem impossible. If I am right, the arguments against the Simple Intention Theory appear to rest on false data, and so one crucial step of Gómez-Torrente argument against the Kaplanian project would be unwarranted.

For reasons of space, I will concentrate on the first case Gómez-Torrente offers against the Simple Intention Theory. Imagine that you and I are watching a soccer game on the university campus. In this game, there is an obviously talented player wearing a yellow shirt, and I happen to believe that he is also the best student in my philosophy class. I then say *That's a really good player,* intending to refer to the player in the yellow shirt *as represented by my perception of him*, and also to the student as represented *by the description* 'the brightest student in my philosophy class'. However, the player is not the student I am representing descriptively. According to Gómez-Torrente, (SIT) predicts that my use of 'that' will lack a referent in this case; yet it is clear that my use of 'that' successfully referred to the player I am perceptually representing. This would show that (SIT) is false, or at the

very least that it needs to be supplemented with a theory of *trumping* that explains when one intention trumps the other[4].

But I think this scenario does not describe a possible situation: the speaker simply cannot have both intentions suitably connected to her use of the demonstrative. Let me explain. We can all agree that demonstratives are devices of direct reference. But what that means exactly is not immediately clear. I take it, following Almog (2014), that expressions are directly referential because of a certain sort of cognitive mechanics underpinning their use. Almog's basic idea is this: my mind comes to be related to a certain object by a *nonconventional* process – perception being the paradigmatic case, but also memory and imagination –, and it is this nonconventional relation that fixes or determines the object of my thought. The important thing to note here is that the mind-object link in such cases is not established *satisfactionally*, that is, in virtue of the object satisfying some conditions I previously conjured up in my mind. In other words, I do not come up with a set of conditions and then "send them" looking for something in the world that fits them. The cognitive link with the object is established directly, meaning that it is not mediated by a relation of satisfaction. With the object of my thought fixed relationally in this way, I *then* use an expression to linguistically refer to the thing I am thinking about. As Almog puts it, linguistic reference in this sense is "*back*-reference, or reference back to an item one is already cognitively linked with" (p. 72).

I agree with Almog that this is what Donnellan (1966) had in mind (pun intended) when he was describing the difference between *referential* uses of expressions and *attributive* uses of expressions. In this interpretation of Donnellan, referential uses are those uses in which the speaker is exploiting this precedent cognitive link, and so the

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[4] See Speaks (2016) and (2017).

expression she uses is superfluous for fixing the object of her thought and what she intends to talk about (as in the martini example). In attributive uses, on the other hand, the mind-object link is established satisfactionally: the thought is meant to get at the object via the attributes it exemplifies. In this way, the expression she uses is *essential* to fixing the object of her thought and what she intends to talk about. Let us call *referential intentions* the intentions to refer to an object one is already cognitively connected with, and *attributive intentions* the intentions to refer to an object satisfactionally, as the satisfier of some condition.

Now, let us go back to the case Gómez-Torrente presented against the Simple Intention Theory. In that case, it is claimed that (a) the speaker intends to refer to the perceptually given player, and (b) also intends to refer to the bright student represented via the description 'the brightest student in my philosophy class'. My claim is that it is not clear how to interpret (b). I think there are two ways of going about this. The first option is to interpret (b) as the claim that I have a genuine *attributive* intention connected with the description, so that I also intend to demonstratively refer to the object that satisfies the description *as the satisfier* of the description. Because this object is not the object I see, my intentions pull in different directions. But I think one cannot use a demonstrative like 'that' with attributive intentions in this way. Demonstratives are "designed" to exploit some contextually given relation between the speaker and an object; indeed, this is what makes them demonstrative and directly referential expressions. In other terms, the point of a demonstrative is to *demonstrate*, and I can only demonstrate what is already given to my cognition, in the sense explained above. This is why Gómez-Torrente is right to say that "salience is not what fixes the reference of the use of "that," as presumably "that" will come out of the utterer's mouth already with a reference" (p. 34). It comes out already with a

reference because it exploits an antecedent link that *already* fixed an object for the utterer's thought and made it available for linguistic reference and predication. The utterance merely expresses the object the utterer had in mind. Now, think of the point of representing something satisfactionally. We represent things satisfactionally – with a genuine attributive intention – because they are not available for being thought about in any other way. Because there is no previous mind-object connection to be exploited by the expression, we come up with a set of conditions to enable us to think about the relevant object. Conversely, we cannot demonstrate what we can think about only by description. Think of how weird it is to try to refer demonstratively to the object I can only think about in terms of the description "the tallest giraffe in South Africa". If this is right, then the relevant intentions governing demonstratives must be referential intentions, not attributive intentions. In short, there is simply no point in coupling a demonstrative expression with an attributive intention because demonstrative reference *presupposes* an already existing mind-object connection to be exploited, and the point of an attributive intention is precisely to fix an object for thought in the *absence* of such connection. Using a genuine demonstrative with an attributive intention is paradoxical. In this interpretation of (b), the example describes an impossible situation. The only relevant intention for the use of the demonstrative is the perceptually-based referential intention. (SIT) then predicts the correct result.

One possible objection is this. I can think things like *well, the tallest mountain in South America… that's where I wanna go for vacation*. In the first part of this thought, I have a genuine attributive intention, since I have no idea which mountain it is; I can only grasp this object satisfactionally, via its properties. But then I use the word 'that' to refer to that mountain I thought about. This would show that it is

possible to couple a demonstrative with an attributive intention. But it seems to me that the word 'that' in the second part of my thought is *not* being used as a demonstrative. This looks like an anaphoric use: 'that' is coindexed with the antecedent description, and it inherits its interpretation from the description. In other terms, I can only understand this occurrence of 'that' if I understand the antecedent description, and it has a denotation only if the description is satisfied. They are semantically coordinated. So, the content of 'that' is equivalent to the content of 'the tallest mountain in South America', and hence not a demonstrative. To use a demonstrative with an attributive intention is to use it not as a demonstrative at all[5].

The second option is to interpret (b) in the case above as follows. I obviously have a memory of the brightest student in my philosophy class. And as Gómez-Torrente (p. 29) notes, we can perfectly well use demonstratives exploiting memory connections with objects. If this is right, we do not need to deploy attributive descriptions in order to bring memories to our consciousness and exploit memorial links with objects. These memorial links would be similar to the perceptual links established naturally between our minds and objects in the external world: just as we do not need to deploy attributive descriptions to grasp objects in our perceptual field, we do not (always) need to deploy attributive descriptions to grasp objects stored in our

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[5] One possibility is to consider a demonstrative use coupled with an attributive intention as an expression like Kaplan's *dthat*, which is still directly referential. I am not sure what to say in these cases. I think, however, that my point still stands: the point of a genuine demonstrative is to exploit an already established connection between the speaker and the object; in *dthat* cases, this connection is absent, and this is why *dthat* needs a descriptive complement: to get at the object satisfactionally.

memory. We simply *recall* them. If this is correct, the description 'the brightest student in my philosophy class' is superfluous for the fixation of the object of my thought, since this object is fixed by my memorial link to it. So, the intention behind this description should be seen not as an attributive intention, but as a genuine referential memory-based intention. This interpretation respects the idea that the intentions required by demonstrative reference are referential intentions, not attributive intentions. Thus, in this view the case describes a situation in which two conflicting referential intentions point in different directions: one memory-based, and one perceptually-based.

I think this is the interpretation that makes the problem of conflicting intentions to (SIT) more persuasive. But I also think this conflict between two distinct *types* of referential intention is not possible. The issue seems to be ultimately an empirical matter, but I will try to offer some (admittedly vague and speculative) considerations to support it. In order to exploit a mind-object connection in the use of a demonstrative, it seems that we need to *attend* to the object. That is, a genuine referential intention requires that we focus our attention on the object we intend to demonstrate. Let us further distinguish between *perceptual* attention, in which we attend to extramental objects in our perceptual field, and *introspective* attention, in which attend to objects via inner mechanisms (memories, imaginations, and so on). In order for the soccer player case to work, it should be possible to attend to an object via perception and to an object via memory *simultaneously* in the episode of tokening the demonstrative. That is, there are conflicting intentions only if it is possible to have my attention genuinely *split* between my perceptual attention to the soccer player and my introspective, memorial attention to the brightest student, and the use of the demonstrative would try to exploit both kinds of attention at the same time. But this seems highly

implausible to me. Attention is a limited resource. It is hard enough to shift attention quickly from one sensory modality to another, or even between objects in a single sensory modality, let alone attend simultaneously to two objects via different *kinds* of attention. Shifting attention inward, to browse our memory, is too demanding to our cognition to allow for simultaneous perceptual attention. If these observations go in the right direction, a speaker can only have referential intentions based on *at most* one kind of attention.

This suggests that it is unlikely that I really do have conflicting intentions in the soccer player case. Either my use exploits perceptual attention, or it exploits introspective attention. As the soccer player case is described, it seems clear that my attention is focused on *the player*, and not on the brightest student. This is why, according to our intuitions, I refer to the perceptually given player, not to the brightest student. This is as it should be, and it is as (SIT) predicts.

It seems to me that many of the cases of conflicting intentions discussed in the literature involve either a supposed conflict between an attributive intention and a referential intention, or a supposed conflict between different kinds of attention involved in referential intentions (e.g. perceptually based vs. memory based). If I am right, though, these cases are not realistic, and so they do not establish a genuine problem for the Simple Intention Theory, and to the Kaplanian project more generally.

None of this, of course, settles the matter definitively. My considerations apply only to the typical cases, such as the soccer player case and the Carnap/Agnew case, in which there are strong intuitions that there is no reference failure nor indeterminacy. For other cases, such as the tree case (p. 42), reference really seems indeterminate. And of course, Gómez-Torrente might be right that, in the end, we might be better off with a theory of roughly sufficient conditions

for the reference of demonstratives. His arguments in *Roads to Reference* are certainly powerful and persuasive, and deserve to be studied in detail.

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