

# Lecture 01: Words and Things

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## 1. The Question's History

'there are these objects out there. Here is the mind/brain, carrying on its thinking/computing. How do the thinker's symbols ... get into a unique correspondence with objects and sets out there?' (Putnam 1981, p. 51)

'the implication of the thinking situation is of some 'correspondence' ... the problem of its nature and valid determination remains the central question of any theory of thinking' (Dewey 1907, p. 200)

'That truth is the correspondence of a representation with its object is, as Kant says, merely the nominal definition of it. ... But what does this correspondence or reference of the sign, to its object, consist in?' (Peirce 1906, p. 390/5.553)

## 2. The Question

Consider utterances of the following sentences:

1. 'Earth is being warmed by human activity.'
2. 'Mars is being warmed by human activity.'

The first depends for its truth on how things are with Earth whereas the second depends for its truth on how things are with Mars. Why do the two utterances differ in this way?

## 3. Reference

Guess: It is because the utterance of 'Earth' stands in some relation to Earth whereas the utterance of 'Mars' stands in that relation to Mars.

Terminology: Call this relation 'reference'.

Question: What is this relation? Is there really any such relation at all?

## 4. Pragmatists on Reference

'What the sign virtually has to do in order to indicate its object—and make it its—all it has to do is just to seize its interpreter's eyes and forcibly turn them upon the object meant: it is what a knock at the door does, or an alarm or other bell, or a whistle, a cannon-shot, etc.' (Peirce 1906, p. 60/5.554)

'I say that we know an object by means of an idea whenever we ambulate towards the object under the impulse which the idea communicates' (James 1909, p. 140)

## 5. Three Theories of Reference

*These are very crude statements of the positions; they are useful at most for getting a handle on the core ideas.*

Pragmatist: For an utterance of 'Earth' to refer to Earth is for this utterance to seize the 'interpreter's eyes and forcibly turn them upon' Earth.

Causal (Kripke): For an utterance of 'Earth' to refer to Earth is for (a) Earth to have been baptised 'Earth' and (b) this utterance to be causally related in the appropriate way to that baptism event.

Description (not Russell, maybe no one): For an utterance of 'Earth' to refer to Earth is for (a) the speaker to have associated this utterance of 'Earth' with a description, and (b) Earth to be the thing which, uniquely, this description is true of.

## References

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