

## DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS AND THE TIME OF A KILLING\*

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Assume that at time  $t_0$  John shot Smith and twenty four hours later ( $t_1$ ) Smith died, and hence John killed Smith. Is the event of John's shooting of Smith the same event as John's killing of Smith? Donald Davidson thinks so, but philosophers like Judith Jarvis Thomson say no.<sup>1</sup> Thomson confronts Davidson's identity claim with three types of problems. Basically, she uses all of them to show that there are some properties which the two events do not share, and hence, by implicitly appealing to Leibniz's principle, she concludes that the two events should be different.

The first type of problem is called 'the tense problem.' Thomson contends that there was a time  $t$  between  $t_0$  and  $t_1$  at which it would be true to say

(1) John's shooting of Smith has occurred;

but it would be false to say at time  $t$

(2) John's killing of Smith has occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson's argument for it is in her paper, 'The Time of a Killing,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVIII, No. 5 (March 1971), 115-32. Our discussion of her view is based upon the above paper. For Davidson's view, see his 'The Individuation of Events,' in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 163-80.

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The second type of problem is called 'the date problem.' Let  $t'$  be a time after  $t_1$ . At  $t'$  it would be true to say

(3) John's shooting of Smith occurred at  $t_0$ ;

but would be false to say at time  $t'$

(4) John's killing of Smith occurred at  $t_0$ .

The third type of problem is called "the temporal problem." It would be true at  $t'$  to say that<sup>2</sup>

(5) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after John's shooting of Smith;

but it would be false to say at  $t'$

(6) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after John's killing of Smith.

The above so-called problems are expressed in terms of definite descriptions (of events). I think Davidson's identity claim can be defended against such challenges. One of the important keys to dissolve or explain away these problems is to get a better understanding of the use of definite descriptions in general. My first concern is to explain and exploit a distinction made by A. N. Prior: the distinction between strong and weak senses of 'the'.<sup>3</sup>

### The Strong and Weak Senses of 'The'

To be accurate, the distinction is made between the two senses of 'The\_\_\_is a ...', or in symbols, ' $F(\exists x)Gx$ '. In its strong sense, it reads: 'The  $x$  which [is] *ever* to be a  $G$ , [is]  $F$ .'

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<sup>2</sup> Our uses of the letters ' $t_0$ ', ' $t$ ', ' $t_1$ ', and ' $t$ ' will refer to the same points in time throughout the whole discussion.

<sup>3</sup> A. N. Prior makes such distinction in his *Time and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), Chapter VIII; see especially p. 76. The same distinction is also made in his *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 164.

Here we follow W. V. Quine in putting verbs in square brackets to signify that they are taken as tenseless.<sup>4</sup> Another reading of the same thing is: 'For some  $x$ ,  $x$  F's,  $x$  G's, and whatever G's, had G'd, or will G, is identical with  $x$ .' This is basically Prior's reading except he uses other symbols in place of 'F' and 'G'.<sup>5</sup> To follow Quine again, this last reading would go like this: 'For some  $x$ ,  $x$  [F's],  $x$  [G's], and whatever G's, had G'd, or will G [is] identical with  $x$ .' In its weak sense, ' $F(\exists x)Gx$ ', according to Prior, is read as: 'The only thing that is *now* a G is *now* an F.'<sup>6</sup> This reading is unnecessarily restrictive, as indicated by the second occurrence of 'now'. For in some cases one may want to assert the following: 'The only thing that is now a G *was* (*will be*) an F.' Since our concern is the part of definite description ' $(\exists x)Gx$ ' in ' $F(\exists x)Gx$ ' rather than the latter expression, we shall relax such restriction and only emphasize the first occurrence of 'now', when it comes to the weak sense of 'the'. But an even better strategy is to ignore such restriction by making the distinction of strong and weak senses of 'the' directly at the level of definite descriptions themselves. Thus, for a definite description ' $(\exists x)Fx$ ', the strong reading goes like this: 'The  $x$  such that  $x$  is F,  $x$  was F, or  $x$  will be F.' Its weak reading goes like this: 'The  $x$  such that it is *now* F.'

But what would an actual example of a definite description which allows a strong *and* a weak sense of 'the' look like? Prior takes the distinction between strong and weak senses of 'the' as reflecting some sort of ambiguity on the part of the word 'the'.<sup>7</sup> So we may rephrase our question as follows: What would an actual example of a definite description whose 'the'

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<sup>4</sup> See Quine's 'Mr. Strawson on Logical Theory,' reprinted in his *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, rev. and enl. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 137-57; see especially p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> For this see the two places referred to in Note 3.

<sup>6</sup> See Prior, *Past, Present and Future*, p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> See Prior, *Time and Modality*, p. 164, where the entry "'The', ambiguity of" in the *Index* refers back to the place in the book where the distinction between strong and weak senses of 'the' is made.

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is ambiguous in Prior's sense look like? Presumably, a definite description like 'the President of the United States' is ambiguous in the required sense; it denotes Reagan when taken in the weak sense of 'the', but denotes nothing when taken in the strong sense of 'the'. Clearly, a definite description like 'the present President of the United States' has only the weak sense of 'the', while 'the first person who is ever to solve problem #2' no doubt has only the strong sense of 'the'. It seems, then, that some definite descriptions, so to speak, wear the strong or weak sense of 'the' on their faces, while others show no clue to either of the two possibilities.

But if it is ambiguity that is in question, then the two-fold distinction is certainly inadequate. Why only pick out 'now' (or 'present') and 'ever' for consideration? Between 'now' and 'ever' there are infinitely many possible points in time or periods of time which may consist of sub-periods of time which may not even be contiguous. The possibilities are as many as there are sets of real numbers, if we grant that time is representable by a real line. But before rushing to such generalization, we have to first understand what now and ever are supposed to be. Undoubtedly, they are respectively point of time, and the time line as a whole without ending on either side. But our question is: a point of time, and the time line of what?

In a somewhat different way Prior explains the weak sense of 'the' with the following remarks: "In the weak sense, 'The  $a$  is  $b$ ' is true so long as  $a$  is a  $b$  when it is the only  $a$  at the time of utterance."<sup>8</sup> By comparing this with his previous explanation, we see that this one is made by specifying the truth condition of a sentence, while the previous one was done by putting the word 'present' or 'now' right into the definite description. These two different explanations strongly suggest that the word 'present' in 'the present  $a$  is  $b$ ' is used to indicate the time at which an entity must have a certain property in order to be qualified as the referent of the definite description.

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<sup>8</sup> Prior, *Time and Modality*, p. 76.

On the other hand, a definite description with the strong sense of 'the' does not require an entity to have a certain property at any particular time in order to be qualified as the referent. Instead, as long as an entity has that property at any time, it is qualified as the referent.

Now it should be clear that our contention of generalizing the two-fold distinction is correct. From the end where the word 'present' indicates that a certain entity must have a certain property at the time when a certain definite description is used, in order to be the referent of the definite description, we may generalize the distinction in this way: a definite description may be so used that it is required that an entity have a certain property at a preset point of time or throughout a preset period of time in order to be qualified as the referent of the definite description, where the point or period of time can be located anywhere on the time line. (And as noted before, a period of time may even consist of non-contiguous points or periods of time.) And from the other end where an entity can be the referent of a certain definite description as long as it has a certain property at any time whatsoever, we may generalize in the following way: a definite description may be so used that it is required that an entity have certain property any time during any particular preset period of time.

The expression 'a preset time or period of time' is ambiguous in the following way. The year 1984 is a period of time, so is *this* year, and they are, as a matter of fact, the same period of time. A time or period of time may be said to be preset in the sense that it is only vaguely indicated, say, by the expression 'the time a definite description is used.' Or it may be said to be preset in the sense that a definite time or period of time such as the year 1982, or the first hour of the first day of 1982 is given. In the former case, no particular time is actually given, but only a function from contexts to particular times or time-periods is given.

In our first generalization we started with the case in which an entity must have a certain property at the time specified by the word 'present', i.e., the time when a certain

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definite description is used. In other words, our generalization started with a case in which a time was only vaguely preset. To be consonant with this fact, the expression 'a preset time or period of time' in the characterization of the first generalization should be understood in its second sense mentioned in the above. And the first generalization would then be taken as follows: a definite description may be so used that it requires that an entity have a certain property at a time or throughout a period of time which is preset with respect to the time the definite description is used, for instance, the time can be the time when the definite description is used, or the previous day before the definite description is used. But there seems to be no point in excluding other senses of the same expression. So we may allow both readings of our first generalization; the same may apply to our second generalization.

For later reference, let us call the preset time or period of time associated with a definite description the *preset time of application* (in short, PTA). In other words, a PTA of a definite description is the time at which, or a period of time throughout which, an entity must have a certain property in order to be qualified as its referent, if the definite description involves the generalized weak sense of 'the'. The PTA of a definite description involving the generalized strong sense of 'the' is also a period, but its referent only has to have a certain property anytime during this period.

A definite description like 'the present owner of the house' may be said to be so used that an entity must have (at the time when the definite description is used) the property of *being the only person who owns the house*. But this definite description is neither ambiguous in Prior's sense nor ambiguous in our generalized sense of the word 'the'. What is ambiguous is rather the definite description 'the owner of the house'; it can mean either what the above description means, or, say, the owner of the house from 1974 to 1975, and so on. Our first generalization is intended to apply to definite descriptions like 'the owner of the house' or 'the President of the United States', rather than descriptions like 'the present

owner of the house' or 'the present President of the United States'. In other words, it intends to apply to definite descriptions which neither give a definite time or period of time, nor give a function from the contexts of uses to a time or period of time. It is not true that definite descriptions of this type are all ambiguous. Whether they are depends very much upon the contexts in which they are used. But no doubt they may be ambiguous in some contexts.

So much for the generalizations of Prior's distinction. For our purpose, what are particularly significant to us are definite descriptions which are ambiguous in the above sense. Due to the fact that definite descriptions of this type do not wear their PTA on their faces, it is extremely likely that one who uses them would often lose track of their PTA's and hence would use them at times outside their PTA's and still take them to be denoting. I think this is why Thomson thinks that she sees three types of problem in the first place.

In what follows, we shall be mainly concerned with definite descriptions with generalized weak sense of 'the', so the PTA of a definite description will be understood as a point of time at which or a period of time *throughout* which its referent must have a certain property.

In order to draw our attention to the existence of the PTA of a definite description, we shall sometimes use the following symbol to represent an *ambiguous* definite description:

$$[(\exists x) Fx]_{t^0}$$

where  $t^0$  indicates the PTA of the definite description '( $\exists x$ )  $Fx$ '. Clearly, the following holds for ambiguous definite descriptions '( $\exists x$ )  $Fx$ ':

$$[(\exists x) Fx]_{t^0} = a \text{ only if } a \text{ is the unique element such that } Fa \text{ at (or throughout) } t^0.$$

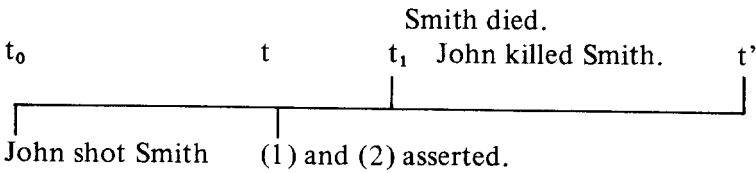
One thing needs to be said so that some possible misunderstanding may be prevented. The use of the symbol ' $[(\exists x) Fx]_{t^0}$ ' may cause some uneasiness concerning the paraphrasing of sentences (say à la Russell) which contain definite descriptions

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enclosed by such a symbol. This symbol (and others similar to it to be introduced later) serves only as a reminder of something important, rather than as a part of the language from which definite descriptions are constructed. So paraphrase can proceed as usual. But when the reminder is gone, one has to be more careful about the thing the symbol is used to remind us of.

**The Tense Problem**

For subsequent reference, let us give a diagram of what happened in our story as told at the very beginning of this paper. To avoid prejudging the time at which an event occurs—which is exactly one of the points of controversy between Davidson and Thomson—we shall not use definite descriptions in the following diagram:



Throughout this paper the four symbols 't<sub>0</sub>', 't', 't<sub>1</sub>' and 't'' will be used as constants; they will thus refer only to times indicated in the diagram.

It is obvious that at time t, one can truly say that John's shooting of Smith has occurred, or in other words, one can truly assert (1). We can also agree with Thomson that at t to assert

John's killing has occurred (= (2))

is to say something false. But we do not have to agree with her that these imply that John's shooting and John's killing are two different events. Nor have we to say that the killing and the shooting are the same event either. (At least when this is said at some particular times.) This may sound strange or even



paradoxical. How can two events be neither identical nor different? But to ask such a question is to presuppose that 'John's shooting' and 'John's killing' do denote or refer to events, either the same or different, at all times when they are used. This is the very presupposition that we want to call into doubt. Once such doubt becomes possible, one can see that the whole matter is not so strange or paradoxical any more. A more accurate and less strange, paradoxical way to put the matter is to talk not about whether two events are identical or different, or neither different nor identical, but to talk about the definite descriptions of events instead. Let  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  be two definite descriptions of events. Usually one would take the position that if  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  both denote, then between

$$(i) D_1 = D_2$$

and

$$(ii) D_1 \neq D_2,$$

one must be true and another false, no matter when one makes both assertions. But this is the case only if  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  have their strong sense of 'the', or if we take (ii) with narrow scope. To support this, let us tell another little story.

Johnson, the only son from Tom's first marriage, had an unhappy childhood. When he was only seven years old, his mother died. Two years later in 1970, his father married his step-mother Joan. Joan was far from being a loving and caring step-mother. In their weak senses, the definite descriptions 'the father of Johnson' (or simply 'Johnson's father') and 'the husband of Joan' (or simply 'Joan's husband') read respectively as follows:

- (a) [the x such that x is a father of Johnson] now,
- (b) [the x such that x is a husband of Joan] now.

Let us ignore the fact that 'a father' and 'a husband' may have some unwanted connotations. Also let us ignore the fact that 'now' in (a) may be misleading. Assume that in 1969 both (a) and (b) were used by someone. (a) would then no doubt

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denote Tom. But how about (b)? Let us assume that in 1969 Joan was single. In that case no one would in 1969 be the person who was then the husband of Joan. So (b) when used in 1969 did not denote any person, hence it was vacuous then. Because (b) was vacuous in 1969, the sentence

$$(a) = (b)$$

when asserted in 1969 would be false. To see this, let us take (a) and (b) to be ' $(\exists x) Fx$ ' and ' $(\exists x) Gx$ ', respectively. Then, according to Russell, we may paraphrase

$$(c) (\exists x) Fx = (\exists x) Gx$$

into

$$(d) (\exists!x) (\exists!y) (Fx \& Gy \& x = y).$$

(d), when asserted in 1969, would be false because it was not the case that  $(\exists!y) Gy$  then. On the other hand, the sentence

$$(e) (a) \neq (b),$$

that is,

$$(f) (\exists x) Fx \neq (\exists x) Gx,$$

when taken with wide scope, can be paraphrased à la Russell as

$$(g) (\exists!x) (\exists!y) (Fx \& Gy \& x \neq y).$$

(g), as asserted in 1969, would be false for the reason that no person was then the husband of Joan. One can easily verify that if (e) is taken with narrow scope, i.e., if we paraphrase (e) as

$$(h) \neg(\exists!x) (\exists!y) (Fx \& Gy \& x = y),$$

then (e) (i.e., (h)) would be true, when asserted in 1969.

Two things should be noted. First, (a) and (b) did denote, as when used in 1970 after Tom married Joan and onward. Ordinarily, one might understand 'a definite description does denote' as meaning that it denotes independently of the time when the definite description is used. This is not what I have

in mind here. Second, there are indeed circumstances in which (i) and (ii) are both false, and hence it is not a case in which at least one of them must be true. The second is exactly what we would also get, if one of the two definite descriptions (i) and (ii) were vacuous in the ordinary sense, i.e., vacuous independently of the time a definite description might be used. What sets the present view apart from the more familiar view is that we insist that some definite descriptions may be vacuous at one time of its use while non-vacuous at another.

Let us now look into Thomson's first type of problem, i.e., the tense problem. (1) and (2) are asserted at time  $t$  (see the diagram), a time between the shooting ( $t_0$ ) and the time of Smith's death ( $t_1$ ). Since  $t$  is later than  $t_0$ , it is no doubt the case that (1) is true when it is asserted at  $t$ . But since  $t$  is earlier than  $t_1$ , i.e., earlier than Smith's death, it would be inappropriate to call the shooting the killing; for at least in some sense of killing, only when the victim is dead can the shooting be called a killing.<sup>9</sup> So it seems to be the case that (2) when asserted at time  $t$  is indeed false.

As an instance of Leibniz's principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals stated as follows:

$$(iii) (x)(y)(x = y \rightarrow (Fx \equiv Gx)),$$

we may have the following:

$$(iv) \text{ John's shooting of Smith} = \text{John's killing of Smith} \rightarrow \\ (\text{John's shooting of Smith has occurred} \equiv \text{John's killing of Smith has occurred}),$$

if we let 'F' be 'has occurred'. For Thomson's argument to go through, one has to assume that (iv) is true and its consequent is false. If (iv) is an instance of (iii), and apparently it is, then one would not want to dispute the fact that (iv) is true, unless

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<sup>9</sup> Davidson seems to hold another notion of killing which Thomson does not subscribe to. More will be said about his different notion of killing at the end of this paper.

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one also rejects (iii). And I accept (iii), if only for the reason that this would simplify our discussion. The consequent of (iv), as we have shown, is false (at some times). So it would seem that the antecedent of (iv) must be false. Now, and this is the crucial point, Thomson seems to think that the only way to explain the falsity of the antecedent of (iv) is to say that the event of John's shooting of Smith is *different* from the event of John's killing of Smith.

But we have already learned that a definite description may be vacuous when used at one time and non-vacuous at another. As noted before, due to the fact that at  $t$  Smith was still alive, no event was then called 'John's killing of Smith', the definite description 'John's killing of Smith' was then vacuous, while the definite description 'John's shooting of Smith' was then non-vacuous. This explains why the antecedent of (iv) was false at  $t$ .

(iv) is in an important way misleading: it in no way indicates the time at which the definite descriptions are used. If we let the symbol  $\{(\exists x) Gx\}_T^T$  represent a definite description with 'T' indicating the time at which the definite description is used and 'T' indicating the PTA of the definite description, then a less misleading version of (iv) would look like this:

$$(iv') \text{ [John's shooting of Smith]}_T^t = \text{[John's killing of Smith]}_T^t \rightarrow (\text{[John's shooting of Smith]}_T^t \text{ has occurred} \equiv \text{[John's killing of Smith]}_T^t \text{ has occurred}).$$

The definite description  $\text{[John's killing of Smith]}_T^t$  is vacuous at time  $t$  simply because  $t$  is outside of its PTA, i.e., outside of 'T'. Here I am not setting up the PTA on my own. This is implied by Thomson's following remarks: "Surely if one says that X killed Y at such and such at [sic] time, one at least suggests, gives the impression that, entitles one's hearer to suppose that Y is dead, and has been since that time." (120) She even takes this to be a preferable position which she assumes throughout her paper. (ibid.)

The fact that a definite description may be vacuous when

used at a certain time but non-vacuous when used at another also has its 'ontological' counterpart. The quotation marks surrounding the word 'ontological' are used to indicate that what we have to say in the following can also be expressed in an ontologically less committal way, say, by talking about predicates as applying to events instead of properties of events.

John's shooting of Smith no doubt lasted only a short while. But after it was over, we could still talk about it, attribute new properties to it, just as we would normally do to other more familiar entities such as human beings. For instance, one may now attribute to Meinong the property of getting more attention and respect from more philosophers, although Meinong is no longer alive. Prior distinguishes the history one event may *have* from the history that the event *is*.<sup>10</sup> He then says that while the history the event *is* may be short, it "doesn't prevent the history that it has from being indefinitely long."<sup>11</sup> In its indefinitely long history an event may gain or lose certain properties. So when John's shooting of Smith was over, its history continued. One might say that this very same event which had occurred at  $t_0$ , acquired at  $t_1$  a new property of being a killing of Smith, due to the fact that Smith died at  $t_1$ . It is due to this new property that after  $t_1$  we may refer to John's shooting of Smith as John's killing of Smith. And from  $t_1$  onward, we are justified to proclaim the true identity statement

John's killing of Smith = John's shooting of Smith.

But before that the identity statement is false for the reason given before.

### The Date Problem

The date problem is a bit different from the tense problem. We can no longer claim that the definite description

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<sup>10</sup> See Prior, *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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'John's killing of Smith' fails to denote (at  $t'$ ). For at  $t'$  Smith had already died, so at  $t'$  the definite description in question does denote an event which was also called 'John's shooting of Smith.' This indicates that our strategy of dismissing the tense problem cannot be directly applied to the date problem.

(3) and (4) are ambiguous in indefinitely many ways. For instance, (4) can be taken as saying

- (4i) The event which is *now* called 'John's killing of Smith' occurred at  $t_0$ .

Or, without explicitly referring to a linguistic entity, such as 'John's killing of Smith', we may take it as saying

- (4ii) The event which is the only event that is *now* a killing of Smith by John occurred at  $t_0$ .

The word 'now' in (4i) and (4ii) refers to the time  $t'$ , when (4i) or (4ii) is asserted at  $t'$ . And both would be true when asserted at  $t'$ , contrary to Thomson's contention. They in no way imply that the event in question was called 'John's killing of Smith' at time  $t_0$ . They instead say that an event which occurred at  $t_0$  is now (i.e., at  $t'$ ) (called) the event of John's killing of Smith. But (4) can also be taken as saying

- (4iii) The event which was called (at  $t_0$ ) 'John's killing of Smith' occurred at  $t_0$ ,

or better,

- (4iv) The only event which was at  $t_0$  a killing of Smith by John occurred at  $t_0$ .

When asserted at  $t'$ , both (4iii) and (4iv) would be false, for at time  $t_0$  there was no unique event which had the property of being a killing of Smith, much less an event which had the property of being John's killing of Smith. Since Thomson takes (4) to be false when asserted at  $t'$ , she must have in mind (4iii), (4iv) or something like it, rather than (4i) or (4ii). But exactly what has she in mind? This is a difficult question to answer. But it is not difficult to indicate the range in which an

answer may lie.

Previously we would use '[John's killing of Smith] $_{T}^{t'}$ ' as an expression for a definite description which indicates that its PTA is T and the time of its use is time t'. When (4) is understood as saying (4iii), then though the definite description 'John's killing of Smith' is used at time t', it is imaginable that the user may think that at time t' it does not denote, in other words, he may take it to be vacuous at t'. As one can see from (4iii), one might use it at t', yet think that it denotes at t<sub>0</sub>, or at some other time different from t'. In the case of (1) and (2), we saw that the non-vacuity of the definite descriptions involved was guaranteed by the fact that they were used within their respective PTA's. But (4iii) and (4iv) clearly imply that the definite description 'John's killing of Smith' can be non-vacuously used at t<sub>0</sub>, a time outside of its PTA. So in order to deal with the date problem, in addition to the time at which a definite description is used, we have to make a distinction between the PTA of a definite definition and the *implied time of non-vacuity* of the same definite description. People often think that a definite description is either vacuous or not, independently of the time at which it is used. This, I think, may account for the fact that Thomson runs these two things together.

To reflect this new distinction in our symbolism, we may have

$$T_3 [\text{John's killing of Smith}]_{T_1}^{T_2},$$

where T<sub>1</sub> is the PTA, T<sub>2</sub> the time when the definite description is used, and T<sub>3</sub> the implied time of non-vacuity.

The falsity of (4) can be accounted for by the fact that (4iii) and (4iv) are false. The falsity of the latter two further indicates that the definite description 'John's killing of Smith', as it occurs in (4), is used in a context that implies that it can be non-vacuously used at times outside its PTA. This very last fact makes the definite description in (4) into a vacuous one. The last point may be explained somewhat differently as follows. The definite description "the event which was called (at

$t_0$ ) 'John's killing of Smith' " in (4iii) is clearly vacuous, because at  $t_0$  no event is called 'John's killing of Smith', as we know that the latter definite description is vacuous at  $t_0$ . Similarly, the definite description 'the only event which was at  $t_0$  a killing of Smith by John' in (4iv) is also vacuous. Now if (4) is taken to be either (4iii) or (4iv), and if the two definite descriptions involved are vacuous, then the definite description in (4) must also be vacuous; and its vacuity is explained by the fact that it is associated with an implied time of non-vacuity that lies outside of its PTA.

We may now symbolize (4) as follows:

(4v)  $t_0$ [John's killing of Smith] $_{T_1}^{t'}$  occurred at  $t_0$ .

(4v) is false, because  $t_0$  is not in T. On the other hand, the definite description in (3) is non-vacuous. This can be seen from the following two readings of (3) that are analogous to (4iii) and (4iv), respectively:

- (3i) The event which was called (at  $t_0$ ) 'John's shooting of Smith' occurred at  $t_0$ ;
- (3ii) The only event which was at  $t_0$  a shooting of Smith by John occurred at  $t_0$ .

Not only are the definite descriptions involved in (3i) and (3ii) non-vacuous, the two sentences are both true. So now we can see that (3) is true, and (4) is false because the latter involves a vacuous definite description. So what we have here is a case exactly like the case of (1) and (2). Thus, exactly as in the case of tense problem, we may explain the falsity of (4) without being driven to the conclusion that John's shooting and his killing are two different events.

The ambiguity of (4) results from the lack of knowledge about what Thomson intends the  $T_3$  in

$T_3$ [John's killing of Smith] $_{T_1}^{T_2}$

to be: does she intend it to be  $t_0$ , as we assumed it to be the case in (4iii) and (4iv), or some other time? Since she takes (4) to be false when asserted at  $t'$ , she must have intended the  $T_3$



to be outside of  $T_1$  (i.e.,  $T' \notin T$  and  $T' \notin T$ ). Now let  $T_3$  be any time or any period of time that is outside of  $T_1$ , and we get a possible answer to the question of what Thomson intends (4) to be saying. So the range of possible answers to the question of what Thomson has in mind is clear. This further shows that the ambiguities which (4) may involve is more than two-fold as we saw in (4iii) and (4iv).

### The Temporal Problem

Both (5) and (6) talk about the interval between the occurrences of two events. Clearly, Smith's death occurred at  $t_1$ . So to determine the truth value of (5) and (6) what we have to do is to see if John's shooting of Smith or John's killing of Smith indeed occurred 24 hours before  $t_1$ . With respect to a definite description like 'John's killing of Smith', the question of when the event so described occurs amounts to the question of when the definite description comes to denote the event. Thomson takes (6) to be false and (5) to be true, as we would no doubt do. This shows that she takes the times when the two definite descriptions start to denote events to be different, a point we would no doubt accept.

Clearly, (5) and (6) are also subject to the same kind of ambiguity faced by (3) and (4). For instance, (6) may be taken as saying

- (6i) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after the occurrence of the event which is *now* the killing of Smith by John.

Or, it can be understood as saying

- (6ii) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after the occurrence of the event which *was at*  $t_0$  the killing of Smith by John.

Again the ambiguity can be more than two-fold. It is clear that (6i) is true, while (6ii) is false. It is also clear that if  $t'$  is any

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time before  $t_1$ , then the following is also false:

- (6iii) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after the occurrence of the event which [is] at  $t'$  the killing of Smith by John.

Now since Thomson takes (6) to be false, she must implicitly take (6) to be

- (6iv) Smith's death occurred 24 hours after the occurrence of the event which [is] at  $t_2$  the killing of Smith by John,

where  $t_2$  can be any time before  $t_1$ . So the implied time of non-vacuity for the definite description 'John's killing of Smith' as it occurs in (6) must not overlap the stretch of time with starting point at  $t_1$ . But as we can see, the PTA of the definite description in question is just the latter stretch of time. This means that Thomson's implied time of non-vacuity for the definite description is such that it is outside of the PTA of the same definite description. From this it follows that we have a vacuous definite description in hand. Let us express (6) partially in our symbols, and we get

- (6v) Smith's death occurred  $\lambda$  hours after  $t_0$  [John's killing of Smith] $_{T_0}^{t_1}$ .

The latter symbolized definite description is vacuous; so is the definite description 'John's killing of Smith' as it occurs in (6). Just like in previous two cases, the falsity of (6) can be perfectly explained without our being driven to the conclusion that John's shooting and John's killing are two different events.

### Some Concluding Remarks

It was noted at the beginning of this paper that Davidson's identity claim could be defended against Thomson's coun-

terarguments. If we may say that Thomson's three types of problem result from some sort of confusions concerning definite descriptions, then, oddly enough, Davidson is not totally immune from such confusions.

To see this, let us look at his famous example of space traveller.<sup>12</sup> Suppose I poison the water tank of a spaceship when it stands on earth. My purpose is to kill the space traveller. When the space traveller reaches Mars, he drinks the water and dies. Now we have two events: my pouring the poison and the death of the traveller. It is clear that one event precedes and causes the other. Davidson then asks the following question: "But when does the event of my killing the traveller come in?" His answer is that "my killing the traveller is identical with my pouring the poison" (p. 177). So far so good. But then Davidson makes the following remarks:

"In that case, the killing is over when the pouring is. We are driven to the conclusion that I have killed the traveller long before he dies" (p. 177).

We can now see that we do not have to be driven to the conclusion that I have killed the traveller before he dies. The identity claim

My pouring the poison = my killing the traveller

is true, if it is asserted after the traveller's death; but it needs not be true if it is asserted before that.

Davidson seems to think that the above identity claim is true even before the traveller is dead. (More about this later.) So he is clearly in the camp of those who take all identity claims like the above to be either true at all time or true at no time. But as we noted before, we may look at my pouring the poison as an event which acquires a new property of being a killing of the traveller, when the latter dies, and hence after his

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<sup>12</sup> In this section, all references to Davidson will be to his book mentioned in Note 1. So all numerical references will be page numbers in this book. For the example of the space traveller, see p. 177.

death, my pouring the poison may be redescribed as my killing the traveller.

Davidson sometimes describes the conclusion that I have killed the traveller long before he dies as a paradox, and sometimes as a puzzle (p. 177, p. xiv). He recommends that the way to cope with "the paradox should take the form of reconciling us to the conclusion" (p. 177). He gives some reasons for doing so. One of them is that "[t]o describe an event as a killing is to describe it as an event (here an action) that caused a death, and we are not apt to describe an action as one that caused a death until the death occurs; yet it may be such an action before the death occurs" (p. 177).

Davidson is certainly right when he says that "we are not apt to describe an action as one that caused a death until the death occurs." But when he continues to say that "yet it may be such an action before the death occurs," he seems to suggest a different meaning for causing a death; i.e., he seems to take 'the event a causes b's death' as meaning something like 'the event a caused, is causing, or will cause b's death.' If this is what he has in mind, then to say that I have killed the traveller long before he dies is to say something like: I have performed, long before the traveller dies, some action that caused, is causing, or will cause the traveller's death. The latter is true and hence neither paradoxical nor puzzling. So either we stick to the more familiar sense of causing a death and refuse to be driven to what Davidson calls a paradox, or we could go along with the other sense of causing a death, and claim that what to Davidson is a paradox is but some plain truth. Either way, there is no paradox or puzzle.

Some of the confusions which we find in Davidson and Thomson are quite pervasive. Some philosophers react to Davidson's so-called paradox by proposing new theories of event individuation. Two of them are L. Davis and I. Thalberg. I think that they also share some of the confusions which we have all along tried to point out.<sup>13</sup> In fact, their new theories

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<sup>13</sup> See I. Thalberg, *Perception, Emotion and Action* (New Haven: Yale University

are in part motivated by such confusions. It would be interesting to see how much motivation is still left, once the confusions are cleared away.

## 確定描述詞與一個殺人事件發生的時間

方 萬 全

### 摘 要

Donald Davidson 的事件理論 (Theory of Events) 認為——舉例言之——要是某甲開槍射擊某乙，而導致乙在一天之後死亡，那麼「甲之射乙」與「甲之殺死乙」是同一事件。此說所面臨的一個問題是，要是二事件其實為同一事件，則二者發生的時間自當一樣；那麼，當甲已射了乙（而乙尚未死）時，甲便已殺死乙了。Davidson 認為解決此 'puzzle' 之法，便是承認在受害者未死之前，我們便可說甲已經殺死乙了。此種解決辦法顯然不理想。基於這個事實以及其他考慮，Judith J. Thomson 提出三種類型的論證，來說明諸如前述的二事件，並非同一事件。

本文的目的在於發展一個含有時間因素在內的確定描述詞理論 (Theory of Definite Descriptions)，用以(1)來反駁 Thomson 的論證，藉以說明 Davidson 認為前述二事件為同一事件之說，是站得住腳的；(2)來解消 (explain away) 前述 Davidson 所謂的 'puzzle'。