ABSTRACT. According to a classical view in the philosophy of language, the reference of a term is determined by a property of the term which supervenes on the history of its use. A contrasting view is that a term’s reference is determined by how it is properly interpreted, in accordance with certain constraints or conditions of adequacy on interpretations. Causal theories of reference of the sort associated with Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke and Michael Devitt are versions of the first view, while defenders of determination by interpretation theories include Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett and John Haugeeland. I use a variant of Putnam’s Twin Earth thought experiment to argue against the first view generally, and causal theories of reference in particular, then go on to argue that a properly-formulated version of the principle of charity can account for the intuitions that seem to support causal theories. Finally, I apply my version of interpretationism to the problem of reference to abstract objects and compare it with some of Wittgenstein’s and Quine’s views about language.

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According to a well-known view in the philosophy of language, the reference of a term is determined by a property of the term called its ‘meaning’. If two referring terms have the same such property, they have the same reference. Terms with different references must differ with respect to this property. A mark or sound lacking any such property is not really a term at all and refers to nothing.

This theory, which Mark Wilson has called the “determination by meaning view”, is taken to derive from Frege, who introduced the term of art ‘sense’ to describe this reference-determining property. Frege made other claims about senses (e.g., linking them to concepts or thoughts which could themselves be referred to in certain contexts); and other terms of art (‘intensions’) and accounts of the properties in question (functions from possible worlds to objects or sets of objects) have been associated with various versions of the view. But the core of the theory is that when a speaker uses a term(-token) on a given occasion, what, if anything, he refers to is completely determined by a property the term(-type) genuinely possesses prior to that occasion of use. This property is its sense.

What sorts of properties are senses? Since language doesn’t fall from...
the sky or spring from the earth, they can't be 'natural' properties of sounds or marks. They must be properties sounds or marks possess by virtue of what human beings (at least) have done with or to them, along with other facts about us and the world we inhabit and describe. To put it very generally, reference-determining properties of words have to supervene upon other properties they possess or have possessed prior to their occasions of use.

According to what might be called the 'classical' version of the determination by meaning view, a word's reference-determining properties supervene upon its users' psychological states. This is a natural position to take if we assume, as seems plausible, that psychological states are knowable by introspection and that competent speakers know what they mean by the words they use. But Hilary Putnam, using a celebrated thought experiment, argued that the following two theses, which together make up the classical view as it applies to general terms, cannot both be true:

(I) The intension of a term as used by a speaker is determined by his psychological state.
(II) The intension of a term determines its extension. ³

Putnam's conclusion was that while (II) is true, (I) must be rejected, and that the range of facts upon which a term's intension supervenes must be broadened to include facts about the context in which the term was originally introduced – a position encapsulated in the slogan "meanings ain't in the head". In a similar vein, Saul Kripke and others have argued against a version of the classical view as it applies to singular terms, the description theory of names, suggesting instead that what a name denotes is determined by the causal relationships linking it to the circumstances of its original introduction. ⁴ But Kripke also suggested in passing that this causal "chain of communication" might be regarded as a surrogate for the Fregean, psychologically-based notion of sense – an idea which Michael Devitt, another critic of the classical view, has developed at length. ⁵

I think that what is wrong is the determination by meaning view itself, rather than just an overly narrow construal of that view; that is, I think that it is a mistake to hold that by virtue of its previous employment a term acquires a property which completely determines the reference of its future uses. Closer to the truth, I think, is what might be called the "determination by interpretation" view – the idea that