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DIRECT REFERENCE AND EMPTY NAMES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Philosophy
in the College of Humanities and
in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term 2013

Thesis Chair: Donald Jones

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of my thesis is to explore and assess recent efforts by Direct Reference Theorists to explain the phenomenon of empty names. Direct Reference theory is, roughly, the theory that the meaning of a singular term (proper name, demonstrative, etc.) is simply its referent. Certain sentences, such as negative existentials (“Santa does not exist”), and sentences in contexts of fiction (“Holmes lived on Baker Street”), present the following challenge to DR Theory: Given that the semantic value of a name is simply its referent, how are we to explain the significance and truth-evaluability of such sentences? There have been various approaches DR Theorists have taken to address this problem, including the Pragmatic Strategy, Pretense Theory, Abstract Object Theory, and the Metalinguistic Strategy. All of these views are analyzed and assessed according to their various strengths and weaknesses. It is concluded that, overall, a Metalinguistic Strategy, supplemented by the notion of pretense, best deals with negative existentials and normal-subject predicate occurrences of empty names, Abstract Object Theory best deals with empty names in meta-fictional contexts, and Pretense Theory best deals with empty names in object-fictional contexts.

For my Bapa

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to first acknowledge and thank all my philosophical and intellectual peers at UCF. Though everyone I've known has had an impact, there are a few that were of particular importance and value in my intellectual development: Max Jackson, Ariel Gonzalez, Doug Zimmerman, Phil Maikkula, Jordan Bell, Dan Karpan, and Jesus Luzardo. During my time at UCF I was blessed with a tight-knit, engaging, and truly top-notch group of friends—due in no small part to one Jake Gibbs, whom we all loved and miss. The most salient, however, has been Ramon Lopez—without whose friendship, intellectual competition, and companionship, I would not be who or where I am today. He has been and continues to be of inestimable value in my philosophical and personal development. I'd also like to express my gratitude to my committee—Don Jones, Bill Butchard, Mason Cash, and Valerie Sims—for their continued patience and aid in the at times arduous process of completing this thesis. And, last but not least, I'd like to thank my family, and especially my parents, for their undying support of me and my philosophical endeavors. I know it hasn't always been easy to put up with questions like “What do you think about the nature of time?” when they were just trying to relax. I thank them for doing so—and for being my family.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

How can we talk about Pegasus? To what does the word 'Pegasus' refer? If our answer is, 'Something,' then we seem to believe in mystical entities; if our answer is, 'nothing', then we seem to talk about nothing and what sense can be made of this? Certainly when we said that Pegasus was a mythological winged horse we make sense, and moreover we speak the truth! If we speak the truth, this must be truth about something. So we cannot be speaking of nothing.

—W.V.O Quine

I. Truth, Meaning & Aboutness

The problem of empty names is really an issue involving several interrelated concepts that should be distinguished and clarified at the outset.

The main two concepts involved in our intuitions that give rise to the puzzle of empty names are those of *truth* and *meaning*. Issues involving the former are brought out most poignantly in the case of subject-predicate sentences, involving vacuous singular terms¹, which we take to be true. Consider, for example, the following:

- (1) Santa Claus can fit down chimneys.
- (2) Vulcan does not exist.
- (3) Romulus did not found Rome.²

Sentences (1)-(3) are, intuitively, true. But this seems strange given a straightforward and commonsensical account of the truth-conditions of sentences of the form 'a is F'. It seems that a

¹ A 'singular term' is any term that purports to designate some individual—paradigmatically, proper names like 'John', or demonstratives like 'That man'.

² At least, he didn't do so by himself—he can take that up with his brother, Remus.

statement of that form is true if, and only if, ‘a’ denotes some individual that exemplifies the property expressed by ‘F’. So, ‘Romulus did not found Rome’ would seem to be true when and only when there is an individual denoted by ‘Romulus’, and this individual exemplifies the property ‘having-not-founded-Rome’³, and so on for the rest. But in these cases there is no referent to be had. So how can we explain our intuition that these, and countless others like them, are true?

Additionally, we have *semantic* intuitions to the effect that various sentences containing empty names are *meaningful*. Consider again (1)-(3): They all seem meaningful, but it’s difficult to see how they *could* be given at least two plausible assumptions about meaning. The first such assumption has been called by those working in philosophy and linguistics the “Principle of Compositionality”. This principle states that the meaning of a sentence is a function of the semantic values of its parts (including connectives, such as ‘and’, ‘or’, and so forth). It would seem, then, that no unique proposition⁴ would be assignable to a sentence like ‘Vulcan is not a planet’, for example, if it lacked one of its semantic ‘inputs’—in this case, the value for ‘Vulcan’. Less technically, but still conveying the general idea, sentences such as (1)-(3) can only be meaningful if there is something for them to be *about*, but given the subject-term’s semantic vacuity, there is nothing for them to *be* about. Call this the ‘aboutness’ condition on the semantics of declarative sentences containing singular terms.

³ Here the Platonic language of ‘exemplification’ is used for convenience’ sake, and will be throughout. It is not to imply, though, that the truth conditions for such sentences are essentially Platonic—the problem here is about the subject-term’s denotation, not about what, if anything, the predicate-term expresses. Consider that the Resemblance Nominalist would face the same problem with the translation ‘Romulus resembles all things that did not found Rome’, for there would still need to be an object denoted by ‘Romulus’ that bears this primitive resemblance relation.

⁴ Throughout I will use ‘proposition’ to mean the semantic value of a sentence. In this sense, two semantically equivalent sentences in distinct languages are equivalent in virtue of the fact that they “express the same proposition”.

The next assumption about meaning is one which connects it up with the notion of truth in a fundamental way. The assumption is: A (declarative) sentence can be meaningful iff it has a set of truth-conditions. Working from the left side of the biconditional, it appears obvious that if a sentence is meaningful, then it has a set of truth conditions. Declarative sentences *say something about the world*, and so it must be that there is some way the world would or would not have to be in order for them to be true, and these of course are its truth-conditions⁵. From the left side of the biconditional, it also seems apparent that if a declarative sentence has a set of truth conditions, then it must be meaningful. For indeed, how could we demarcate the sentence's truth conditions if we did not first understand what the sentence *meant*?

Now, some philosophers have attempted to make the connection between meaning and truth close indeed. They have postulated semantic theories of truth, and truth-conditional theories of semantics⁶. For present purposes, however, I will remain neutral on this⁷. It suffices for now to point out that there is, at the very least, a relation of *material* equivalence between meaning (for declarative sentences) and truth-conditions, if not a stronger relation, such as that of identity.

It can be seen, then, that the notions of truth, meaning, and 'aboutness' form a sort of nexus of logically related concepts. Because of this, I will sometimes speak of meaning, sometimes of truth, and sometimes of aboutness depending on the case at hand and the intuitions

⁵ The way truth conditions are characterized throughout this thesis is basically in accord with truthmaker theory: There must be some state of affairs in the world, consisting of objects, that makes the statements true. Note, though, that even if one rejected truthmaker theory in favor of a theory that did not make essential appeal to objects in the world, the issues about meaning and compositionality would still remain.

⁶ See Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4 (1944): 341-376., and Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," *Synthese* 17 (1967): 304-23. , respectively.

⁷ Most Direct Reference theorists, however, seem to endorse a Propositionalist account of meaning, wherein a sentence's semantic value is given by the proposition it expresses. Just what these propositions are meant to be—at least those expressed by sentences featuring singular terms—is discussed in Chapter 2.

involved. Keep in mind, though, that the other notions are always, so to speak, “in the neighborhood”, and are not disconnected from the problem at hand.

I’d like to make one last remark regarding the differences, if any, between different “cases” of empty names. The first and most general distinction to be made is between empty names as they occur in negative existentials (statements denying the existence of their subject), and empty names as they occur in normal subject-predicate sentences.

Negative existentials involve us in questions that go beyond those that arise from normal subject-predicate sentences. Although both cases involve the aforementioned problems about semantic value and truth, negative existentials involve us in metaphysical quandaries about whether existence is a property of individuals, whether there in some sense *are* things that *don’t exist*, and so on. Because of this, they present us with the most poignant, and the most problematic, case of empty names. It may be that negative existentials and normal subject-predicate sentences ought to be given distinct analyses in the end. We will see if this is the case.

The next distinction is between *fictional* and *non-fictional* cases of empty names. A fictional case would, of course, be something like “Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street”, or “Ned Stark does not exist”. The unique thing about fictional names is that we use them *as* empty.⁸ On the other hand, non-fictional cases of empty names are cases in which we (at least initially) do *not* use them as empty. So, for example, when La Verrier uttered “Vulcan explains the perturbations in Mercury’s orbit” he used an empty name, but not *as* empty—although, we later discovered that it was indeed empty, and this is where the “at least initially” qualification

⁸ I here demarcate fictional names as those we use “as empty” because I take it to be the thing that unites cases occurring in novels, parables, games of make believe, and so on. However, this family resemblance of “using as empty” is, strictly speaking, not *always* the case. See Chapter 3.

comes in. Once such a discovery is made, we may use such a non-fictional empty name as empty, as in a negative existential like “Vulcan does not exist.” But this usage is parasitic upon a prior usage of the name as non-empty.

As with the more general distinction between negative existentials and normal cases of empty names, it may be that, in the end, fictional and non-fictional cases of empty names require different analyses. This is, in fact, what I will argue. I’ll wait until Chapter 3 to elaborate, however.

II. Background of the Debate

The problem of empty names has as its background in the more general debate between Descriptivist and Directly Referential⁹ accounts of names. Taking center-stage in much of this debate has been the case of vacuous names. As we will see, it is in part motivated Descriptivism¹⁰. Because of this, it will be useful to briefly go over this background in order to put our present discussion in its broader context.

As with the story of analytic philosophy itself, this story begins with the Austrian logician and philosopher Gottlob Frege. In his “On Sense and Reference”¹¹, Frege set himself to

⁹ Direct Reference theory is also often referred to in the literature as ‘Millianism’—so-called after the philosopher J.S. Mill, who thought the semantic value of a name was simply its referent.

¹⁰ The two other puzzles that motivated Descriptivism were Frege’s Puzzle (discussed in the following paragraphs), and substitution in intensional contexts. An example of the latter would be a person’s believing that Mark Twain is a great author, but not that Samuel Clemens is a great author. Given that ‘Mark Twain’ just *means* ‘Samuel Clemens’ (because they are co-referential), it should be impossible for a person to believe Mark Twain is a great author without believing that Samuel Clemens is a great author. However, it does seem possible, and hence arises the problem for DR theory.

¹¹ Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892): 25-50.

solving a certain puzzle about identity. The puzzle was this: Where ‘a’ and ‘b’ are both distinct purported-singular terms, how can ‘a=a’ and ‘a=b’ “differ in cognitive significance”¹², if their meanings are simply their respective referents? Another way of saying this is that “a=a” is always trivial, whereas “a=b” can be informative. For example, “C.S. Lewis is C.S. Lewis” seems trivial—indeed, analytic.¹³ However, “C.S. Lewis is Jack”¹⁴ can be informative, and seems “synthetic”¹⁵ in some sense. How can this be, though, if ‘C.S. Lewis’ and ‘Jack’ both simply “mean” their respective denotations? “C.S. Lewis is C.S. Lewis” and “C.S. Lewis is Jack” ought to be semantically equivalent, but the fact that they differ in these semantical ways shows that they cannot be.¹⁶

In order to solve this puzzle, Frege came up with his distinction between “sense” and “reference”. The “sense” of a term could be identified with its meaning—thought of as a “mode of presentation”, or way of thinking about, a purported individual. As distinct from this, the *referent* of a term was simply, well, its referent. With this distinction in hand, Frege could explain his puzzle about identity thus: “a=a” and “a=b” are semantically inequivalent because the meanings of ‘a’ and ‘b’ are *not* their denotations, but rather their *senses*. Thus, something like “a=a” will always be trivial, whereas “a=b” may convey information, such as “The sense of ‘C.S. Lewis’ and the sense of ‘Jack’ have the same referent”.

¹² This is Frege’s terminology.

¹³ Here I use “analytic” in Kant’s sense—note, however, that the very *notion* of analyticity becomes debatable on a Direct Reference view. If we take the notion to essentially involve the concept of the *a priori*, then post-Kripke we must abandon the idea that there can be analytic statements featuring singular terms or natural kind terms. See Kripke’s discussion of a posteriori necessity in *Naming and Necessity*.

¹⁴ ‘Jack’ being what Lewis’s friends called him, so I’ve heard.

¹⁵ In Kant’s sense.

¹⁶ Frege’s Puzzle presents an independent problem for Direct Reference theory, beyond the scope of this thesis.

More important for our present purposes, however, was that the sense-reference distinction also allowed Frege to explain our semantic problem about empty names: A statement such as “Santa Claus is a jolly, red-cheeked saint” can be meaningful in spite of the referential vacuity of “Santa Claus”—it still has a *semantic* value, identified with its Fregean sense.

Bertrand Russell developed a theory similar to Frege’s, but which was more formally worked-out and avoided some of its pitfalls¹⁷. In his classic “On Denoting”¹⁸, Russell argued that the surface grammatical form of statements of the kind “The F is G” (so-called “definite descriptions”) was misleading. Although they appeared to essentially involve picking out a definite individual and proceeding to predicate something of it, their “true logical form” revealed otherwise: In reality, they were general statements about whether a certain set of properties was or was not satisfied. Let’s begin with Russell’s general, formal analysis and then see how it applies to particular cases. Under his Theory of Descriptions, as it came to be called, a statement of the form “The F is G” could be analyzed as being equivalent to the following:

$$(R) \exists x(Fx \wedge (y)(Fy \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Gx)^{19}$$

This analysis allowed Russell to deal with empty names by, to reiterate, making statements that *appeared* to pick out an individual and say something of it, into statements that merely said of some set of properties whether it was or was not satisfied. Let’s see how **R** would analyze, for example, statements (2) and (3) above. For brevity’s sake, let’s simply represent whatever

¹⁷ For example, many have found it unclear just what Frege’s “senses” were supposed to *be*. Assumedly some sort of abstract object—a pitfall, at least, for those nominalists who wish to avoid *abstracta* at all costs.

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Mind* 14 (1905): 479-493.

¹⁹ Informally: There is some x that is F, and for anything y, if y is F, then y is identical to x, and x is G. The ‘for anything y, if y is F, then y is identical to x’ gives the uniqueness condition meant to capture the sense that a denoting phrase such as ‘The F’ is meant to designate some unique, particular individual.

properties we typically associate uniquely with Romulus as the predicate ‘Rom’, and those associated with Vulcan ‘Vulc’. Further, let’s represent the predicate ‘founded Rome’ with ‘F’.

(2) and (3) then receive the following analyses on **R**:

$$(2') \sim \exists x(\text{Rom}(x) \wedge (y)(\text{Rom}(y) \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Fx)$$

$$(3') \sim \exists x(\text{Vulc}(x))$$

(2') remains meaningful, and true, because it simply states that there is no unique thing exemplifying the properties expressed by ‘Rom’ and exemplifying the property of founding Rome (in this case, simply because there is no such entity satisfying ‘Rom’²⁰). (2) is true/meaningful for the same reason, although it is simply a denial that any individual exemplifies ‘Vulc’²¹. It can thus be seen how Descriptivism neatly dealt with both normal subject-predicate occurrences of empty names, and negative existentials.

This, then, was the broadly ‘Descriptivist’ solution to the puzzles about empty names. In the 1970’s, however, the whole Descriptivist picture was, many philosophers came to agree, refuted by a series powerful anti-Descriptivist arguments—beginning with Saul Kripke’s *Naming*

²⁰ As Russell pointed out, however, a statement such as ‘Romulus did not found Rome’ is ambiguous between a ‘narrow-scope’ and a ‘wide-scope’ reading of the negation operator. The wide-scope reading is that given in (2’), whereas the narrow-scope reading gives us: $\exists x(\text{Rom}(x) \wedge (y)(\text{Rom}(y) \rightarrow y=x) \wedge \sim Fx)$. In this case, the negation operator takes scope over the predicate, rather than the whole sentence. The wide-scope reading is merely the *subaltern* of ‘Romulus founded Rome’, whereas the narrow-scope reading gives us the genuine *contradictory* of ‘Romulus founded Rome’.

²¹ And thus doesn’t involve us in the aforementioned scope ambiguity, for what could the narrow-scope reading *mean* in such a case? That there *exists* something which lacks the property of existence?

and Necessity lectures²², and subsequently continued in the work of philosophers such as Putnam, Kaplan, and Donnellan²³.

In *Naming and Necessity* Kripke leveled an all-out attack on any Descriptivist interpretation of the semantic behavior of proper names. His arguments were numerous, but were eventually categorized into two types of argument: one semantic, one modal.

The semantic argument ran as follows: If, say, ‘Aristotle’ just *meant* ‘the most famous student of Plato’, then in a counterfactual scenario in which some *other* individual satisfied that predicate, *that* individual would be Aristotle.²⁴ However, this verdict is incorrect. The fact that some individual might have satisfied all the salient Aristotle-properties would not *make that* individual Aristotle. Descriptivism, then, makes the wrong predictions about who we would mean by a name in counterfactual situations.

Now, the modal argument. Consider the following two modal claims (taking the descriptive content of ‘Aristotle’ to be ‘The student of Plato’ for simplicity’s sake):

(M1) $\sim\Box\sim(\text{Aristotle is not the student of Plato})$ ²⁵

(M2) $\sim(\sim\Box\sim(\text{Aristotle is not identical to Aristotle}))$

²² Saul Kripke, “Naming and Necessity,” in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Gilbert Harman and Donald Davidson (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1972).

²³ See, for example, Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” in *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, ed. K. Gunderson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975): 131-93., and David Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” in *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog, John Perry and Howard Wettstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²⁴ Indeed, we need not look to other possible worlds to see this—for it could equally be the case that, unbeknownst to us, all of the descriptions we associate with a name are in fact false of that individual in our own world. See Kripke’s Gödel example in *Naming & Necessity*.

²⁵ The notation here is simply the ‘possibly’ of modal logic.

Descriptivism, making ‘Aristotle’ equivalent to ‘The student of Plato’²⁶, would predict that **M1** is *false*! However, even the Descriptivist must admit that **M2** is true. Yet how can she consistently say this? On Descriptivism, **M1** and **M2** ought to be *equivalent*. Yet they are not. Aristotle might not have satisfied ‘The student of Plato’, but he could not possibly have not been himself. This demonstrates that Descriptivism gives us the incorrect analysis of modal claims such as the ones above.

Kripke not only pointed out these problems with the Descriptivist analysis, but he also gave us the *semantical reason* why such analyses failed. The reason, as Kripke put it, was that proper names are semantically *rigid designators*. Rigid designators, Kripke explained, are terms that pick out the same individual in every possible world in which that individual exists. In contrast, definite descriptions, those of the sort Russell attempted to make names semantically equivalent to, are (in general) *nonrigid* designators: their referent could vary from world to world²⁷. ‘The teacher of Alexander the Great’, for example, will pick out different individuals depending on the possible world being considered—many different people may have exemplified that property. However, a *name* like ‘Aristotle’ is rigid in that, in considering counterfactual situations (as we saw above) it will always pick out whoever *it in fact picks out* in our world. Thus it is “rigid” in a way its associated definite descriptions fail to be²⁸.

Due to arguments such as these, the Descriptivist paradigm lost its hold on philosophy, and was soon replaced by the Direct Reference picture of naming according to which the

²⁶ Again, this is for simplicity’s sake. One may substitute any of the common descriptions associated with ‘Aristotle’ and achieve the same result.

²⁷ I say “in general” here because there are certain exceptions. For example, the definite description ‘the first prime number’ picks out the same individual in every possible world: the number 2. In general, however, the descriptions we associate with names are nonrigid.

²⁸ The same point was argued to hold for natural-kind terms, such as ‘gold’ and ‘water’. For the *locus classicus*, see Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”.

semantic value of a name is simply its referent. However, although giving independent force to DR theory, none of these arguments dealt with or refuted the original puzzles with assuming the value of a name was its referent. Thus, it was left, somewhat awkwardly, at square one with these problems, not the least of which was the puzzle of empty names. It became part of the project of DR theory, then, to try and offer explanations of these puzzles consistent with its claims about naming. And this leads us to the subject matter of the present thesis. There have been a variety of strategies deployed and approaches taken in attempting to make DR theory consistent with the phenomenon of empty names. The following chapters will explore these strategies and approaches in detail, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and analyze whether they give a generally successful account from the perspective of DR theory.

CHAPTER 2:

THE PRAGMATIC STRATEGY

We begin our exploration of the various approaches to empty names with the Pragmatic Strategy. This approach has been developed by philosophers such as Taylor, Dietrich and Adams²⁹. Before discussing the Pragmatic Strategy itself, however, it will be useful to first discuss two ideas essential to the strategy: Conversational implicature, and gappy propositions.

I. Conversational Implicature

The Pragmatic Strategy attempts to explain the apparent semantic content and truth-conditions of sentences containing empty names by appealing to the notion of *conversational implicature*³⁰. We may give an approximate characterization of conversational implicature as follows:

(CI)=_{DF} A proposition **P** is *conversationally implicated* by an utterance **U** in a context **C** for an audience **A** and Speaker **S** iff **P** is *not* the semantic content of **U** but is understood by **A** in **C** to be implied by **S**'s utterance of **U**.³¹

²⁹ See: Kenneth Taylor, "Emptiness without Compromise," in *Empty Names, Fiction and The Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2000), and Fred Adams and Laura Dietrich, "What's in A(n Empty) Name?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 125-48.

³⁰ H.P. Grice, "Presupposition and Conversational Implicature," in *Radical Pragmatics*, ed. P. Cole (New York: Academic Press, 1981): 183-97.

³¹ Grice's implicature is more nuanced and involved than this rough characterization. However, following the literature, I will assume that some sort of pragmatic process akin to Grice's notion is occurring in the case of empty names.

To take some examples: Say Smith walks into the kitchen and says “Boy, am I famished!” in the presence of Jones. Although the literal, semantic content of “I am famished” is simply that the speaker be hungry, Smith has *conversationally implicated* to Jones that he has come into the kitchen to find something to eat. That is, the proposition ‘I have arrived in the kitchen to find something to eat’ was, in this context, conversationally implicated by the utterance of “Boy, am I famished!” Or, again, say Jones says to Smith (sarcastically) “There is *nothing* I like better than taking out the trash.” If Smith is savvy to Jones’ proclivity towards sarcasm, he will take Jones’ utterance to have conversationally implicated the proposition ‘I despise taking out the trash’.

Of course, propositions conversationally implicated may have various degrees of relationship to the literal, semantic content of the utterance. Sometimes a proposition implicated we would take to constitute *what the speaker said* or *meant* in the context. We would naturally say, for example, in the example about Jones’ sarcasm, that what he *meant* in that context in giving that utterance *just was* that he despised taking out the trash. There may be more distal relationships, though, as when a speaker might say at a party “This party is packed!”, and conversationally implicate a logical entailment of that sentence, “There are a particular number of people at this party.” The latter proposition is not what the party-goer was trying to *get across*, not what he *meant*, but is nonetheless reasonably taken by his audience to be implied³² by what he said.

Additionally, there may be propositions implicated in conversational contexts that are neither what the speaker meant (or was trying to convey), nor logically entailed by what the speaker meant. Say Betty says to Don, “Oh, *Jeff* just arrived at the party!”, and say it is generally

³² Here ‘implied’ is being used in its loose, conversational sense—not to be confused with the material or strict implications of formal logic.

known among Don and other locals that Jeff is, probably, the coolest cat at school. If Don responds with “Well, now the party can start!”, he probably took Betty’s utterance to conversationally implicate the proposition “The coolest cat at school has just arrived at the party”, although such a proposition isn’t strictly *entailed* by “Jeff just arrived at the party”³³, nor should such a proposition necessarily be identified with *what she meant* (she may have not been trying to emphasize Jeff’s coolness). It is this last sort of conversational implicature that will be most relevant to the Pragmatic Strategy.

II. Gappy Propositions

The notion of a gappy proposition has been developed by various philosophers, such as Braun, Taylor, and Salmon³⁴. In order to understand the concept of a gappy proposition, it’s important to understand what philosophers call a *Russellian proposition*. A Russellian proposition is a proposition in which the object referred to by a singular term (proper name, demonstrative, etc.) is itself a *constituent* of the proposition expressed by a sentence in which such a singular term occurs. This idea can be made clearer if one thinks of it in the context of the principle of compositionality: If it’s true (1) that the semantic value of a sentence is a function of the semantic value of its parts, and (2) that the semantic value of a singular term occurring in a sentence is simply its referent, then (3) it’s plausible that, in some sense, the referent of that singular term itself features in the proposition expressed by such a sentence³⁵.

³³ Though, given a *Descriptivist* picture, plus the assumption that this is all Betty associated with the name, such a strict entailment would indeed hold.

³⁴ See, for example, David Braun, “Empty Names,” *Noûs* 27 (1993): 449-69.

³⁵ This is all somewhat vague language used in order to get across a rough and intuitive idea. It’s not as if it’s part of the concept of a function *in general* that its inputs feature as “parts” or “constituents of” its output—or just what it

Russellian propositions may be represented as ordered pairs of objects³⁶—specifically, an ordered pair consisting of an individual and a property. The Russellian proposition expressed by a sentence such as “John McDowell is brilliant”, for example, is representable as follows:

(J) < John McDowell, brilliance >

Note that such a proposition isn’t a *representational* entity—it consists of no Fregean senses or anything of that sort. Rather, it simply consists in the objects themselves.

With that in the background, we can make sense of the notion of a “gappy” proposition. A gappy proposition is a Russellian proposition with an empty “slot”, so to speak. Taylor³⁷ has called such pseudo-propositions “propositions-in-waiting”: They have the structure of a proposition, but are missing a semantic value—namely, the semantic value of the singular term. A gappy proposition too may be representable, then, as an ordered pair; an ordered pair consisting of an empty slot and a property. The gappy proposition expressed by a negative existential like “Santa Claus does not exist”, for example, may be expressed as,

(S) < ____, nonexistence >³⁸

Or, perhaps more perspicuously, as,

(S’) < \emptyset , nonexistence >

It is such “incomplete” or “gappy” propositions that are the semantic (or perhaps pseudo-semantic) values of sentences containing empty singular terms.

would mean for that to be true. Consider the function ‘ $f(x)=2+x$ ’. If I input for the function ‘1’, it will uniquely determine ‘3’, but it’s not as if ‘1’ is somehow a ‘constituent of’ or ‘features in’ the number 3—whatever that could mean.

³⁶ Braun, “Empty Names”.

³⁷ Taylor, “Emptiness without Compromise”.

³⁸ This is just an example—the endorser of gappy propositions need not be committed to any particular view on the status of existence as a property.

Some philosophers have taken such gappy propositions to be truth-valueless³⁹, while others have attempted to make them truth-evaluable⁴⁰. Because in what follows it is the views of Dietrich and Adams that will be primarily considered, it will be assumed that gappy propositions are truth-valueless. It is important to keep in mind, though, that acceptance of gappy propositions does not commit one to this view.

III. The Pragmatic Strategy Explained

One assumption that unites those who endorse this strategy is that, strictly speaking, a sentence containing an empty name expresses no complete proposition. Such sentences are then, at best, “semantically deficient”. How then are we to explain the appearance of semantic significance and truth-evaluability? The Pragmatic Strategist offers the following solution: Such sentences, although expressing no complete proposition, may nonetheless *conversationally implicate* other fully meaningful, complete propositions. And, further, we confuse the semantic significance and truth-evaluability of these *implicated* propositions with that of the sentence *actually uttered*.

Additionally, Pragmatic Strategists have assumed that there are *certain* sets of propositions that are, at least a majority of the time, implicated by the usage of certain names. These have been characterized differently by different philosophers. Soames⁴¹, for example, refers to such typically-implicated proposition-sets as the propositions “asserted” by the usage of

³⁹For example, Nathan Salmon, Laura Dietrich and Fred Adams.

⁴⁰Braun, “Empty Names”.

⁴¹Scott Soames, *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

sentences containing empty names. Taylor⁴² has characterized them as *conceptions* of the referent associated with a mental “file”, and Adams & Dietrich as the “lore” associated with the name⁴³. Following Adams and Dietrich, I will for the most part refer to such proposition-sets as *lore*.

Importantly, the lore associated with a name is taken to be a set of *descriptive* propositions, of the form ‘The F is G’. Given the widely-accepted Russellian analysis of such definite descriptions, they can be meaningful even in the absence of a referent⁴⁴ (recall the quantified structure explained in Chapter 1). This is important because only semantically complete and fully truth-evaluable propositions could explain our intuitions that the utterances that implicate them are, in fact, significant and with truth-value.

Here are some examples. Consider again our (1)-(3) from Chp. 1:

- (1) Santa Claus can fit down chimneys.
- (2) Vulcan does not exist.
- (3) Romulus did not found Rome.

For the Pragmatic Strategist, (1)-(3) express no complete propositions. However, through conversational implicature, the “empty-slots” where the names are in (1)-(3) get “filled in”⁴⁵ by the descriptive content provided by the lore, thus generating implicated propositions such as

- (1*) The jolly man from the North Pole can fit down chimneys.
- (2*) The planet postulated in La Verrier’s theory does not exist.
- (3*) The brother of Remus who was raised by wolves did not found Rome.

⁴² Taylor, “Emptiness without Compromise”.

⁴³ Adams and Dietrich, “What’s in A(n Empty) Name?”.

⁴⁴ For a classic objection to Russell, however, see: P.F. Strawson, “On Referring,” *Mind* 59:235 (1950): 320-344.

⁴⁵ This is Taylor’s language.

(1*)-(3*) contain no singular terms, and are meaningful in the absence of their referents, and so express complete, truth-evaluable propositions. The Pragmatic Strategist claims that our intuitions concerning the significance of (1)-(3) are really intuitions concerning (1*)-(3*), though we mistakenly think they are directed at (1)-(3).

Note that the Pragmatic Strategist offers a uniform explanation of normal subject-predicate sentences and negative existentials. Because of this, the approach can be seen as neutral on the sticky metaphysical questions about existence. For example, it may, or may not be, that existence is a property: For the Russellian analysis of definite descriptions of the form “The F does not exist”, the question doesn’t arise. Such statements have the logical form of negated existential *quantifications*, the negation taking scope over the entire quantified sentence. The question of existence-as-property would only arise if one took the negation as an *internal predicate negation*, which need not be done on a Russellian analysis.⁴⁶

There have been several important objections to the Pragmatic Strategy. In what follows I will focus in particular on objections offered by Sider, Braun, and Everett⁴⁷, as I take them to be representative of the most powerful arguments against such a position. I will also discuss replies to some of these objections given by Dietrich and Adams⁴⁸. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by giving my own analysis of the Pragmatic Strategy, putting forward some objections and weighing the view’s theoretical virtues and vices.

⁴⁶ See footnote 20.

⁴⁷ From the following papers: Theodore Sider and David Braun, “Kripke’s Revenge,” *Philosophical Studies* 128 (2006): 669-682., and Anthony Everett, “Empty Names and ‘Gappy’ Propositions,” *Philosophical Studies* 116:1 (2003): 1-36.

⁴⁸ Dietrich and Adams, “What’s in A(n Empty) Name?”.

IV. Everett *Contra* The Pragmatic Strategy

One of the most powerful objections Everett levels against the Pragmatic Strategy is that it fails to give the correct analysis of the “modal profiles” of certain sentences containing empty names. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

(K) Remus is identical with Hilary Putnam.

Sentence (K) seems necessarily false: there is no possible world in which Remus is identical with Hilary Putnam. However, if the Pragmatic Strategists are correct, and our intuitions about such sentences are operating on the descriptive “lore” rather than semantic content, we should intuit that (K) is possibly true. Hilary Putnam, for example, may have been raised by wolves and co-founded Rome with Romulus (adding to his already impressive credentials). And the problem with (K) seems to generalize: Sentences of the form ‘N is identical with S’, where ‘N’ is empty and ‘S’ full, are intuited as necessary falsehoods, whereas the Pragmatic Strategy incorrectly predicts our intuiting their possible truth

Another objection Everett has to the Pragmatic Strategy is this: If there are pragmatic processes in the case of empty names directing our intuitions at the lore rather than the literal semantic content, why are such processes not operative in the case of *filled* names? Kripke et. al have shown that they are not—the arguments in favor of Direct Reference are indeed *based* on this observation⁴⁹. It seems *ad hoc* to postulate such processes in the case of empty names but not filled names, as there seems to be no in-principle reason why there should be such a divergence.

Here the Pragmatic Strategist may point out that such processes “turn on” only when we *recognize* that the name is empty, but otherwise remain “off” (that is, our intuitions remain about

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1.

the literal semantic content). This, however, doesn't explain why our intuitions regarding sentences like (K) above remain stable even when we *realize* that one of the names is empty. Further, it predicts the wrong intuitions regarding negative existentials.⁵⁰ Consider, for example, the following negative existential:

(N) Santa Claus does not exist.

If the Pragmatic Strategy is correct, then our intuitions regarding (N) should be operating on a descriptive proposition like

(N') The jolly man who lives at the North Pole does not exist.

It appears, though, that even if one realizes 'Santa Claus' is empty (and thus accepts (N)), one will still intuit that (N) and (N') are *not* equivalent. We can see this by considering that our intuitions will be that (N') may yet be true, while (N) is false (Santa may have recently retired and moved to the Bahamas, for example. Or, conversely, we will still be able to see, despite our recognition that 'Santa' is empty, that (N) could be true while (N') is false: It may be true that Santa does not, in fact, exist, while it's true that some *other* individual satisfies all of the "Santa-lore" (say, unbeknownst to you, your Uncle Frank). This, I think, shows that our Kripkean "Direct Reference" intuitions are still operative on sentences containing empty names even when we recognize that the names they contain are empty.

Everett further objects that there is the problem of "varying descriptive content across speakers and times". Assume, for example, that 'Aristotle' is in fact empty. Assume further that I associate only 'Teacher of Alexander' with 'Aristotle', and a friend of mine, Jones, associates only 'Student of Plato' with 'Aristotle'. Despite the emptiness of 'Aristotle', and the fact that me

⁵⁰ Here I am elaborating on an argument of my own.

and Jones associate different “lore” with ‘Aristotle’, it still seems that Jones and I *mean the same thing* when we say, for example, ‘Aristotle is clever’. However, the Pragmatic Strategy should predict that we do *not* mean the same thing: *I* mean (because the name is empty and the pragmatic process is operative) “The Teacher of Alexander is clever” and *Jones* means “The student of Plato is clever”. However, it will be clear to anyone observing Jones and I that we mean the same thing, and it will be clear to *us* that we *meant* the same thing once we are made aware (if we were not already) that the purported-referent of ‘Aristotle’ is the individual supposed to be associated with both descriptions.

In addition, we may consider a *single* speaker who associates different descriptive lore with a name across time. Say I once (falsely) associated the description “Star observed by Einstein” with the name ‘Vulcan’, and say I *now* (correctly) associate with it the description “Planet postulated in order to explain perturbations in Mercury’s orbit”. It appears that, in deploying the name ‘Vulcan’ then and now, I used the name univocally. However, again, the Pragmatic Strategy predicts the opposite: Because I associated different lore with the name at the different times, and ‘Vulcan’ was empty, I should have the intuition that I meant something different at each time. Our intuitions, however, are to the contrary. For example, I would have understood at the later time that my former assumption that Vulcan was a star was incompatible with my present belief that it is a planet—showing that my intuitions were that I had been mistaken about an object univocally denoted by ‘Vulcan’, rather than that I had simply *meant something different* at the earlier time. Everett considers a possible objection to this argument that runs as follows: Although *all* of the descriptive content associated with the name is not shared between the speakers, or across time, it nonetheless is the case that *some* of the

descriptive content is. At the very least, the metalinguistic descriptive proposition “The object denoted by ‘N’” is shared. If so, then (for example) Jones and I could have the shared pragmatic semantic content “The individual designated by ‘Aristotle’ is clever”. Everett counters this, however, by pointing out that this would fail to explain our intuitions regarding the semantic equivalence of distinct names. For example, if a metalinguistic proposition like “The object denoted by ‘N’” is at play in such cases, then we should have the intuition that “Santa Claus does not exist” and “Father Christmas does not exist” are semantically *inequivalent*. But they *are* semantically equivalent, so making the move to a conversationally implicated metalinguistic proposition fails to account for such cases.

Finally, Everett points out the problematic case of names used by speakers where they associate *no* descriptive propositions with a name. He gives the example of a person overhearing a conversation between two people involving an empty proper name, say ‘Bill’, and then proceeding to forget any descriptive content associated with the name, even the content “Person whom x and y were talking about”. I may then use the name in a sentence, say a negative existential such as “Bill does not exist”, and have an intuition (though I know not why) that it is both meaningful and true. In this case, because I forgot all of the descriptive content associated with the name, there is no lore that can be appealed to explain the fact that I take myself to be saying something both meaningful and truth-evaluable. And yet, it is at least possible that I have intuitions to that effect in such a case.

Everett considers some possible replies to this argument. One is, as before, metalinguistic: I could at least mean, in such a case, “The referent of ‘Bill’ does not exist”. Everett responds by pointing out that this would commit one to saying that *every* usage of ‘Bill’

is empty—surely an unhappy consequence. To avoid this, our interlocutor may give the following analysis: “The referent *of my current utterance of ‘N’*, does not exist”. Everett rejects this as well, on the grounds that it would make my utterance of “N does not exist”, and the original speaker’s utterance of “N does not exist” semantically inequivalent (because ‘my’ is an indexical). It’s apparent, though, that both utterances would express the same proposition.

This concludes Everett’s main lines of objection against the Pragmatic Strategy. We will now consider replies to some of these objections given by Adams and Dietrich in their paper “What’s in A(n Empty) Name?”.

V. Dietrich & Adams *Contra* Everett

Dietrich and Adams (hereafter D&A, for brevity’s sake) begin their reply to Everett by addressing the “differing lore across speakers and times” objection. It is claimed first that, in general, there will be enough descriptive content in common between speakers or times to preserve an intuition of sameness of semantic content. In those exceptional cases in which there is not, D&A appeal to literal semantic content, the “gappy proposition” expressed by the sentence, in order to explain our intuitions of semantic identity. So, for example, although Jones and I associate different lore with the name ‘Aristotle’, it nonetheless is the case that we both express the same *gappy proposition* in uttering (say) “Aristotle is clever” (the proposition representable by the ordered pair $\langle _, \text{cleverness} \rangle$). And it is this that explains our semantic intuitions in such cases.

D&A further point out that, typically, the only cases in which there will be radical

departure between lore will be cases in which it is not, in fact, the same name being used. If, for example, Jones and I's conception of Aristotle differs on every significant point (say I don't even associate "famous thinker" with Aristotle, but only "peasant of the 12th century"), then it will probably be the case that my usage of the name 'Aristotle' has a different causal-historical origin than Jones'⁵¹, thus effectively rendering my usage of a 'Aristotle' a different usage, a different name, than Jones'.

Next D&A reply to Everett's "No Descriptive Content" objection (the case in which we forget any content associated with a name, but nonetheless retain an intuition of semantic significance and truth-evaluability in using the name). Here D&A divorce our semantic intuitions from our truth-related intuitions. They claim that our intuitions to the effect that we've said something *true* in deploying the name are based on a conversationally implicated proposition such as (in the case, for example, of a negative existential) "The referent of my utterance of 'N' does not exist". As was discussed above, Everett objects to this on the grounds that it makes my utterance of such a sentence and another person's utterance of the same sentence semantically inequivalent, due to the indexical "my". Here D&A claim that this intuition, and any other intuitions of semantic equivalence, are based on the gappy proposition literally expressed by the sentence, rather than any conversationally implicated proposition. So, in the case of truth-related intuitions, our intuitions are operating on conversationally implicated propositions, and in the case of semantic intuitions, they are operating on the gappy proposition literally expressed⁵².

⁵¹ The semantic theory of Direct Reference is typically coupled with a causal-historical theory of referring. See Chapter 4.

⁵² Note that this still commits them to the view that two speakers may be expressing different truths in deploying the same empty name—this is itself counterintuitive, in the same way that we're *saying something different* is counterintuitive. In fact, it seems *ad hoc* to divorce our truth-related and semantic intuitions in this way. It's plausible that the meaning of a sentence uniquely determines a set of truth conditions.

To Everett's objection that we aren't prone to conflate semantic content with pragmatic content in the case of *full* names, D&A reply as follows: It is claimed that, in fact, we *are* often prone to the same mistakes in the case of filled names—and thus, we may plausibly take the same pragmatic processes to be at work. They give the example of an exchange in which a speaker is using a proper name unfamiliar to his audience, say “Ronald Reagan”. If the audience is unfamiliar with the name, they may ask “*Who?*” to which the speaker may legitimately reply by offering a definite description: “Oh, *the 40th president of the United States*”. It seems, then, that our semantic intuitions *are* often operating on descriptive content, even in the presence of the deployment of a proper name.

Finally, A&D address Everett's “modal profiles” objection. To this they reply by claiming that it is in fact *not* pragmatic processes such as conversational implicature that explain our intuitions in this case. Rather, our intuitions are regarding the modal features of *sentence schemas* of the form “*a=b*”, where ‘a’ and ‘b’ are proper names and ‘=’ is the identity relation. Our intuitions regarding such schemas are that they are true if, and only if, (a) ‘a’ and ‘b’ are full, and (b) ‘a’ and ‘b’ designate the same individual, and are necessarily false otherwise. So, in a case where either ‘a’ or ‘b’ is empty, condition (a) will not be met, and so ‘a=b’ will express a necessary falsehood. This is why, for example, we intuit the necessary falsehood of (K) above: It is an identity statement involving two proper names, where ‘Remus’ is empty and ‘Hilary Putnam’ is full.

This concludes Dietrich and Adams' replies to Everett. We will now consider another, distinct set of arguments leveled against the Pragmatic Strategy given by Sider and Braun in their paper “Kripke's Revenge”.

VI. Sider & Braun *Contra* the Pragmatic Strategy

Sider and Braun (hereafter ‘S&B’) focus their attack on an account given by Scott Soames in his book *Beyond Rigidity*⁵³. Soames adopts the Pragmatic Strategy in that book, so we may take their criticisms of Soames as a broader attack on any sort of ‘Pragmatic Millianism’. Where other philosophers speak of the proposition conversationally implicated, Soames speaks of the proposition “asserted” in a context. Further, Soames refers to the literal semantic content of a sentence, as opposed to what it asserts (or implicates) in a context, as the proposition “expressed”. For the present discussion we will adopt Soames’ language, keeping in mind that the proposition asserted is the proposition conversationally implicated, and the proposition expressed is the literal semantic content of the sentence (or utterance).

S&B’s attack, however, doesn’t focus in particular on the case of empty names. Rather, they attack the *general* notion that our everyday intuitions about sentences containing proper names will ever conflate the semantics of such sentences with the semantics of descriptive propositions implicated by, or “asserted using”, such sentences. Such arguments should then, *a fortiori*, be seen as arguments against the particular case of empty proper names. The cases they do focus on, however, are cases involving propositional attitudes (belief contexts, desire contexts, and so on). Recall that such contexts are, like empty names, supposed to constitute a problem for Direct Reference accounts of naming⁵⁴. The pragmatic approach is then typically taken as a uniform explanation of all the “Fregean data”: Empty names, substitution in

⁵³ Scott Soames, *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of Naming and Necessity*.

⁵⁴ See footnote 10.

intensional contexts (especially belief contexts), and Frege's Puzzle about identity. Keeping all of this in mind, we will now discuss S&B's arguments against pragmatic accounts.

The first problem S&B point out with a pragmatic account such as Soames' is that it allows for the possibility that certain modal claims be intuited as true, when they are straightforwardly necessarily false. They use the following sentence as an example:

(A) \Box (If Aristotle exists, then Aristotle taught Alexander)⁵⁵

(A) would be intuited as true as long as the audience "descriptively enriched" the name 'Aristotle' with 'teacher of Alexander the Great'. Because the pragmatic approach entails that our intuitions regarding the semantics of sentences in which proper names occur can operate on the proposition asserted (implicated), as opposed to the proposition expressed (literal content), it should be at least *possible* that there be contexts in which (A) seems true (for example, if 'Aristotle' were empty, and the pragmatic processes 'turned on'). However, it doesn't seem there are *any* contexts in which (A) would be intuited as true. Therefore, S&B claim that Soames' account "overgenerates" in allowing for such a possibility.

Next, S&B give a version of Kripke's semantic argument against Soames. They ask us to consider a scenario in which Gödel is about to give a lecture, and the host descriptively enriches 'Gödel' with "man who proved the incompleteness theorem". The host then says:

(G) Gödel will speak on logic.

And, as in Kripke's original example, it is in fact *not* Gödel who proved the incompleteness theorem, but someone else—the infamous proof-thief, Schmidt. Given all of these assumptions,

⁵⁵ That is, "Necessarily, if Aristotle exists, Aristotle taught Alexander."

Soames is committed to saying that the host asserted something *false* in uttering (G). It seems apparent, however, that he did not.

Here S&B make an important point that I myself will argue for and return to in the final section of this chapter. They point out that Soames *cannot* appeal to the literal semantic content of (G) to explain our intuitions, because this creates an “explanatory asymmetry” between Soames’ account of differing cases of semantic intuition. In some cases, such as propositional attitude contexts, Soames wants to appeal to the proposition asserted as opposed to expressed in a context. Therefore, if he wants to avoid being *ad hoc*, he cannot legitimately claim that our intuitions in the present case are operating on the proposition expressed as opposed to asserted.

Next S&B challenge pragmatic accounts on the grounds that they defy not only our semantic intuitions, but also our *logical* intuitions. Given that pragmatic accounts claim that our intuitions often operate on propositions asserted rather than expressed, S&B argue they should endorse the following principle:

(P) Pragmatic Position on Logical Intuitions: Speakers intuit in a context that an argument is valid iff the argument it *asserts* in that context is valid.

It makes sense that Soames ought to endorse (P), given that our logical intuitions concerning what follows from what in a context will be sensitive to what we take the relevant sentences involved to *mean*. Further, as S&B note, Soames ought to endorse (P) on the grounds that it explains our intuitions that an argument such as the following is invalid:

- (1) Lois Lane believes that Superman flies.
- (2) Superman=Clark Kent
- (3) Therefore, Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies.

Principle (P) nicely explains our intuitions that this argument is invalid: Although the propositions literally *expressed* in the argument make it valid, the propositions *asserted* make it invalid (because, once descriptively enriched, it's plausible that it's not the case that 'Superman=Clark Kent'). Thus, our intuitions with respect to validity appear to be based on the propositions asserted rather than expressed.

However, S&B find this problematic. For it predicts that we should intuit the validity of:

1. Superman flies.
2. Therefore, the strongest man on earth flies.

We should intuit this as long as, of course, we have descriptively enriched 'Superman' with 'the strongest man on earth'.

However, S&B claim that one who endorses an account such as Soames' may endorse a *weaker* principle in order to avoid these consequences, which is given as follows:

(V) If speakers intuit in a context that an argument is valid, then the argument it asserts in that context is valid.

The principle given by (V) avoids, at least, the problem with intuiting that 'The strongest man on earth flies' follows from 'Superman flies'.

However, S&B argue that even if one who endorses a pragmatic account accepts only the weaker (V), she will *still* have a problem with certain arguments from 'quantifying in'. And here they give the following argument to illustrate:

1. Lois Lane believes Superman can fly, & Superman=the superhero.
2. Therefore, $\exists x(x=\text{the superhero} \ \& \ \text{Lois Lane believes } x \text{ can fly})$

3. Lois Lane does not believe that Clark Kent can fly, & Clark Kent=the milquetoast reporter.
4. Therefore, $\exists x(x=\text{the milquetoast reporter} \ \& \ \text{Lois Lane does not believe that } x \text{ can fly})$
5. The superhero=the milquetoast reporter.
6. Therefore, $\exists x(x=\text{the superhero} \ \& \ \text{Lois believes } x \text{ can fly and Lois does not believe } x \text{ can fly})$

Because of (V), speakers should *not* have intuitions to the effect that this argument is valid—because the argument it *asserts* is invalid. However, it seems, despite the contradictory nature of the conclusion, we *will* intuit this argument’s validity: If the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. So here we have a case in which the antecedent of (V) is true, but its consequent false: We intuit the argument’s validity, but do not intuit that the argument it *asserts* is valid. Thus, we have a counterexample even to the weaker (V).

S&B’s conclusion, then, is that Soames’ account (and thus, for our purposes, the Pragmatic Strategy generally) fails *both* to account for our semantic intuitions *and* our logical intuitions.

VII. The Pragmatic Strategy Assessed

The Pragmatic Strategy will now be assessed according to its various strengths, weaknesses, and theoretical virtues. First, though, I’d like to offer some criticisms of Adam and Dietrich’s defense of the strategy.

The first criticism I'd like to make is that their reply to Everett's objection that pragmatic processes aren't operative in the case of full names doesn't work. D&A argue that, in fact, we *can* give examples of mistaking descriptive pragmatic content for literal semantic content in the case of full names, and they give the example of asking for clarification when a proper name is used to support this: I may say (where 'N' is a full name), "*N* is F", my audience may inquire "Who?", and I may reply "Oh, *the G*" (where 'the G' is a definite description). This, however, is an inadequate counterexample, for it assumes that the definite description is offered up as a *semantic* clarification, rather than a mere *reference-fixing* clarification. As Kripke pointed out⁵⁶, definite descriptions do play a role in fixing the referent of a name, but they do not provide a *definition* of the name. We can see that this is the case by considering that, if I proceeded to ask of my audience "So, *N* could not have failed to be *G*?", they would reply in the negative. So, for example, I may clarify my usage of "Ronald Reagan" by offering up the description "The 40th president of the United States", but if I asked my audience "Oh, so Reagan could not have failed to be the 40th president of the United States?", they would probably reply "Of course not!". This shows that the audience is *not* in fact confusing the pragmatic, descriptive content for the actual semantic content. Rather, they merely take the definite description to be a convenient reference-fixer. So I think Everett's point stands: Such pragmatic processes are *not* operative in the case of filled names, and there is no in-principle reason that they should not be if they *are* operative in the case of empty names.

Second, I believe A&D's defense of the Pragmatic Strategy is *ad hoc*, for the following reason: Whenever the Strategy fails to account for the linguistic data, they claim that our

⁵⁶ In Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

intuitions are actually acting upon the literal semantic content, or sentence schemas, in these particular cases. For example, they claimed in the case of negative existentials that our intuitions to the effect that such statements could be true/meaningful were based on descriptive pragmatic content. However, in both the case of certain modal statements and the “no descriptive content” case brought up by Everett, they claimed that our intuitions were acting upon literal, semantic content (in these cases, the “gappy proposition” expressed). Why, though, should we think that our semantic intuitions are switching back and forth between these two contents? Absent an in-principle reason for thinking that such intuition shifts are taking place, this explanation is *ad hoc* and brings a disunity to the account that should be avoided if possible.

Recall that Sider and Braun make a similar point regarding Soames’ account. With statements such as “Necessarily: If Aristotle exists, he is the teacher of Alexander”, our intuitions diverge from what the Pragmatic Strategy tells us—our intuitions are that such statements are false, and necessarily so. And those who endorse pragmatic accounts such as Soames cannot appeal to the literal semantic content in order to explain it, for it would introduce an “explanatory asymmetry”. Because of this, I believe that Dietrich and Adam’s defense of the Pragmatic Strategy ultimately fails.

The Pragmatic Strategy does have explanatory power over a certain set of sentences, especially non-modal subject-predicate sentences such as “Santa Claus brings presents every Christmas Eve”, and negative existentials like “Romulus does not exist”. The account, though, lacks explanatory scope, for it fails to account especially for our modal intuitions, the fact that the pragmatic processes don’t seem operative in the case of filled names, and the logical

intuitions that Sider and Braun pointed out. For all of these reasons, I believe that the Direct Reference theorist ought to look elsewhere for an adequate account of empty names.

CHAPTER 3:

FICTION, PRETENSE, & FICTIONAL ABSTRACTA

As discussed in Chapter 1, the case of fiction appears to be unique in the discussion of empty names, for in such cases we appear to be using the names *as* empty—as part of a story in which it is the very nature of the name to be empty (though filled *in the fiction*). This divergence from other cases of empty names may or may not require a unique account, and this question will be explored in the present chapter. We will begin by outlining the two competing theories of fiction: The Pretense Theory, and its main alternative: *Abstract Object Theory*⁵⁷.

I. Pretense Theory

Our discussion of Pretense Theory will focus on the notion as developed by Saul Kripke, although important contributors to the theory include Kendall Walton, Gareth Evans, and others. I will now outline Kripke’s discussion of the view as laid out in his John Locke lectures⁵⁸.

Kripke develops and defends what he calls the “Pretense Principle” for fiction. The Principle states that, in contexts of fiction, criteria for reference, and in particular the semantic criteria for naming, are just *assumed* to obtain. That is, it is *part of the pretense* that such semantic criteria are satisfied⁵⁹. So, for example, if the Direct Reference account of naming is correct, it is part of the pretense of fictional uses of names that they simply refer. An important

⁵⁷ Although, as will be seen, one may consistently accept both relative to certain domains of discourse.

⁵⁸ Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Interestingly, Kripke takes this point to establish that fiction cannot be a “test case” for theories of reference or naming.

consequence of the Pretense Principle for Kripke is that, strictly speaking, no propositions are actually expressed in fiction. Rather, there is merely a pretense that propositions are being expressed. Thus, the pretense involved in fiction represents a unique semantic phenomenon: When a name is used, or a proposition is (make-believedly) expressed in fiction, it is *essential* to such usages and expression-attempts that they are *merely* pretense.

A further important consequence of the Pretense Principle, Kripke argues, is that it implies that characters in fiction could not have possibly existed⁶⁰. This follows from the Pretense Principle when one considers the aforementioned point about fictional uses of names being *essentially* a pretense. In order to motivate this point, Kripke asks us to consider a case in which, for example, we discovered that all of the properties attributed to Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories were exemplified by some English detective—and this independent of Conan Doyle's knowledge or intentions in writing his stories⁶¹. He then asks us: Would this be a case in which we discovered that *Sherlock Holmes existed*? Given that the name was initially used by Conan Doyle as part of a semantic pretense, the answer seems to be a clear "No". It might be a case in which it was discovered that some real English detective was astonishingly *similar* to the Holmes of Conan Doyle's stories, but it would *not* be a case in which Sherlock Holmes (the name being used as univocal with Conan Doyle's usage) existed.

However, Kripke does believe there is *some* sense in which we may have discovered that Sherlock Holmes existed. It would not, however, be on the basis of a real person being sufficiently similar to the Holmes of Conan Doyle's stories. Rather, the sense in which we may

⁶⁰ Salmon argues this as well, calling such names "strongly nonreferring". See: Nathan Salmon, "Nonexistence," *Noûs* 32:3 (1998): 277-319.

⁶¹ Note that this doubles as an argument against descriptivist accounts of naming in fiction.

have discovered that Sherlock Holmes existed is if the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ was actually *not* being used by Conan Doyle as part of a fictional pretense—say, if Conan Doyle was in fact writing a historical narrative about an English detective he actually knew, and we, for whatever reason, mistakenly took his stories to be fiction. But *given* that we are correct in our assumption about the way in which Conan Doyle was deploying the name, there is no sense in which Sherlock Holmes might have existed⁶².

We might conceive of pretense-propositions as being prefixed with a “story operator”⁶³. If so, Kripke observes that we can block certain inferences to the reality of non-existent objects⁶⁴. Consider, for example, the following:

1. Hamlet was melancholy.
2. Therefore, $\exists x(x \text{ was melancholy})$

However, it’s also true that

3. Hamlet does not exist.

And hence,

4. $\exists x(x \text{ does not exist})$

The Pretense Principle allows us to avoid this unhappy consequence if we consider that

⁶² Kripke says the sense in which Sherlock Holmes might have existed is an *epistemic* sense of ‘might have’. This is analogous to Kripke and Putnam’s discussion of natural kind terms: Prior to the discovery that $\text{Water}=\text{H}_2\text{O}$, there was an epistemic sense in which we could have entertained the idea that Water might have failed to be H_2O . However, upon discovering the identity, we realize that such a scenario would be *metaphysically* impossible. In such cases, epistemic possibility is not a generally reliable guide to metaphysical possibility.

⁶³ For a statement of this idea, see: David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15:1 (1978): 37-46

⁶⁴ A view commonly referred to as ‘Meinongianism’, after the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong.

(1) is merely a *pretended* truth—that is, it is implicitly bound by a “It is true in the story that” operator. If so, the move from (1) to (2) is blocked (unless, that is, (2) is seen as *also* bound by a story operator). Further, the Pretense Principle allows us to see that the senses of (1) and (3) are distinct: In (1) ‘Hamlet’ is used in the context of a story operator, whereas in (3) it is being used outside the scope of the fiction, to say something of the fictional character that is not itself true in the fiction (that is, it’s not true *in the fiction* that Hamlet does not exist. Indeed, Shakespeare’s play wouldn’t have amounted to much if its protagonist didn’t exist in the story!). Under Kripke’s account, then, this sort of argument for non-existent objects doesn’t go through.

Thus, it seems that Pretense Theory affords us both (a) a ready explanation of the appearance of semantic significance and truth-evaluability in the case of statements in the scope of a fiction, and (b) the theory, and its associated notion of story-operators, allows us to block certain inferences to the reality of nonexistent objects. It should be clear, then, why such an account has been attractive to many philosophers.

Some philosophers have argued, however, that the Pretense Theory cannot be the whole story⁶⁵. There are semantic phenomena surrounding fiction that cannot be accounted for by appealing to “games of make believe”, pretense, or story-operators—and this observation has been the main objection against Pretense accounts. It is these semantic phenomena that have led such philosophers to endorse an *ontology of fictional characters*. This ontology, and the semantic phenomena that motivate it, will now be discussed.

⁶⁵ No pun intended.

II. Abstract Object Theory

The idea that we must appeal to an ontology of fictional characters has been argued for and developed primarily by the philosophers Saul Kripke, Peter van Inwagen, and Nathan Salmon⁶⁶. We will focus primarily on their thought and arguments in what follows.

Both Kripke and van Inwagen make a distinction between so-called *object*-fictional sentences and *meta*-fictional sentences (hereafter simply ‘o-fictional’ and ‘m-fictional’, respectively). O-fictional sentences are statements made *within* a story—statements that, using our former terminology, may fall within the scope of a “story operator”. The following are some examples of o-fictional sentences:

- (1) Frodo is on a quest to Mordor.
- (2) Macbeth then saw a hallucination of a dagger.
- (3) Buck heard the call of the wild, resounding from the forest.

Statements (1)-(3) are statements made from within the fictions themselves, and are thus “true in the story”. Although the names they contain are empty, the Pretense Theorist believes we can explain their apparent-significance by appealing to the fact that we merely *pretend* they are significant—that it is part of the make-believe language game we are engaging in that they express complete propositions. However, we may also make statements from *without* the story, commenting on features of the stories and the characters they contain themselves. Such statements are what is meant by a “meta-fictional” sentence. The following are examples:

⁶⁶ In Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Salmon, “Nonexistence”, Peter van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14:4 (1977): 299- 308., and Peter van Inwagen, “Quantification and Fictional Discourse,” in *Empty Names, Fiction and The Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2000)., respectively.

(1') Frodo is the protagonist of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

(2') Macbeth is the most malevolent of Shakespeare's characters.

(3') Buck represents the primal nature of Man.

Statements (1')-(3') are not part of the pretense of the story—they cannot be prefixed by a story operator, for none of them are true *in the stories*. Rather, if they are true at all, they are true statements about *reality*, not about what's true within a fictional or make-believe context. Consideration of such sentences has led philosophers such as Kripke, van Inwagen, and Salmon to believe that they cannot be explained by appealing to the notion of pretense or make-believe. Rather, they must be explained in some other way; in a way that respects the fact that they appear to be straightforward statements about the way reality is outside of the stories.

Because Kripke, van Inwagen, and Salmon all accept Direct Reference, and m-fictional sentences such as (1')-(3') feature proper names, they have been led to accept the reality of fictional characters. Such m-fictional sentences have the form of basic subject-predicate sentences, having a proper name in the subject-position, and so (as was discussed in Chapter 1) appear to have their truth conditions given by the subject's having a referent, and that referent exemplifying the property expressed by the predicate—and their semantics compositionally determined in such a way that essentially involves a referent. If so, then if any such m-fictional sentences are true or meaningful (and surely many are), then their subject-terms must denote some object. This object denoted is a *fictional character*.

However, these philosophers have been quick to point out that their account is emphatically *not* an account that commits one to the reality of the nonexistent. They are not postulating non-existent entities that somehow have or encode the properties attributed to them

from within and without the stories. Rather, they have conceived of fictional characters on the model of an *abstract object*. These abstract objects exist, and are as real as any other existent thing. Further, it has been argued by most of these “abstract object theorists” that these objects are *created* by the authors who come up with the stories in which they play a part—or, relatedly, that they “supervene” on the existence of the literary works in which they occur⁶⁷. They are thus contingent entities, unlike many of their other abstract counterparts, such as numbers or properties⁶⁸.

So here we have a class of sentences that *prima facie* contain empty names, and are significant and truth-evaluable, but which these philosophers have argued *do not* in fact contain empty names. Here, then, is at least a partial solution to the problem of empty names that is consistent with DR theory: the apparent emptiness of the names is *merely* apparent—they do, in fact, denote.

There is another, related class of sentences featuring names from fiction that such philosophers have also taken as evidence for an ontology of fictional characters: Sentences involving attitude-verbs, such as *admires*, *worships*, *desires*, and *fears*. Consider the following sentences:

- (1) I admire Frodo for his bravery.
- (2) The Greeks worshipped Dionysus.
- (3) I desire Juliet more than any other heroine.
- (4) I fear Jacob Marley.

⁶⁷ Some fact or entity A “supervenes” on another B iff were there any change in B, there would necessarily be a change in A.

⁶⁸At least on a Platonic account of such entities.

Taking such attitude-verbs straightforwardly as two-place relations between one who has an attitude and one who is the receiver of an attitude, it seems that (1)-(4) commit us to the existence of Frodo, Dionysus, Juliet and Jacob Marley, respectively. The following schema, for example, seems to represent a valid form of inference (where ‘a’ and ‘b’ are individuals and ‘v’ is an attitude-verb):

1. a v’s b.

Therefore,

2. $\exists x(a \text{ v’s } x)$ (this is simply an Existential Generalization on ‘b’)

For example,

1. I admire Jones.

Therefore,

2. $\exists x(\text{I admire } x)$

If this is indeed a valid form of inference, then it seems unavoidable that we should accept an ontology of fictional characters when we consider sentences featuring attitude-verbs directed at such characters.

There is, however, a classic objection to this sort of move deriving from the work of W.V. Quine⁶⁹. Quine argued that there are two distinct readings we may give a statement containing an attitude verb. As per Quine’s original example, consider the following sentence:

(S) I want a sloop.

⁶⁹ W.V. Quine, “Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes,” *Journal of Philosophy* 53 (1956): 185-96.

According to Quine, (S) admits of both an *opaque* reading and a *transparent* reading, depending on the position of the existential quantifier—if it has wide or narrow scope. Consider, then, the following two readings of (S) (taking the attitude-verb ‘want’ to be roughly equivalent to ‘wishing that’):

(S1) I wish that: $\exists x((\text{sloop})(x) \wedge \text{I have } x)$

(S2) $\exists x((\text{sloop})(x) \wedge \text{I wish that I have } x)$

S1 is the opaque reading of (S), and **S2** is the transparent reading of S. In **S1**, I merely wish that some general condition is satisfied: That something is a sloop, and I have it. In contrast, the sense of **S2** is that there is some *particular* thing that *is* a sloop, and I wish that I had that thing. The important point for our present purposes is that **S1**, the opaque reading, involves us in no “ontological commitments”. That is, if we read S in light of **S1**, the inference from S to the existential generalization “There is some x such that I want x” will be invalid.

Kripke, however, doubts that this really gets around the aforementioned arguments. He points out, first, that we often do have some particular individual in mind when we have an attitude toward it. For example, when I say “I worship Dionysus”, it doesn’t seem to be the case that I am saying that I worship whoever satisfies some general set of properties—rather, I take myself to be worshipping some definite individual⁷⁰. Second, according to Kripke, Quine’s analysis here only really works, if at all, for *intensional* attitude verbs. That is, verbs that don’t admit of substitution of co-referring terms *salva veritate*⁷¹. Non-intensional verbs, such as

⁷⁰ It also seems strange to take ‘worships’ as a sort of sentential operator like ‘believes’ or ‘desires’. One doesn’t worship *that* some proposition (this is meaningless), worshipping rather puts one into a relation with an *individual*.

⁷¹ Recall the example of belief-contexts. Although ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’ are co-referring, it doesn’t seem I can substitute one for the other in any sentence embedded in a “believes-that” clause and preserve truth.

‘admires’ and ‘worships’ seem to always be directed at individuals, rather than expressions of some wish or other attitude directed at the satisfaction of a set of properties.

The example of the statement “I admire Hitler” is given in order to get this across. Consider that, if my attitude here is directed at some general features, call them the “Hitler-properties”, then the following inferences should be invalid (because it involves substitution in an intensional context):

1. I admire Hitler.
2. Hitler = the most murderous man of history.

Therefore,

3. I admire the most murderous man of history.

However, most of us would recognize this inference as *valid*. Anyone who admires Hitler admires, even if they deny or are unaware of this characteristic of his, the most murderous man of history. This shows that an attitude verb such as ‘admires’, or similarly ‘worships’, is essentially an attitude directed at some definite individual, rather than at a set of properties, Fregean sense, or whatever.

To take another example, consider the attitude-verb “fears”. Now, say that Little Johnny fears the Devil. Even if Little Johnny believes all of the stories about the Devil (that he is King of the demons, is out to tempt Johnny, and so forth), nonetheless his parents may truly report of him “Poor Johnny, he fears a fiction!”. However, if the correct analysis of “fears” is given by, say, wishing that some general state of affairs doesn’t obtain, or some set of properties is not satisfied, this doesn’t make sense. It should be *false* under this analysis that Johnny fears a fiction, because “being fictional” is not part of the content of Johnny’s fear. However, if it is

some *individual* that Johnny's fear involves, then it makes sense that we may truly say that he fears something fictional, for "fears" would be a non-intensional verb relating two individuals independent of the mode of description of that individual.⁷²

Another objection to Abstract Object theory has been as follows: Given that m-fictional sentences are to be analyzed in terms of the existence of abstract objects, how do we make sense of negative existentials featuring fictional names? If, for example, "Spock" refers to an *existent* abstract individual, shouldn't it be *false* that "Spock does not exist"? To this philosophers such as Kripke, van Inwagen, and Salmon have responded as follows: In such instances, it is *literally false* that such entities don't exist. However, such negative existentials can be used to convey some related truth, such as that "there is no person sufficiently similar to the character of the stories", or that the entity is "merely fictional" and not one of "flesh and blood"⁷³.

We have now explored the outlines of two approaches to the case of (apparent) empty names occurring in fiction: Pretense Theory, and Abstract Object Theory. Of course, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive: One may, as Kripke and van Inwagen do, accept a Pretense account of object-fictional sentences and an Abstract Object account of meta-fictional sentences. However, one may also adopt a holistic approach, adopting one or the other framework to explain all the data. This is what Nathan Salmon does, and his views will now be discussed.

⁷² Intensional contexts, and attitude contexts generally, are, however, controversial. The Abstract Object theorist may simply avoid such cases and rely on m-fictional sentences to motivate their theory.

⁷³ See Salmon, "Nonexistence".

III. Salmon *Contra* Pretense

Salmon criticizes Pretense accounts on the grounds that they fail to account for a certain set of o-fictional sentences, or o-fictional uses of fictional names. Consider the following:

- (1) According to The Lord of the Rings it is true that Arwen is an elf.
- (2) Martha believed that Ned Stark was a great hero of Westeros, not realizing that ‘Game of Thrones’ was mere fiction.
- (3) Sherlock was cleverer than Russell⁷⁴

Let’s first consider (1). If Pretense Theory is correct, according to Salmon, how can we make sense out of such a statement? For, because no actual propositions get expressed by o-fictional sentences but are only *pretended* to be expressed, there should be *nothing* that is true according to LOTR. In order to make sense out of the content of that-clauses such as the one occurring in (1), we must assume a proposition is expressed. However, Pretense Theory can provide us with no such propositions.

The problem with (2) is similar: Given that there is, strictly speaking, no proposition expressed by “Ned Stark was a great hero of Westeros”, how do we make sense out of the content of Martha’s belief? What is it that Martha believes to be true if not some proposition expressed by that o-fictional sentence? Pretense accounts, again, cannot offer us the requisite content.

Now consider (3). It seems that, as it occurs in (3), “Sherlock” is being used as it is in the context of the stories: To refer to an intelligent English detective. If so, it is being used o-fictionally, rather than m-fictionally (when it would be used to refer to some abstract creation of

⁷⁴ This in particular is Salmon’s example.

Conan Doyle's). But then 'Sherlock' is in this case *genuinely empty*, so how can we make sense of the significance and truth-evaluability of "Sherlock was cleverer than Russell"?

In order to deal with such problems, Salmon rejects (or rather "modifies") the Pretense Theory. He claims that we should not view fictional names as being ambiguous between an o-fictional use and an m-fictional use, but rather that they *univocally* refer to the abstract object—inside and outside of the stories. The difference for Salmon, then, between statements from within and without the fiction, is that statements from within the fiction pretend that the abstract objects referred to by the names possess every-day, non-abstract properties ('being human', 'donning a hat', and so forth)⁷⁵. Outside the fictional context, this pretense is dropped and we can attribute to them the properties that are "proper" to them *qua* abstract objects—like, for example, 'being created by Author A', and 'being the most notorious literary character'. This deals with the aforementioned problems by providing a semantic value, and thus complete propositions, for o-fictional sentences to contain and express. There is thus a proposition that is true according to LOTR, a proposition believed by Martha, and a proposition expressed by 'Sherlock was cleverer than Russell'.

There seem to be some initial moves available to the Pretense Theorist, however—at least regarding sentences (1) and (2). The Pretense Theorist may translate them with theoretical impunity as follows:

(1') When engaged in the LOTR-pretense, it is pretended that "Arwen is an elf" expresses a true proposition.

⁷⁵To give a more mundane example of this sort of thing, consider the case in which a child acquires a pet rock. She proceeds to name it 'Don', and *feigns* its personhood. Nonetheless, throughout this game of make-believe, the referent of 'Don' is the rock, despite the fact that one of its essential properties in the game, being a person, is incompatible with its actual nature as an inanimate object.

(2') Martha believes that the sentence "Ned Stark was a great hero of Westeros" expresses a true, non-pretended proposition.

(1') and (2') commit us only to the existence of the *sentences* involved, and thus, by making such a metalinguistic move, avoid commitment to any propositions. However, one possible response to this move by the Pretense Theorist would be to say that it fails to account for certain translanguistic facts. For example, it seems we'd want to say that two speakers could have an identical belief that "Ned Stark was a great hero of Westeros", even if one read *Game of Thrones* in English, and the other German. However, the solution expressed by (2') commits us to saying they would not possess the same belief: One would have a belief about the *English* sentence in the book, and the other a belief about its *German* equivalent in the book. This is a problematic result⁷⁶.

IV. Assessment

We have explored the two broad approaches to the case of empty names in fiction: Pretense Theory, and Abstract Object Theory. These two views are not inconsistent, and have, as mentioned, been combined by certain philosophers in order to explain the distinction between so-called 'object-fictional' sentences and 'meta-fictional' sentences. However, as also mentioned, one can take a pure Pretense account or a pure Abstract Object account, the latter being exemplified by Salmon.

The virtue of Abstract Object Theory is that it explains the semantics and truth-conditions of meta-fictional sentences by simply denying the names they contain are empty. If they are not,

⁷⁶ At least under a "naïve" metalinguistic view—see Chapter 4.

then they are provided with their Directly Referential values: abstract objects that serve as their denotations. Salmon argues that this line of thinking needs to be extended to object-fictional sentences, but it's unclear whether this is a good analysis, given certain *prima facie* plausible moves the Pretense Theorist can make. Additionally, it seems a significant shortcoming of Abstract Object accounts that they "analyze away" negative existentials: It seems there is *some* sense in which it is literally true that, say, "Sherlock Holmes does not exist". It seems, though, that the Abstract Object Theorist must deny this by either (a) analyzing it as something like "Sherlock Holmes is *merely* fictional", or (b) taking the name in question to be given by a descriptivist semantics. The former isn't desirable because it loses the literal sense of the original sentence, and the latter because it conflicts with Direct Reference.

Pretense Theory's greatest strengths are in its ability to explain object-fictional sentences, what sort of "language game" we're engaged in when interacting with fiction, and in its ability to explain why it seems fictional characters could not have possibly (at least concretely) existed: Their use is defined essentially by its role in a *pretense* to reference, so there's no possible non-pretensed propositions they may have been constituents of.

In the following chapter I will explore the various *metalinguistic* strategies that have been employed by philosophers to explain empty names—and in particular negative existentials. In the course of this discussion, Pretense Theory will rear its head once more, as it has been used by certain philosophers—most notably Ken Walton and Gareth Evans—to try and explain negative existentials. We will see whether it can provide any insight in these other areas as well.

CHAPTER 4:

THE METALINGUISTIC STRATEGY

In this final chapter I will discuss the Metalinguistic Strategy—or rather, I will discuss a set of related metalinguistic *strategies*. What defines a metalinguistic strategy is that it appeals to linguistic or semantical items *themselves* in order to explain empty names⁷⁷. Just what this amounts to should become clear in the proceeding discussion. Further, it *this* strategy that I will ultimately argue is the most successful, when developed in the correct way, in dealing with our stickiest problem: negative existentials. Before beginning, however, I will briefly discuss two ideas that will be key to the subsequent discussion. First, there is the distinction between “use” and “mention”, and second, there is the so-called “causal-historical” theory of reference.

I. Use, Mention, & The Causal-Historical Theory

The distinction between use and mention is the distinction between deploying a term to talk about its *referent*, and deploying a term to talk about the term *itself*. For example, consider the following set of sentences:

1. Rolf is the worst person I know.
2. ‘Rolf’ is a four-letter word.
3. God is the creator of the cosmos.
4. I’m not sure what ‘God’ is supposed to mean.

⁷⁷ There have also been recent attempts to revive *Descriptivism* in metalinguistic garb. See: Kent Bach, “Giorgione Was So-called Because of His Name,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 16 (2002): 73-103.

In (1) and (3), the names ‘Rolf’ and ‘God’ are being *used*, whereas in (2) and (3) they are being *mentioned*. As can be seen, a term’s being mentioned is typically signaled by its occurring within scare quotes, and a term is usually being used when it occurs without them. This common convention will be followed throughout the chapter. Further, note that the most natural way to think about mentioning a term is that, in binding it with scare quotes, one creates a name *for the name itself*. So, for example, ‘Rolf’ is a name that designates the name ‘Rolf’.

Up until this point, we have focused only on the Direct Reference component of the now-dominant analysis of proper names. However, Direct Reference, being merely a theory of the *semantics* of proper names, is incomplete. The semantics of proper names merely tells us what the meaning-contribution of name is to a sentence in which it occurs. But there is a further question: In virtue of what does a term refer to the particular thing it does, rather than another? An answer to *that* question takes us beyond the purely semantical contribution of a name, and into a theory of the *mechanism of reference* for names.

Kripke answered this question with what has come to be called the *causal-historical* theory of reference. The causal-historical theory of reference says that a name refers to the particular thing it does in virtue of an utterance of that name being a part of a causal-historical chain, going back from speaker to speaker, to an initial “baptism” of an object with that name. For example, consider the name ‘Aristotle’. A particular utterance of that name refers to who it does in virtue of the fact that there is a historical chain of language users, each intending to use the name in the same way as the last user, going back to a moment at which a particular child was dubbed (“baptized”) with the name ‘Aristotle’. Note that, under the causal-historical theory, names are individuated by the causal-historical chain to which they belong. Because of this, I

may call both my dog and the Greek philosopher ‘Aristotle’, but they are in reality different names—one is part of a causal-historical chain leading back to the Grecian man, and the other part of a chain leading back to my dog. And, again, it is virtue of this fact that they have their respective referents⁷⁸.

II. The Naïve Metalinguistic Strategy

Metalinguistic approaches to negative existentials have often been criticized, indeed even hastily written off, in the literature. However, I will argue, most such criticisms have been leveled against either what I will call a *naïve* Metalinguistic Strategy, or a “meta-propositional” strategy, instead of the more plausible and robust forms it can take. In this section I will lay out what the naïve strategy amounts to and look at the main lines of criticism that have been brought against it.

According to the naïve metalinguistic strategy, a negative existential of the form “*N* does not exist” is to be analyzed as “‘*N*’ does not refer”. It is *metalinguistic* in that it claims what appears to be a statement about an individual (in this case, saying the individual in question does not exist), is in reality a statement about the referential vacuity of the name itself. ‘Jones does not exist’, for example, will really be a statement about the *term* Jones, analyzed as “‘Jones’ does not refer”. Note that this view has at least the *prima facie* virtues of (a) not committing us to non-existent objects, (b) not committing us to any particular view of whether existence is a property, and (3) not conceding any ground to Descriptivism.

⁷⁸ The conjunction of DR theory with the Causal-Historical view of referring is sometimes called the ‘New Theory of Reference’. In contrast to this new picture, the Descriptivist view held that a name refers to the individual it does in virtue of the fact that the individual in question satisfies the properties which are the name’s semantic value.

This, then, is a basic statement of the naïve metalinguistic strategy for dealing with negative existentials. As mentioned before, though, many philosophers have (rightly, I think) objected to such a view. These objections will now be addressed.

Braun, in his “Empty Names”, objects to the view on at least two grounds. First, he argues that if (say) ‘Vulcan does not exist’ were equivalent to “‘Vulcan’ does not refer”, then the following two propositions ought to be equivalent as well:

P1. If Vulcan does not exist, then ‘Vulcan’ does not refer.

P2. If ‘Vulcan’ does not refer, then ‘Vulcan’ does not refer.

But, as he points out, (P1) and (P2) are *not* equivalent. P1 is at best contingent, for ‘Vulcan’ may have referred to some other object. P2, on the other hand, is necessary. This difference in modal profile shows that these two propositions cannot be equivalent.

Braun further objects that, if this view is correct, it seems to imply that negative existentials that contain different names cannot be equivalent. Consider P3 and P4, keeping in mind that I was called ‘Pierre’ in my 7th grade French class:

P3. Ben does not exist.

P4. Pierre does not exist.

Assuming of course that my classmates knew, at least in the context of our classroom, that “Ben=Pierre”, P3 and P4 ought to be equivalent. However, under the naïve metalinguistic strategy they are not, for they are equivalent to:

P3’: ‘Ben’ does not refer.

and,

P4’: ‘Pierre’ does not refer.

If these negative existentials are simply about the *names* involved, it doesn't seem they can preserve the semantic equivalence between P3 and P4⁷⁹.

Further, if a statement like “Vulcan does not exist” is truly equivalent to “‘Vulcan’ does not refer”, then the following conditional should also hold:

(C) If ‘Vulcan’ does not refer, then Vulcan does not exist.

But (C) seems false: The name ‘Vulcan’ may fail to refer and yet Vulcan still exists. We need only consider a possible world in which Vulcan is called something else, or called nothing, yet which includes the planet Vulcan. This seems to be a clear metaphysical possibility, so again, the equivalence between the negative existential and its naïve metalinguistic analysis cannot hold.

Kripke gives an argument in the same vein as these, but which is based on the idea of “indirect discourse” about belief-reports. He asks us to consider (assuming that the metalinguistic strategist will want to treat “exists” in the same way she treats “does not exist”) a case in which we report a belief of the ancient Greeks: “The Greeks believed that Zeus existed”. Given that “Zeus exists” is to be treated as “‘Zeus’ refers”, we must analyze such a belief-report as: “The Greeks believed that ‘Zeus’ referred”. However, Kripke points out, this cannot be the correct analysis, for we may correctly attribute such a belief to the Greeks without committing ourselves to the Greeks using or even knowing about the *term* ‘Zeus’.

These are the main lines of objection to the naïve Metalinguistic Strategy. I will now discuss what has been called the “meta-propositional” approach to negative existentials⁸⁰.

⁷⁹ By the principle of compositionality, one proposition expressed will have ‘Ben’ as a constituent, and the other ‘Pierre’—assuming mentionings function as names for names.

⁸⁰ This is Braun’s terminology.

III. The Meta-propositional Approach

The meta-propositional approach gets its initial statement in Kripke's John Locke lectures⁸¹. There, he argues that we should analyze “*N* does not exist” as “There is no true proposition to the effect that ‘*N* exists’”. Under this analysis a statement about the nonexistence of an individual is really a statement about the nonexistence of a certain proposition (namely, the one that would be expressed by the positive sentence, ‘*N* exists’). And this accords with the DR theorist's acceptance of Russellian propositions: If a name has no referent, and hence no semantic value, then there will be no (complete) proposition expressed by any sentence in which it occurs. So it does seem true that, at least, any genuine negative existential *entails* the nonexistence of propositions that may have been expressed by sentences in which the requisite name occurs.

Kripke observes that such a view also commits us to an extended notion of falsity. Typically, we take a sentence to be false (or its negation true) if that sentence *expresses a false proposition*. However, if the present analysis is correct, the positive existence claim is false precisely because it expresses *no* proposition. That is, “*N* does not exist” is true in virtue of the fact that “*N* exists” expresses no proposition.

Salmon objects to this view on the grounds that it “attempts to explain one negative existential in terms of another”⁸², and thus generates a sort of vicious regress. We can see Salmon's point if we consider closely the equivalence between the following two propositions:

(1) Julius does not exist.

(2) The proposition that ‘Julius exists’ does not exist.

⁸¹ Kripke, *Reference and Existence*.

⁸² Salmon, “Nonexistence”.

The analysis given by (2) does seem to accurately capture how Kripke's meta-propositional view would handle (1). If so, Salmon would argue that it just has introduced a new negative existential in need of analysis: "The proposition that 'Julius exists' does not exist". This seems to me an inadequate objection, however. For consider the semantic difference between (1) and (2): (1) contains a proper name, and so by DR theory and the Principle of Compositionality, generates all of the problems we have been addressing. (2), however, appears to be a *definite description* of the form "The F is G". If so, then it can straightforwardly receive its quantificational Russellian analysis, and no problem is generated. (2) would plausibly be equivalent to:

$$\sim \exists x(x \text{ is a proposition} \ \& \ x \text{ is expressed by 'Julius exists'})$$

The key point here is that "The proposition that P" is *not* a singular term, but rather a descriptive phrase that we may take to be individuated by its being that possible proposition expressed by the *sentence* "Julius exists"⁸³. Under the Russellian analysis just given, we are simply denying that there is some proposition satisfying that description. Ultimately, then, I do not find Salmon's objection to Kripke compelling.

It seems, however, that some of the aforementioned objections against the naïve view may here return to haunt us. For consider that, if these nonexistent propositions are individuated by the *sentences* they might have been the semantic value for, then we once again are faced with the following problem: Negative existentials in different languages, or featuring different names, that are semantically equivalent will be predicted to be semantically *inequivalent*. To see this, consider again the analysis just given of "Julius does not exist":

⁸³ Kripke does not explicitly say that such nonexistent propositions would be individuated by the sentences that purportedly express them. However, I think, this is the only plausible interpretation of their individuation conditions. The "to the effect that" clause in Kripke's meta-proposition cannot, of course, be embedding the proposition it's claiming the nonexistence of—so, it must be embedding the sentence.

$\sim\exists x(x \text{ is a proposition} \ \& \ x \text{ is expressed by 'Julius exists'})$

Now consider a scenario in which someone else knows this purported-individual Julius only under the name 'Maximus'. Further, assume that both speakers involved make the following true utterances: "Julius does not exist" and "Maximus does not exist". It is plausible to assume that, if 'Julius' and 'Maximus' have the same causal history, that these two sentences will be equivalent. However, the meta-propositional view predicts the opposite, for their analyses are as follows:

(A) $\sim\exists x(x \text{ is a proposition and } x \text{ is expressed by 'Maximus exists'})$

(B) $\sim\exists x(x \text{ is a proposition and } x \text{ is expressed by 'Julius exists'})$

These are inequivalent because, once again, they are about two distinct sentences. Thus, the meta-propositional view (so-characterized) makes the wrong semantic prediction.

So much for the meta-propositional view. I will now discuss what I believe is fundamentally wrong with most of the criticisms of metalinguistic approaches, offer a general strategy for making a Metalinguistic Strategy plausible, and then explore how such a plausible metalinguistic view has been worked out by several philosophers.

IV. Towards a Robust Metalinguistic Strategy

The fundamental problem with the above criticisms of metalinguistic approaches is this: They all take the relevant metalinguistic entity, the one that fails to refer, to be a *syntactical word-type*. Once you assume this, a metalinguistic strategy becomes unworkable—indeed, I believe all of the aforementioned arguments are *legitimate* if one assumes that a metalinguistic strategy entails such an assumption. However, it need not. Before offering the general strategy

for constructing a workable statement of the position that rejects that the relevant lexical entity that fails to refer is a word-type, though, let's look at just how exactly this debilitates the view.

Consider the (tragic) negative existential "Batman does not exist". As we saw, such a negative existential, on the naïve view, gets the following analysis:

(B1) 'Batman' does not refer.

One of the objections to such an analysis was that (B2) as follows would be contingent, whereas (B3) would be necessary, though they should be equivalent on the naïve view:

(B2) If Batman does not exist, then 'Batman' does not refer.

(B3) If 'Batman' does not refer, then 'Batman' does not refer.

We saw that (B2) was contingent because there are possible worlds in which Batman doesn't exist but the term 'Batman' still refers (say, to Bane). Now, note that this objection *essentially* depends on the above assumption: That 'Batman' is a syntactic word-type—and by this I mean that it is individuated by its syntactical structure (that is, in terms of its *syntactic type*, any utterance or inscription of the term is an instance of that type, even if it has a different referent. This is the sense in which I am "using the same name" when I talk of the superhero and when I talk of my pet lizard whom I named 'Batman'). If it is this syntactic word-type that we are claiming doesn't refer, then *of course* it may have referred in spite of the nonexistence of Batman—the word-type 'Batman' can be used to refer to whoever (even his mortal nemesis, Bane).

Now consider the objection from negative existentials featuring different names, but that seem semantically equivalent. For example:

(S1) Santa Claus does not exist.

(S2) Father Christmas does not exist.

Intuitively, these are equivalent. But once again, the naïve view predicts they are not, for their respective translations are:

(S1') 'Santa Claus' does not refer.

(S2') 'Father Christmas' does not refer.

Now note that this objection also essentially depends on the syntactic word-type assumption: That we are speaking of the syntactic word-types 'Santa Claus' and 'Father Christmas' lacking referents.

Finally, consider the objection that the following conditional is also contingent (the converse of the previous conditional):

(C) If 'Batman' does not refer, then Batman does not exist.

As discussed before, this conditional is straightforwardly contingent: There are possible worlds in which 'Batman' does not refer, but in which Batman yet exists. Again, the contingency of the conditional hinges on assuming that we are speaking of some word-type individuated by syntax, 'Batman', lacking a referent.

I submit, however, that we need only reject the “syntactic word-type assumption” in order to get around all three of these objections. Instead of saying that it is some syntactic word-type that is failing to refer, we should rather say that it is terms *individuated by their use* that are failing to refer. Let us call such terms individuated by use “functional word-types”, and denote them by ' N_f '. If we consider then, say, 'Santa Claus' and 'Father Christmas' not with respect to their syntactical type, but with respect to their *use* type, we will see them as “the same term”. That is, $\text{Santa Claus}_f = \text{Father Christmas}_f$. They are the same term in that they are “functionally

equivalent”, or “use-equivalent”⁸⁴. Equipped with this notion of a functional word-type, we can get around the three objections as follows.

First, the objection from the inequivalence of “If *N* does not exist, then ‘*N*’ does not refer” and “If ‘*N*’ does refer, then ‘*N*’ does not refer”. The objection was that the former is contingent whereas the latter is necessary. If we replace ‘*N*’ in the first conditional with the functional word-type ‘*N_f*’, then we get the correct modal analysis: “If *N* does not exist, then *N_f* does not refer” is necessary. This can be seen when one considers that, if the individual named doesn’t exist, then it’s trivially true that *the name you used to refer to that individual* doesn’t refer. The objection that the name might refer to some *other* individual in spite of *N*’s nonexistence is blocked here, because such a name would be *functionally inequivalent* to *N_f*.

Next, the objection from negative existentials with different, but apparently equivalent, names. Recall that the naïve metalinguistic strategy had to take ‘Father Christmas does not exist’ and ‘Santa Claus does not exist’ as semantically distinct—one is about the name ‘Father Christmas’ not referring, and the other ‘Santa Claus’ not referring. However, if we consider ‘Santa’ and ‘Father Christmas’ according to their functional word-type, it is clear that ‘*Santa Claus_f* = *Father Christmas_f*’. If we designate the functional word-type that is instantiated by both of these names with ‘*C_f*’, then we get a unifying metalinguistic meaning and truth-condition: ‘*C_f* does not refer’.

Finally, consider the objection from the contingency of “If ‘Batman’ does not refer, then Batman does not exist”, when it should be necessary (the antecedent being equivalent to the

⁸⁴ It is of course natural to think of ‘Santa Claus’ and ‘Father Christmas’ as different terms. Because of this, it’s important to keep in mind that I am here merely *stipulating* that they are the “same term” in the sense of bearing a relation of use-equivalence to each other.

consequent, on a metalinguistic view). This one is trickier than the others, but I believe the ‘ N_f ’ framework can work here as well. Consider that, if ‘Batman’ *as we use it* (say, the “superhero-use”), that is ‘Batman_f’, does not refer, then there isn’t any sense in which Batman *might have existed*⁸⁵. This point is subtle. To see it, it is important to consider the nature of Direct Reference and the nature of counterfactual reflection. On DR theory, the semantic value of a name is simply its referent. Because of this, as we have seen, a name will lack any content in the absence of a referent. When deploying an empty name in reflecting on counterfactual situations, then, there will be no definite state of affairs being considered in using that name. Consider, for example, that we discover Shakespeare never existed. Someone may say “Well, Shakespeare doesn’t exist, but he *might have*!” What, on DR theory, could this mean? Under what circumstances would Shakespeare have existed, if the name itself lacks any content? Who is it we are picking out in this other possible world using the name ‘Shakespeare’ and saying that he exists in that world? It may be helpful to consider how counterfactual reflection works for definite descriptions, in order to see the contrast. For a definite description, such as “The first Prime Minister”, when we consider a counterfactual situation using that phrase we have definite identity conditions for who will be the first Prime Minister in the world considered⁸⁶: Whoever exemplifies the property ‘being the first Prime Minister’. We also get a clear identity condition when deploying a filled name in a counterfactual situation: Whoever is identical, in that world, to the individual denoted by that name in the actual world. No such identity conditions are available when we deploy an

⁸⁵ Recall Kripke’s point about Sherlock Holmes.

⁸⁶ This is not the metaphysical problem of so-called “transworld identity”. That is a problem about identity *across* worlds, as opposed to a problem about the individuation conditions *at a particular world*, which is presently being discussed.

empty name, so there isn't any sense in which we can meaningfully reflect on the possible existence of some definite individual.

It is in this sense, then, that the conditional is necessarily true: If 'Batman_f' does not refer, then Batman does not exist⁸⁷. I think that the *appearance* of contingency here can be explained by the fact that, when a name is *full*, the conditional will indeed be contingent: If there *is* such a person as Batman, then we can proceed to meaningfully speak of him in counterfactual situations, even counterfactuals in which the name 'Batman' doesn't exist, or is not used in the way in which we use it.

Because of these considerations, I believe that such a general strategy for reworking the metalinguistic approach is promising. Further, there has been a kind of metalinguistic view, consistent with DR theory and the causal-historical theory of reference, which has been developed by several philosophers and appears to flesh out this general idea well. In particular, it gives us the *conditions* under which our N_fs will fail to refer. It is this kind of metalinguistic view that I believe is the correct analysis of negative existentials. I will call it the "Causal-Historical Metalinguistic View", and it will now be discussed.

V. The Causal-Historical Metalinguistic View

The Causal-Historical Metalinguistic view (hereafter simply TCV) finds its initial statement in Keith Donnellan's 1974 paper "Speaking of Nothing"⁸⁸. Donnellan first points out

⁸⁷ In this conditional, what's true specifically is that if 'Batman' does not refer *in our world* then Batman's existence, considered *at* our world, isn't possible *in any other world*.

⁸⁸ Keith Donnellan, "Speaking of Nothing," *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 3-31.

that, given the causal-historical theory reference, the truth conditions for “singular expressions” are (a) that an individual is “appropriately related” to the name historically, and (b) that the individual instantiates the property expressed by the predicate. It follows naturally according to Donnellan, then, that the truth conditions for a negative existential are just that there is no individual appropriately causally-historically related to the name.

When a name lacks such a causal-historical relation to an individual, Donnellan says that name ends in a “historical block”. The truth condition for negative existentials may then be stated as follows: A negative existential is true iff the causal history of the name that occurs in the negative existential ends in a block. Further, he points out that there are various ways in which it could happen that a name ends in a block: The introduction of a fictional character by parents (when, for example, they tell their child of Santa Claus); a writer mistakenly attributing various writings to a single individual⁸⁹; someone being under a visual hallucination and naming the purported-object of the hallucination⁹⁰, and so on.

Donnellan addresses two possible objections to this account. First, there may be two usages of the same name in a language, so how do we distinguish the causal-historical truth conditions? To this Donnellan replies much in the same way I did above: One need only distinguish the names in terms of their “characteristic usages”. So, by way of example, we would have ‘Beethoven₁’ for the composer, and ‘Beethoven₂’ for the dog (in my former terminology, these are distinct because they are distinct *functional* word-types, though they are identical *syntactic* word-types). Second, there is the objection that people can express the same true

⁸⁹ Such as a certain fringe view about the works of Shakespeare.

⁹⁰ Although, interestingly, Kripke thinks that hallucinatory objects may themselves represent a unique ontological category, analogous to fictional entities. See *Reference and Existence*, Lecture IV.

negative existential in different languages, using different names. If so, how could the truth conditions be identical when they have differing causal histories? To this Donnellan's reply is simple: If these names were indeed functionally equivalent, then their histories must merge at some point, "if one goes back far enough". If, for example, we recognized the English "Santa Claus" and the German "Der Weihnachtsmann" as being intertranslatable⁹¹, and thus semantically equivalent, then it must be that the histories of those names merge at some point in the past⁹².

Donnellan's basic idea has influenced and been developed by the philosophers John Perry and Anthony Everett. Perry calls his developing of the idea a "reflexive-referential" theory—reflexive, he says, because the truth conditions for negative existentials are conditions on the utterance *itself* (much like what I said constitutes a view's being "metalinguistic"). Perry's theory is fairly nuanced and technical, but the basic idea is this: With every proper name, we can identify its causal-historical "network", which is to be identified with its linguistic history. Networks always have an origin, but do not always originate with an *individual* (as Donnellan said, they may end in a "block"). There is a type of content associated with names, then, that we may call their "network content". The network content of a name may sometimes contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it occurs, and Perry gives existential claims as a prime example. When I say "*N* exists", Perry claims that the truth conditions are given by some fact about the network; namely, that the "*N*-network" has an individual at its origin. The

⁹¹ I have heard that this isn't strictly the case, but let's ignore such translation-related nuances for the sake of argument.

⁹² This, however, does *not* entail that they must have been *the same name* at some time in the past. Histories can merge in less straightforward ways: Someone may tell me of Bigfoot, and I decide to call him 'Little John'—if so, the causal chain initiated by my introduction of 'Little John' will be a part of the larger causal chain of 'Bigfoot' usages.

network-related truth-conditions of the negation of “*N* exists”, then, are that the *N*-network lack an individual at its origin.

Everett argues along similar lines, but where Perry talks of “networks” Everett talks of “referential frameworks”. Like Perry’s networks, Everett’s referential frameworks are the collective linguistic histories, with all of its branches and sub-branches, of a name stretching all the way back to the name’s introduction. Everett says that if at the “base” of the framework there is an individual referred to, that framework as a “referential source”. However, Everett points out that even if a framework lacks a referential source, it may still have at its base a *reference-fixing* source. And a framework may grow up over time out of such a reference-fixing event just as it may grow out of the dubbing of an actual object. To see this, consider the example of visual hallucination: Say I am wandering through the woods and believe I see a massive creature lurking. I proceed to name the creature, whatever it is, “Solomon”, and a framework of usages of that name grows out of that reference-fixing event. Unbeknownst to me, however, there never was a Solomon: I had just recently consumed a hallucination-inducing herb. Solomon does not exist. But of course, this did not prevent a genuine referential framework from growing up out of the event—to this day, visitors to the forest speak of the lurking Solomon.

Everett uses these ideas to explain how (1) certain distinct empty names can be “about” the same thing, and (2) certain distinct empty names can be “about” different things. For example, if DR theory is true, then in what sense can we say that two statements such as “Santa Claus is jolly” and “Father Christmas is merry” are about the same thing if there is nothing for them to be about? Here Everett invokes his technical notion of “thin-aboutness”. Everett says that two things are “thinly about the same thing” if they “share a common framework source”. It

is in this “thin” sense of aboutness, Everett claims, that statements about Father Christmas and Santa Claus are about the same thing.

With respect to (2), there seem to be statements featuring empty names that are about different things. But how can this be, given that there’s nothing for them to be about—or, put another way, given that they both have the same semantic value, \emptyset . Consider, for example, the statements “Romulus is brave” and “Spock is brave”. If they have any semantic values at all, their semantic values may be given by the “gappy propositions” they express: $\langle \emptyset, \text{braveness} \rangle$ and $\langle \emptyset, \text{braveness} \rangle$. They both have the null set in their subject-position (because they are empty), and the property ‘braveness’ in the predicate-position. How, then, to distinguish them? We can distinguish them if we consider what they are (in Everett’s phraseology) “thinly” about, or (in Perry’s phraseology) if we consider their “network” content. TCV, then, gives us insight not only into negative existentials, but also into questions concerning the sort of content that distinguishes or unites various occurrences of empty names in normal subject-predicate sentences.

As a final point in favor of TCV, recall Kripke’s objection from belief-reports. We may report, for example, that the Greeks believed Zeus existed without committing ourselves to the Greeks having any beliefs about the *term* ‘Zeus’ (that, in this case, ‘Zeus’ refers). The present TCV account has a straightforward response to this problem: In committing ourselves to the fact that the Greeks believed Zeus existed, we are *not* committing ourselves to anything about the Greek’s believing something about the term (considered syntactically) ‘Zeus’, but we *are* committing ourselves to the belief that they believed *whatever functionally equivalent term they*

used (call it Zeus_f) refers. And the basis of this successful reference is given by Zeus_f having a referential origin.

Next, I'd like to address a certain objection to metalinguistic views that doesn't just apply to the naïve view, but would also apply to our present TCV version of the view.

VI. The 'Mention' Objection

It has been argued by philosophers such as Kripke, Evans, and Kroon⁹³ that there should be the following restriction on any analysis of existential or negative existential statements: The singular term must be analyzed as being *used* rather than *mentioned*. It's often unclear just why, exactly, this restriction should be placed on the analysis. However, Kroon gives at least two *prima facie* reasons: First, he claims that viewing the term as used rather than mentioned passes the "surface grammar" test. The motivation here seems to be that, at least *ceteris paribus*, we should avoid giving an analysis that is removed from the straightforward grammatical structure of the sentence—preserving as much of the notion as embodied in ordinary language as possible.

Second, Kroon argues that viewing the term as used rather than mentioned respects the anaphora surrounding such terms in many contexts. A term is "anaphoric" if its meaning is parasitic on the meaning of some prior term. For example, in "Joe went to school. He picked up some books.", "He" is anaphoric, as its semantics are parasitic on the previous occurrence of "Joe". Consider, then, a context like the following: "Spock doesn't exist. He was a brilliant

⁹³ See: Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)., and Fred Kroon, " 'Disavowal Through Commitment' Theories of Negative Existentials," in *Empty Names, Fiction and The Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2000).

Vulcan in ‘Star Trek’, though.” In such a context, it’s clear that “he” is anaphoric on “Spock”. However, how can it be, if the original negative existential is not about an individual, but rather about a term? The metalinguistic translation of the previous context would be: “‘Spock_f’ doesn’t refer⁹⁴. He was a brilliant Vulcan in ‘Star Trek’, though.” Clearly, ‘he’ here can’t be anaphoric on the *term* ‘Spock_f’.

Despite these considerations, I do not believe that such a restriction is legitimate. Consider first the “surface grammar” motivation. It seems that one of the main lessons of the history of the philosophy of language has been that surface grammar is often misleading. Indeed, one of the field’s most successful and fruitful results is founded on such a rejection of surface grammar: Russell’s Theory of Descriptions. Russell’s key insight was that statements that *appear* to essentially denote some definite individual, of the form “The F is G”, are *despite their surface grammar* existential quantifications. Further, if surface grammar were a legitimate test for a philosophical-semantic theory, then we would have to give ground to the Meinongian, endorser of nonexistent entities, who takes the surface grammar of negative existentials at face-value: Statements of the form “N does not exist” have the grammatical form of subject-predicate sentences, and thus the Meinongian takes us to be designating some entity and predicating nonexistence of it. It seems, then, that although the “surface grammar test” should be a *prima facie* guide for philosophical-semantic theories, it surely shouldn’t be a *restriction* on such theories.

Now to the question of anaphora. It seems that how one addresses this question will vary, in part, depending on what the metalinguistic strategist thinks about fiction. For example, in the

⁹⁴ In virtue of ending in a block.

previous example involving Spock, the endorser of Abstract Object Theory may interpret it as follows: The initial statement of Spock’s nonexistence is not strict, but is rather something more like “There is no one sufficiently like Spock as portrayed in Star Trek”. The subsequent anaphoric “he” would then (because we wouldn’t want to call the abstract object “he”) introduce a new context, a context within a pretense. The anaphora of “he”, then, would hinge on the ambiguity between the meta-fictional sense of “Spock” and the object-fictional sense of “Spock”. It should be understood in such contexts, though, that speakers are sensitive to such ambiguities and accept the anaphora on their basis. This is, at least, one route that might be taken.

For simplicity’s sake, though, let’s eliminate contexts of fiction and see how the metalinguistic strategist may treat anaphora in another context. Consider a context in which someone says “Did you hear? Aristotle never existed! Shame, really—he was my favorite philosopher.” Here ‘Aristotle’ is empty, is featured in a negative existential, and the subsequent “he” is anaphoric. What is the metalinguistic strategist to say? First, let’s keep in mind that she will give the following analysis of ‘Aristotle never existed’: “‘Aristotle_f’ doesn’t refer”. Now the aforementioned would look something like “Did you hear? ‘Aristotle_f’ doesn’t refer! Shame, really—he was my favorite philosopher”. My first intuition here is to simply ask: Does the anaphoric “he” here *really* seem that out of place—that inappropriate? Beyond a raw appeal to intuition, though, the metalinguistic strategist may say something along the following lines:

The anaphoric “he” here is relying upon a *previous* semantic convention associated with ‘Aristotle’—a convention like: The name ‘Aristotle’ is filled, so one may apply anaphoric terms to it. That is, there was a previous presumption that the name was *not* empty, so like with any

filled name, it was strictly appropriate to apply anaphoric terms to it. Once it is discovered that ‘Aristotle’ is in fact empty, speakers may continue to exploit this convention or presumption in order to speak loosely about, for example, features they still or used to associate with the name—in this case, ‘my favorite philosopher’. Although the speaker in question of course knows now that there is no “he” to be the referent of that description, she nonetheless continues to exploit the previous convention that permits her to talk *as if* the name has a referent—and this to convey some bit of information more quickly and conveniently, such as “It’s a shame, all of those works authored under the name ‘Aristotle’ were my favorites. Now I know they were written by several independent hacks, under the name ‘Aristotle’” (or whatever the case happened to be).

Anaphora is a complex and variegated phenomenon, but it seems there is no in-principle reason the metalinguistic strategist cannot deal with it by appealing to pragmatic considerations such as the ones just mentioned. The case of anaphora is at least not an obvious, knock-down argument against metalinguistic approaches.

VII. Pretense and The Causal-Historical Metalinguistic View

Although I have argued that surface grammar should not be a *restriction* on an analysis of negative existentials, it still would be helpful if we could explain the *prima facie* appearance that we are engaged in normal subject-predicate discourse when uttering such sentences. I believe the endorser of TCV can incorporate a certain insight of philosophers Evans, Kroon, and Walton in order to do just that⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ See: Kendall Walton, “Existence as Metaphor?” in *Empty Names, Fiction and The Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2000).—for Evans and Kroon, see footnote 93.

Evans, Kroon, and Walton have all endorsed a *pretense* account of negative existentials. As Evans put it, we should liken negative existentials to "...a person who makes a move within a pretense to express the fact that it is a pretense". He gives the example of someone running out on stage in the middle of a play and saying, "This scaffold and these buildings are only props!" More to the present point, one may think of children playing a game of Cowboys and Indians, when all of a sudden, upon realizing one of the children is too caught up in the game and frightened, another child says "Jim, don't worry—those Indians over there don't exist!". In both of these cases, the phrases "This scaffold and these buildings" and "Those Indians over there" are *moves within the pretense*. In reality, of course, there are no buildings, scaffolds, or Indians in these cases—but the participants in the game of make believe exploit the assumption that they *are* in order to convey that they are *not*. Kroon calls this "disavowal through commitment".

According to these thinkers, then, a negative existential should be seen in the following way: When we utter "N does not exist", we are *pretending* that "N" refers, assuming a convention under which it would make sense to deploy it in a subject-predicate sentence, in order to convey that it *does not* in fact refer—much like saying "Those Indians over there don't exist"⁹⁶. It is clear on this model how one explains the appearance of use: One is *using* the term in the context of the pretense, in order to convey that it is not, indeed cannot, be used (because it is empty).

Interestingly, Kroon and Evans, at least, have both explicitly rejected the idea that empty names are to be seen as mentioned in negative existentials. However, note that they put a

⁹⁶ Walton thinks that the game of make-believe involved in our usage of negative existentials is actually a *Meinongian* game, in which we pretend that there is a certain domain of objects which have the property of nonexistence.

metalinguistic truth condition on the negative existential: That the name, or that particular utterance of the name, fails to refer. As Walton put it, a statement such as “Neptune does not exist” is more fundamentally to say something like “Neptune: that was unsuccessful”. If so, then it’s difficult to see just what, exactly, the issue between the metalinguistic approach and the pretense approach to negative existentials *is*. For even the endorser of TCV would presumably agree that, for whatever reason, we deploy sentences in which the names are *superficially* used to get across this ultimately metalinguistic truth condition, or information. I want to submit, then, that the pretense account of negative existentials and TCV are actually complementary: The Causal-Historical Metalinguistic View gives us the truth conditions for negative existentials, and the pretense account gives us the pragmatic *device* by which we convey these truth conditions.

Given that it is developed in the causal-historical way just outlined, and that it is supplemented by pretense views, I believe that a Metalinguistic Strategy is the most promising for dealing with negative existentials. Having now completed the review and analysis of the various approach DR Theorists have taken regarding the problem of empty names, I will now conclude by summarizing and making some general observations.

VIII. Conclusion

We began with a cluster of problems generated by four facts: (1) The phenomenon of empty names, (2) Direct Reference theory, (3) the principle of compositionality, and (4) the truth conditions for subject-predicate sentences featuring singular terms. Given that a name is empty, and that its semantic value could only be its referent, the principle of compositionality dictated that no unique complete proposition could be expressible by sentences in which such names

occurred. Further, even if we took their semantic significance for granted, we still faced the problem of how some such sentences managed to be *true*: Their truthmakers would seem to be constituted by the denotation of the subject term exemplifying the property expressed by the predicate term. Additionally, we saw that there are various types of sentence featuring empty names that may, in the end, require different analyses: (1) Basic subject-predicate sentences, such as “Romulus founded Rome” , negative existentials such as “Santa Claus does not exist”, and names as they occur in fictional contexts, such as “Spock is from planet Vulcan”.

The Pragmatic Strategists attempted to deal with these cases uniformly. They theorized that our intuitions regarding the semantic significance and truth-evaluability of such sentences was based not on the propositions (or lackthereof) they literally expressed, but rather on conversationally implicated *descriptive* propositions. So, for example, our intuitions regarding the significance of a statement such as “Santa Claus is jolly” are ultimately based on some associated descriptive proposition, such as “The fat man from the North Pole who brings presents every year is jolly”. There were, however, important objections to the view—objections that left me with the conclusion that the view, while having its virtues, was too problematic.

Next we saw how DR theorists have attempted to deal with the phenomenon of empty names in fictional contexts. There were two main views: Pretense Theory, and Abstract Object Theory. Pretense Theory attempted to explain fiction as a sort of exercise in make-believe—an exercise, or language game, in which we *pretend* that the requisite semantic conditions are fulfilled by the sentences being used. If so, then one such condition we are pretending is fulfilled is the condition that the names involved have a referent. Our intuitions regarding the significance of names in such contexts is then explained by our realizing that it is part of the *pretense* of the

fiction that they are indeed significant, when in reality they are not. Abstract Object Theory, however, arose out of a consideration of certain sentences involving fictional names, but that did not occur *within* fiction: meta-fictional sentences, such as “Sherlock Holmes is the most famous literary detective”. Sentences such as these are not part of any pretense, they are not “true in the stories”, but are rather straightforward statements about reality. And many such sentences seemed to commit us to *quantifying over* such fictional characters—fictional characters being conceived of as a sort of abstract object. Further, the fact that we bear certain attitude-relations towards such characters was taken as additional evidence for their existence. This class of sentences, at least, was then explained by these DR theorists by claiming that they do *not* in fact feature empty names: their semantic values are the abstract objects they refer to. In the end, I found Abstract Object Theory a compelling and natural explanation of meta-fictional discourse, though had doubts about whether it could be extended to account for object-fictional discourse, as Nathan Salmon thought it may. Such an extension, though, is unnecessary, given that Pretense Theory and Abstract Object Theory are consistent with one another—one may be taken to explain object-fictional, and the other meta-fictional discourse.

Finally, in this chapter, I explored and assessed the Metalinguistic Strategy for coping with empty names. A naïve metalinguistic view and the meta-propositional view were analyzed and rejected, and a more robust causal-historical version of the view was developed in their place. It was argued that such a causal-historical version could cope with not only negative existentials, but with the sense that other basic subject-predicate sentences had some sort of content, despite our recognition of their emptiness. For example, that sentences featuring ‘Santa Claus’ and ‘Father Christmas’ share content, whereas sentences featuring ‘Remus’ and ‘Bigfoot’

have divergent content. This was explained in terms of Perry's notion of "network" content, and Everett's notion of "thin aboutness". Finally, regarding negative existentials, I argued that such an account, in order to explain the appearance of use, ought to be supplemented by the pretense accounts given by philosophers such as Evans, Kroon and Walton: Pretense explains the pragmatic device by which we convey a metalinguistic truth condition.

My analysis of the various strategies and approaches to empty names from the perspective of Direct Reference may then be summarized as follows: For the case of fiction, meta-fictional sentences and certain attitude-contexts ought to be analyzed in the way Abstract Object Theory proposes. On the other hand, object-fictional sentences seem best understood on the model of pretense—given that, as was argued, an alternative account such as Salmon's is problematic. For the case of negative existentials, I argued for the sort of causal-historical metalinguistic account developed by philosophers such as Donnellan, Perry, and Everett—supplemented by a notion of pretense. And, finally, the same sort of analysis was to explain the content of non-fictional normal subject-predicate sentences: Our retaining the intuition that such sentences remain meaningful, despite the emptiness of the names they feature, is that they retain their "network" content.

In the end, the one strategy that could have given a *unified* account of empty names was rejected: The Pragmatic Strategy. However, the philosopher must always make his choice relative to various theoretical virtues. In this case, I purchased the explanatory power of a disparate set of views at the price of the explanatory simplicity of the pragmatic view. Of course, these positions themselves are not without their problems. I believe, however, that given the

current state of things, the most promising lines of defense against the problem of empty names for DR theorists are those just outlined, explained, and defended.

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