Things a Millian can say about empty names

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February 6, 2008

A Millian can, but need not, say the same thing about each of the different types of apparently empty names. The best strategy to me seems to think about each of these cases on its own terms, and see whether the Millian can say anything plausible.

1 Some apparently empty names are not really empty

An obvious kind of solution for the Millian would be to show that some apparently empty names are not really empty. One kind of case for which this has been presented is the case of names which occur in works of fiction.

1.1 van Inwagen on fictional characters

van Inwagen argues that sentences like this one commit us to the existence of fictional characters.

> Some characters in novels are closely model-ed on actual people, while others are wholly products of the literary imagination, and it is usually impossible to tell which characters fall into which of these categories by textual analysis alone
>
> van Inwagen (1977), p. 302

This certainly looks like an existentially quantified sentence which is true only if fictional characters can be values of the relevant variables. And we certainly do ordinarily take sentences of this sort to be true.

Suppose that fictional characters exist; then they are presumably named by the names which figure in works of fiction. So, the Millian can take those fictional characters to be the contents of those names.

This has two consequences which might seem odd. First, the Millian has to regard negative existentials like

> Sherlock Holmes does not exist.

as false, not true. Second, the Millian has to regard most predications we'd be tempted to make of Sherlock Holmes as false, such as

> Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

But the Millian can say some plausible things about both cases. About negative existentials, he should say that our temptation to regard them as true rests on the genuine truth of sentences like

> Sherlock Holmes does not exist in space and time.
> Sherlock Holmes is not a real person.

About predications like the above, he should say that out temptation to regard them as true rests on the genuine truth of sentences like

> According to Conan Doyle's stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective.
> Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a detective in the stories by Conan Doyle.

See the discussion in van Inwagen (1977), §IV.

1.2   Fictions vs. theories

An interesting question is whether we can extend the treatment of fictional names to names which occur in, for example, false scientific theories. An example is 'Vulcan', introduced as a name for the planet which was causing observed perturbations in the orbit of Mercury. To do so, we'd want to find sentences which appear to quantify over objects which would be the referents of those names.

Caplan (2004) suggests sentences like the following:

> There is a hypothetical planet whose orbit was thought to lie between Mercury and the Sun, but there has never been a hypothetical planet whose orbit was thought to lie between Mercury and Venus.

I agree that this is parallel to the van Inwagen sentence above in that, if true, it commits us to an object which would be the referent of 'Vulcan.' But I am less convinced that this sort of sentence is true. To the extent that it seems true, I think that this rests on reading the existential quantifier as within the scope of the propositional attitude, as in this sentence:

> It was once thought that there is a planet which lies between Mercury and the Sun, but there has never been a planet whose orbit was thought to lie between Mercury and Venus.

which doesn't commit us to the existence of hypothetical planets. So I'm inclined to say that these cases are not parallel, and that the Millian can't extend his solution to the fictional name cases to cases like 'Vulcan.'

2 Some names are disguised definite descriptions

2.1 Russell on empty names

This was Russell's response to the problem of empty names at the time at which he wrote 'On Denoting': ordinary proper names were not, he thought, 'logically proper names', but rather abbreviated definite descriptions.

Russell's solutions to the problem of meaning and the problem of true negative existentials.

Since we're interested in whether the Russellian who is also a Millian has anything plausible to say about empty names, we can set this position to the side. Russell's view of ordinary proper names as disguised descriptions has all the problems associated with Fregean views of names.

2.2 Names introduced via description

But even if we can't say that all names are disguised definite descriptions, can we say this about *some* kinds of empty names? A promising candidate might be names which are introduced into the language via definite description. (Imagine someone saying: 'Let 'n' stand for/be a name for whatever is the F.')

One reason why this is plausible: it doesn't seem like replacing a description with a name should be semantically significant; no one would think that abbreviation, or forming an acronym, is semantically significant. So why think that replacing a description with a name should be?

This suggests a general rule, to which we'll return: if a name is introduced via some other expression, the semantics of the name should not diverge from the semantics of the expression used to introduce it (relative to the relevant context of utterance).

A further argument based on the implausibility of widespread contingent a priori knowledge that names introduced via description are not, at least in the standard case, Millian.

Some theoretical terms, if we think of them as 'defined by the theory.' This amounts to introduction via description.

2.3 Jeshion's argument against this view

Jeshion (2001) (131-2) suggests that this position is unstable. Consider some examples of names introduced via description: 'Jack the Ripper', 'The Boston Strangler.' Can we use

Kripke's modal and epistemic arguments to show that names like this are not equivalent to disguised descriptions?

How about 'Neptune'? Is it plausible to think that the meaning of the name changed when we gained non-descriptive ways of referring to it?

A puzzling case: someone can surely understand a name without knowing how that name was introduced. Understanding does not typically require knowledge of the history of the expression in question. So suppose that the name was introduced via some description 'the F.' It could have this meaning for an agent A even if that agent does not know how it was introduced. Does it follow that 'the F' and the name can be substituted salva veritate in ascriptions of propositional attitude ascriptions to the agent? In some cases, this does not look plausible. It is very hard to know what the right thing to say about these cases is; we can gain some comfort from noting that this problem occurs quite generally for the descriptivist, and only in this sort of case for the Millian.

A separate but related point: is it possible to understand a name without knowing whether it is a device of direct reference or an abbreviated description? There seems to be something odd about this; it would follow that it is possible to, e.g., believe a proposition without knowing whether it was an existentially quantified proposition or a de re proposition.

2.4   Theoretical terms

A lot hangs on how we treat these sorts of names, since, at least on the treatment in Lewis (1970), terms introduced via a theory are a special case of terms introduced via description. Plausibly, if we are content to regard the above examples as names introduced via description, we should also so regard names empty names introduced via false theories. ('Vulcan' could be such an example, if you think of 'Vulcan is the plant causing the perturbartions in the orbit of Mercury as a very short and boring theory.)

3   Some names contribute no constituent to propositions expressed by sentences containing them

Consider the example of Strawson (1950): 'Suppose I advance my hands, cautiously cupped, towards someone, saying, as I do so, "This is a fine red one ".' Plausibly, in this case you fail to express a proposition.

Now consider a name introduced via a demonstrative like 'this' or 'that.' If the name is empty, then the use of the demonstrative must be empty, as in Strawson's example. But then we can apply the rule above, that the introduction of a name via some use of an expression is such that the name acquires the same content as the expression used to introduce it. But then if we want to say that Strawson's example sentence fails to express a proposition, sentences involving names introduced via such demonstratives should also fail to express propositions.

How then should we think about sentences involving names of this sort? Here's what

Nathan Salmon says:

> "these sentences express no proposition, or at least none that is a candidate for being true or false. I would propose that they be seen instead as expressing something severely disabled, the partially formed product of a failed attempt to construct a true-or-false proposition, something whose cognitive and semantic function is that of a truth-valued proposition but which is unable to fulfil its function for lack of an essential component. ...Let us call it a structurally challenged proposition. It may be thought of for the present purpose as an ordered pair, or rather a would-be ordered pair, whose second element is the concept or property of baldness and whose first element is nothing what so ever." (Salmon (1998), 307)

Could we, contra this passage, think of these structurally challenged propositions as being true or false? Braun (1993) suggests the following rule:

If P is a proposition having a single subject position and a one-place property position, then P is true iff the subject position is filled by one, and only one, object, and it exemplifies the property filling the property position. If P is not true, then it is false.

What would this lead us to say about negations of propositions expressed by sentences containing genuinely empty names?

4   Divide and conquer!

To sum up, I think that the best strategy for dealing with the classes of empty names laid out previously is as follows:

- *Names for fictional characters.* Not genuinely empty; the relevant negative existentials are false, not true, and sentences involving them unproblematically express singular propositions about fictional characters.

- *Non-referring theoretical terms.* See names introduced via description.

- *Names for mythological characters.* Mixture between non-referring theoretical terms and names for fictional characters.

- *Names introduced via description.* Disguised definite descriptions; for these empty 'names', we say what Russell said about all ordinary names in 'On Denoting.'

- *Names introduced via demonstrative.* The only genuinely empty names; we can take them to express structurally challenged, gappy propositions. These might either lack a truth-value, or be assigned truth conditions via Braun's rule (supplemented with clauses for other sorts of sentences). Negative existentials involving these are either true or lack a truth-value, depending on one's assignment of truth conditions to gappy propositions.

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None of these moves is transparently correct; the case of names introduced via description is especially worrying. What is obvious is that the problem of empty names is not clearly a devastating problem for Millianism, as it's often taken to be.

Whether the problem admits of an adequate solution in Millian terms is something that would be worth exploring in a paper.

References

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