

# The problem of empty names

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## 1 Russellianism and Millianism

A good place to begin is with a distinction which is often ignored, between Russellian views of propositions and Millian views of names. Russellianism is a view about what sorts of things are the constituents of propositions — objects, relations, and properties. As such it incorporates no view about the semantic contents of names in English, or any other natural language.

Millianism is a view about the meanings of names: it says that the meaning of a name is its referent. This is sometimes also called a ‘direct reference’ view of names.

Millians are typically Russellians. But Russellians needn’t be Millians. Russell, for example, was a Russellian but not a Millian from 1905 till about 1910. (From ‘On Denoting’ till he stopped believing in propositions altogether.)

As we’ll see, empty names pose a special problem for Millianism, and not for non-Millian versions of Russellianism. Most Russellians are Millians, and in what follows I’ll be assuming Millianism for the purposes of argument. But it is worth keeping in mind that, even if Millian views of names are wrong, this doesn’t by itself show that Russellian views of propositions are incorrect.

## 2 Empty names

### 2.1 What is an empty name?

An empty name is a name which lacks a referent.

Which names these are will be a matter of controversy. An important example which is worth mentioning at the outset is that whether or not you think that ‘Socrates’ is empty may depend on your views about the status of past objects, and whether formerly existing objects can have properties like ‘being the referent of a name.’ Names of former but no longer existing objects raise some interesting problems of their own — which in my view constitute the hardest problem about names facing the Millian — so we’ll reserve those for a separate discussion. I’ll call those ‘names for past existents’, and reserve ‘empty names’ for names which appear to lack a reference and do not fall into that category.

### 2.2 Types of apparently empty names

There’s more than one type of apparently empty name. The following is a list of the main varieties we’ll be interested in:

- Names for fictional characters. *Sherlock Holmes, Holden Caulfield.*
- Non-referring theoretical terms. *Vulcan.*
- Names for mythological characters. *Zeus, Poseidon.*
- Names introduced via description.
- Names introduced via demonstrative.

The last two categories need some more explanation. The distinction is between two ways in which a name might be introduced into the language. On the one hand, we might introduce a name as a name for whatever satisfies a certain description — the standard example (from Evans) is that we might introduce the name ‘Julius’ as a name for whoever invented the zipper. On the other hand, we might introduce a name as a name for some object of our perceptual acquaintance, as a name for *that thing*. As we’ll see, there’s some reason for thinking that there are important differences between names of these two sorts. (Is this distinction between classes of names exclusive? Exhaustive?)

## 3 Problems posed by empty names

We can split the problem of empty names for Millians into two sub-problems.

### 3.1 *The problems of meaningfulness and communication*

If Millianism is true, then the meaning of a name is a referent. So, if a name lacks a referent, it lacks a meaning. But many names lack a referent without lacking a meaning; for example, ‘Zeus’ or ‘Santa Claus.’ So Millianism is false.

In case the Millian is inclined to bite the bullet and say that these names do lack a meaning, we can point out that if one expression in a sentence lacks a meaning, the sentence as a whole seems to lack a meaning (fail to express a proposition, relative to the context). And clearly sentences like ‘Zeus is the greatest of the Greek gods’ do say something.

And if the Millian is inclined to once again bite the bullet and say that these sentences lack a meaning, we can further press the problem by noting that speakers clearly do use these sentences to communicate and convey thoughts, and to express beliefs. But how could this be, if the sentences really do fail to express propositions?

Seeing the difference between this problem and the preceding one depends on seeing the distinction between what a sentence means (relative to a context) and what a given speaker might use a sentence to say on a given occasion. In many non-literal uses, the speaker does not convey what the sentence means; and even in literal uses, the speaker typically conveys much, much more than the sentence means.

### 3.2 *The problem of true negative existentials*

These are all versions of the problem of making sense of the apparent meaningfulness of names. A further problem results from the apparent truth-values of sentences involving these names, which are often called *negative existentials*:

Zeus does not exist.

Santa Claus does not exist.

Vulcan does not exist.

On problem here is simple: if these sentences are true, they must be meaningful. But according to the Millian they are meaningless.

A different but related way to think about this is as a dilemma: if the Russellian can’t find a reference for apparently empty names, then he’s committed to the bad consequences about meaninglessness discussed in the preceding section. If he does supply a reference for these names, then negative existentials involving them turn out to be false, rather than true.