EMPTY NAMES

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Abstract

Empty names—that is, names that don't refer—pose a host of problems for a host of views, including Russellianism and Fregeanism about semantic content. These problems include explaining why sentences that contain empty names can seem true, and why different sentences that contain different empty names can seem to have different truth-values; and explaining why it seems that speakers can assert and believe things expressed by sentences that contain empty names, and why it seems that speakers can assert and believe different things expressed by different sentences that contain different empty names.

Keywords

Key points

- Discusses problems that empty names pose for Russellianism and Fregeanism

- Examines problems having to do with truth-value as well as assertion and belief

- Considers views that avoid the problems by denying that there are any empty names

- Assesses whether gappy propositions can help Russellianism

1. Introduction

'Connor McDavid' is a name, and it refers to a person (or thing), Connor McDavid. (Names are distinguished from definite descriptions, like 'the captain of the Edmonton Oilers in 2025', which also refers to Connor McDavid.) Some names, like 'Connor McDavid', refer; others might not. For example, 'Santa Claus' is a name that, on some views, doesn't refer to anything; so are names from fiction (e.g. 'Miss Marple', 'Sherlock Holmes') and failed scientific theories (e.g. 'Vulcan'). A name that doesn't refer is *empty*. To say that a name is empty in this sense is thus to make a claim about semantic or linguistic reference; it isn't to make a claim about what pragmatic or psychological associations the name has, or about its linguistic meaning, or about what speakers intend to refer to when they use it. (There's a large literature on the pragmatics of empty names. See, for example, Mousavian, 2015.)

Empty names pose a host of problems for a host of views. In particular, they pose problems for two views, known as *Russellianism* and *Fregeanism*, about the semantic contents of names. (Fregeanism comes from Frege, 1892/1997. Russellianism is sometimes also known as *Millianism* or *the direct reference theory*. Russellianism gets its name from the work of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). Millianism gets its name from the work of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). The direct reference theory gets its name from David Kaplan (1989, p. 483), who named it.)

2. Two views and two problems

2.1. Russellianism and Fregeanism

According to Russellianism, the semantic content of a name—that is, what it contributes to propositions expressed by sentences that contain it—is its referent, the thing that it refers to. For example, the semantic content of 'Connor McDavid' is Connor McDavid himself, and a sentence like

(1)   Connor McDavid plays hockey.

expresses a proposition that contains him as a constituent. This proposition can be represented as the following ordered pair:

(1p) <Connor McDavid, *playing hockey*>.

((1p) is an ordered pair whose first element is Connor McDavid and whose second element is the property *playing hockey*.) The proposition represented as (1p) is what speakers assert or believe when they assert or believe that Connor McDavid plays hockey.

According to Fregeanism, by contrast, the semantic content of a name is a sense, something that presents its referent. For example, the semantic content of 'Connor McDavid' is a sense that presents Connor McDavid (perhaps by describing him as having the property *being the captain of the Edmonton Oilers in 2025*), and (1) expresses a proposition (or, in Fregean terminology, a thought) that contains that sense as a constituent.

2.2. The truth-value problem and the assertion and belief problem

Let's suppose that 'Santa Claus' is an empty name. According to Russellianism, 'Santa Claus' has no semantic content (since it has no referent). Some Russellians conclude that sentences like

(2)   Santa Claus delivers presents.

don't express propositions. Let's call this *the no proposition view* (Braun, 1993, p. 456; see Hodgson, 2022).

There are two problems with the no proposition view. The first is that, if a sentence inherits its truth-value from the proposition it expresses, then a sentence that doesn't express a proposition doesn't have a truth-value. So, if the no proposition view is true, then sentences like (2) don't have truth-values. But (2), for example, might seem true. Let's call this *the truth-value problem*. The second problem is that, since propositions are what speakers assert and believe, a sentence that doesn't express a proposition doesn't express anything for speakers to assert and believe. So, if the no proposition view is true, then sentences like (2) don't express anything for speakers to assert and believe. But (2), for example, might seem to express something that speakers can assert and believe—and, in fact, do assert and believe when they assert and believe that Santa Claus delivers presents. Let's call this *the assertion and belief problem*. (These problems come from Braun, 1993, pp. 451–453; 2005, pp. 596–598.)

3. Assertion and belief

3.1. Fregeanism

Fregeans can avoid the no proposition view. Even if 'Santa Claus' is empty, it can still express a sense, perhaps one tied to the property *being a jolly bearded man who lives in the North Pole and delivers presents to children around the world*. (For an alternative view of senses, on which they're not tied to properties, see McDowell, 1977, pp. 172–175.) Since the sense doesn't present anything, the name doesn't refer. Still, the name expresses a sense, and

(2) Santa Claus delivers presents.

expresses a proposition that contains it as a constituent (Frege, 1892/1997, pp. 153, 157). (But some Fregeans deny that empty names express senses and accept the no proposition view instead (Evans, 1982, pp. 10–14, 22–30).)

Fregeans who reject the no proposition view can offer a straightforward solution to the assertion and belief problem. When a speaker asserts or believes that Santa Claus delivers presents, what they assert or believe is the proposition expressed by (2), which contains the sense expressed by 'Santa Claus'.

3.2. Russellianism and the gappy proposition view

Russellians can also avoid the no proposition view. Some Russellians say that, even if 'Santa Claus' is empty and has no semantic content, sentences that contain it can still express propositions. For example,

(2) Santa Claus delivers presents.

can express a *gappy* proposition, one that can be represented as the following would-be ordered pair:

(2p) <__, *delivering presents*>.

((2p) is like an ordered pair whose second element is the property *delivering presents*, except that it doesn't have a first element.) Let's call this *the gappy proposition view*. (Kaplan (1989, p. 496), Braun (1993, pp. 460–465; 2005, pp. 598–600), and Salmon (1998, pp. 307–308) accept the gappy proposition view; Mousavian (2011) rejects it.)

4

Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view can offer at least a partial solution to the assertion and belief problem. When a speaker asserts or believes that Santa Claus delivers presents, what they assert or believe is the gappy proposition represented as (2p).

But this solution might be only partial, since on the gappy proposition view it might be that

(3)   Miss Marple delivers presents.

also expresses the gappy proposition represented as (2p). ('Miss Marple' is a name that Agatha Christie introduced for the protagonist of numerous mystery stories and novels.) If so, then what speakers assert when they assert that Santa Claus delivers presents would be just what they assert when they assert that Miss Marple delivers presents. But, it seems, speakers who assert that Sant Claus delivers presents don't assert the same thing as speakers who assert that Miss Marple delivers presents. (And likewise for speakers who believe that Santa Claus, or Miss Marple, delivers presents.)

Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view might say that speakers who assert that Santa Claus delivers presents and speakers who assert that Miss Marple delivers presents assert the same thing; it's just that they do so in different ways, or by grasping what is asserted in different ways. (And likewise in the case of belief. See Braun, 2005, pp. 602–603. For criticism, see Sawyer, 2012, p. 158.) Similarly, some Russellians say that

(4)   Mark Twain is a writer.

and

(5)   Samuel Clemens is a writer.

express the same proposition. (Samuel Clemens published *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* under the pen name 'Mark Twain'.) This proposition can be represented as the following ordered pair:

(4p) <Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens, *being a writer*>.

((4p) is an ordered pair whose first element is the person known both as 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' and whose second element is the property *being a writer*.) So speakers who assert that Mark Twain is a writer and speakers who assert that Samuel Clemens is a writer assert the same thing: namely, the proposition represented as (4p). But speakers assert that

proposition while grasping it in different ways: some in a 'Mark Twain is a writer' way; others in a 'Samuel Clemens is a writer' way (Braun, 1998, pp. 572–577).

Alternatively, Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view might say that there are multiple gappy propositions all represented as (2p). One of these gappy propositions is expressed by (2); another is expressed by (3). (On this view, gappy propositions aren't individuated solely by their constituents and how they're ordered.) When speakers assert that Santa Claus delivers presents, they assert the gappy proposition expressed by (2); but, when they assert that Miss Marple delivers presents, they assert a different gappy proposition, the one expressed by (3). (And likewise in the case of belief. See Spencer, 2016.)

4. Truth-value

4.1. Russellianism

Sentences like

(2)   Santa Claus delivers presents.

might seem true. This is a problem for Russellians who adopt the no proposition view: on the no proposition view, (2) doesn't express a proposition and hence doesn't have a truth-value. Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view instead can say that (2) expresses the gappy proposition represented as

(2p) <__, *delivering presents*>.

But, by itself, that doesn't solve the truth-value problem, since for (2) to be true it isn't enough for it to express a proposition; rather, it must express a proposition that's true. And it might be hard to see how the gappy proposition represented as (2p), which seems to attribute *delivering presents* to nothing, would be true. (By contrast, the proposition represented as

(1p) <Connor McDavid, *playing hockey*>

is true, because it attributes *playing hockey* to Connor McDavid, and he has that property.)

Even for Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view, the truth-value problem goes further. For (2) and

(3) Miss Marple delivers presents.

might seem to differ in truth-value: (2) might seem true, while (3) might seem false. And the sentences wouldn't differ in truth-value if they express the same gappy proposition. A similar problem arises with sentences like

(6)   Santa Claus = Santa Claus.

and

(7)   Miss Marple = Santa Claus.

(6) and (7) might also seem to differ in truth-value: (6) might seem true, while (7) might seem false. And they wouldn't differ in truth-value if they express the same gappy proposition, the one represented as the would-be ordered triple displayed below:

(6p) <__, __, *being identical with*>.

((6p) is like an ordered triple whose third element is the *being identical with* relation, except that it doesn't have a first or second element.)

If (6) and (7) express different gappy propositions both represented as (6p) (Spencer, 2016), then it wouldn't follow that they have the same truth-value. But, even if there's a way for a gappy proposition represented as (6p) to be true (since it attributes the identity relation to nothing and nothing, and there might be a sense in which 'nothing is nothing' is true), it might still be hard to see why one gappy proposition represented as (6p) would be true while another would be false.

Alternatively, Russellians who adopt the gappy proposition view can say that sentences like (2) and (3), or (6) and (7), express the same gappy proposition and explain why the sentences seem to differ in truth-value even if, in fact, they don't. Perhaps speakers believe the gappy proposition represented as (2p) in one way, a 'Santa Claus delivers presents' way, but don't believe it in another way, a 'Miss Marple delivers presents' way. And perhaps that's why they think that (2) is true and (3) is false (Braun, 2005, p. 608). Similarly, perhaps some speakers believe the proposition represented as

(4p) <Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens, *being a writer*>

in one way, a 'Mark Twain is a writer' way, but don't believe it in another way, a 'Samuel Clemens is a writer' way. And perhaps that's why they think that

(4)   Mark Twain is a writer.

is true and

(5)   Samuel Clemens is a writer.

is false (Braun, 1998, pp. 572–573).

4.2. Fregeanism

Fregeans who reject the no proposition view can say that sentences like

(2)   Santa Claus delivers presents.

and

(3)   Miss Marple delivers presents.

—or

(6)   Santa Claus = Santa Claus.

and

(7)   Miss Marple = Santa Claus.

—express different propositions: the proposition expressed by (2) contains the sense expressed by 'Santa Claus', while the proposition expressed by (3) doesn't; and, conversely, the proposition expressed by (7) contains the sense expressed by 'Miss Marple' (which might be tied to the property *being a kindly older woman who solves all the murders that happen around her*), while the proposition expressed by (6) doesn't. But that doesn't solve the truth-value problem. For (2) to be true, it would have to be the case that the sense expressed by 'Santa Claus' presents something that has *delivering presents*, the property presented by the sense expressed by 'delivers presents'. (By way of comparison,

(1)   Connor McDavid plays hockey.

is true, because the sense expressed by 'Connor McDavid' presents something—Connor McDavid—that has *playing hockey*, which is the property

8

presented by the sense expressed by 'plays hockey'.) But, since 'Santa Claus' doesn't present anything, it can't present anything that has *delivering presents*. And, for similar reasons, (6) can't be true either (Frege, 1892/1997, pp. 156–158). Still, Fregeans can explain why (2) and (6) seem true, even if they aren't, by saying that speakers believe the propositions that they express; and (3) and (7) don't seem true, because speakers don't believe the (different) propositions that they express. (Here, Fregeans would be following Braun, 2005, p. 608.)

5. Are there any empty names?

In the face of the problems posed by empty names, some have proposed that names that might seem empty aren't really empty.

On one proposal, apparently empty names are stipulated to refer to a special object. (For a parallel proposal about definite descriptions, see Frege, 1892/1997, p. 164 n. I.) If all apparently empty names refer to the same special object, then this proposal doesn't fare any better than the gappy proposition view in solving the truth-value problem and the assertion and belief problem, since

(2) Santa Claus delivers presents.

and

(3) Miss Marple delivers presents.

—or

(6) Santa Claus = Santa Claus.

and

(7) Miss Marple = Santa Claus.

—would end up expressing the same proposition if Russellianism is true.

Some Russellians say that names from fiction like 'Miss Marple' and 'Sherlock Holmes' refer to abstract objects (van Inwagen, 1977; Thomasson, 1999; Kripke, 2013). Others extend the view to names from failed scientific theories like 'Vulcan' (Salmon, 1998, pp. 304–305; see also Braun, 2005, pp. 619–620). ('Vulcan' was introduced as a name for a planet between Mercury

and the Sun that was causing perturbations in the orbit of Mercury; but there's no such planet.) Assuming that 'Santa Claus' and 'Miss Marple' refer to different abstract objects, Russellians could then say that (2) and (3), or (6) and (7), express different propositions, which contain different abstract objects as constituents. (But abstract objects don't deliver presents, so (2) wouldn't really be true, although speakers might believe that it is, or it might be true according to a story.)

But even Russellians who say that names from fiction and failed scientific theories refer to abstract objects allow that other names are empty: e.g. 'Liz 3', a name hereby introduced to refer to the Queen of England in 2025. (For a parallel example, see Salmon, 1998, pp. 305–306.) Or Russellians who allow that names from fiction and failed scientific theories might refer to abstract objects on some uses say that those names are empty on other uses: e.g. 'Vulcan' as it was used by the nineteenth-century astronomer Urbain Le Verrier, who intended to name a planet (Braun, 2005, pp. 615–619; see also Goodman, 2014, and Tillman and Spencer, 2024).

Following Alexius Meinong (1904/1960), Meinongians say that many apparently empty names in fact refer to nonexistent objects (Parsons, 1980). But some Meinongians distinguish between succeeding in referring to a nonexistent object and failing to refer to an existent object (Parsons, 1979, pp. 95–98); and they might agree that Le Verrier's use of 'Vulcan' was empty, since he intended, but failed, to refer to an existent planet.

On E. E. Constance Jones's view, every name—and, indeed, every definite description—refers to something; it's just that some of these things have different kinds of existence (like existence in imagination for fairies, or existence in a region of supposition, for round squares). (See Jones, 1890, pp. 87–91; 1911, p. 62.) This view avoids the problems posed by empty names. But, it seems, few have been willing to embrace its plenitudinous and variegated ontology, full of all kinds of things with all kinds of existence.

6. Conclusion

Empty names are names that don't refer. 'Santa Claus' and 'Miss Marple' might be empty.

According to Russellianism, the semantic content of a name is its referent, so 'Santa Claus' doesn't have any semantic content if it's empty. On

10

the no proposition view, sentences that contain 'Santa Claus' don't express propositions. But the no proposition view faces the truth-value problem, in this case explaining why some sentences that contain 'Santa Claus' seem true. And the no proposition view faces the assertion and belief problem, in this case explaining why it seems that speakers can assert and believe that Santa Claus delivers presents. Alternatively, on the gappy proposition view, sentences that contain 'Santa Claus' express gappy propositions. But the gappy proposition view faces the truth-value problem, in this case explaining why it seems that sentences that contain different empty names can differ in truth-value. And the gappy proposition view faces the assertion and belief problem, in this case explaining why it seems that speakers who assert and believe that Santa Claus delivers presents don't assert and believe the same thing as speakers who assert and believe that Miss Marple delivers presents.

According to Fregeanism, by contrast, the semantic content of a name is a sense, which presents its referent, so 'Santa Claus' can have a semantic content even if it's empty, and sentences that contain it can express propositions that contain that sense. Assuming that 'Miss Marple' expresses a different sense, sentences that contain 'Santa Claus' and 'Miss Marple' can express different propositions, which contain different senses. This allows Fregeanism to offer a straightforward solution to the assertion and belief problem, but that doesn't immediately solve the truth-value problem.

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