

Four Problems with Empty Names

Empty names, while all having the property of being empty in common, significantly differ from one another in other respects. Some of them, as Kripke argues, are necessarily empty -- those that are used to create works of fiction. Others appear to be contingently empty -- those which fail to refer at this world, but which do uniquely identify particular objects in other possible worlds. I argue against Kripke's metaphysical and semantic reasons for thinking that either some or all empty names are necessarily non-referring, because these reasons are either not the right reasons for thinking that a name necessarily must fail to refer, or they are too broad -- they make every empty name necessarily non-referential. Plausibly, the explanation for the necessary non-reference of fictional names should be semantic, yet the explanation should not rule out a priori the contingent non-reference of certain other empty names. In light of this, I argue that a name's semantic value needs to carry information about its referential status. I claim that names do so by encoding information about the way they were introduced into discourse. Names that are fictional will be marked at their introduction as being non-referential -- they will fail to refer as a matter of their semantics. In contrast, names that are contingently empty will be marked as referential, but they will be failed referential names that could have been successful. The reason, then, for the non-referential status of a fictional name, will be semantic, as our intuitions suggest it should be. Likewise, the reason for the non-referential status of other empty names, those created by acts of failed attempts to refer, will be metaphysical, again, in keeping with our intuitions.

1. Introduction

The properties of at least some proper names present difficulties when attempting to give them a unified semantic treatment. This is especially true once we assume that a name's semantic function is to serve as a device of reference for objects, and that it should remain steadfastly fixed to its target object, two ideas that together comprise what we might think of as the standard theory of proper names. The most long-standing difficulty is that many proper names are empty -- they sometimes lack a referent -- raising questions about the nature of their meaning compared to their referring counterparts. A more contemporary problem is that while all empty names have the property of being empty, there are many properties that they do not share. For example, as Salmon (1998) points out, some empty names appear to be necessarily non-referring, while others appear to be only contingently

non-referring¹ Some empty names fail to refer because of a stipulation to that effect on the part of a speaker, others simply because the world fails to co-operate with a speaker's intention to refer. Examples of the former plausibly include names contained within works of fiction, while examples of the latter can be found contained within failed scientific theories.

One unified treatment of the previous kinds of empty names is due to Kripke (1980) who argues that fictional names are necessarily empty, and generalizes this claim to apply to all empty names. While Kripke's treatment of empty names is uniform, it is too strong in ruling out a priori the possibility of contingently non-referring names. It also fails to give the right reasons for the referential status of certain empty names, in particular, fictional names.

Despite its shortcomings, Kripke's treatment of empty names has a consequence for any and all semantic treatments of empty names, and for proper names in general. While initially, the standard treatment of proper names had to address only one problem with empty names, Kripke's treatment of them reveals that in addition to the question of their meaning, there are, in fact, three other problems with empty names. Now the first problem the problem, the puzzle of traditional focus, has been explored by numerous philosophers of language, too many to mention, in fact. Indeed, I will not myself offer a completely satisfying solution for this problem in what follows. I will, however, show how a certain picture of a name's semantic value makes the problem less recalcitrant than it might at first seem. At any rate, I will fully resolve the other three problems with empty names. The first of those is explored in depth by Kripke, while the other two arise as consequences of Kripke's initial investigation. To address these problems, I offer a semantic hypothesis, a generalization of Kripke's own historical picture of how to determine a name's semantic value, that can

¹ Though Salmon is not explicitly concerned with discussing different kinds of empty names per se, he does make several distinctions between them.

account for most of the different properties of different kinds of empty names.

2. Four Problems with Empty Names

On the standard picture, names are devices of reference. It is simply part of a name's nature that it is used to identify, individuate and track particular objects in space and over time. This fundamental intuition about names motivates two fairly widely accepted theses: first, that names are rigid designators, referring to the same individual across possible worlds; second, that a proper name's meaning, or on a less committal note, its truth-conditional content -- its contribution to the proposition expressed by sentences containing it -- consists solely in an individual, in the name's having a referent.

2.1 The Meaning Problem

Historically, the existence of empty names poses at least one problem for the standard theory of proper names, specifically, of accounting for their meaning. Consider the empty names 'Zeus', 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Vulcan', the first stemming from a myth, the second from some fictional works made familiar by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the last from a false scientific hypothesis due to LeVerrier. If names are expressions whose meanings are tied to having individuals as contents, then either these names are meaningless, or while they somehow have meaning, they have no truth-conditional content, contributing nothing to the propositions expressed by the sentences containing them.

However, denying that the previous names have any meaning or content flies in the face of several common sense reactions. For instance, the Greeks spent a fair bit of their time worshiping Zeus, but their error in doing so was not linguistic, it was factual, supposing we do not believe in Zeus's existence. It is not as if the Greeks were confused about the meanings of their words; they were confused about the world. Furthermore, speakers can

and do make synonymy judgments about fictional names: 'Sherlock Holmes' is not synonymous with 'Watson', but 'Kypris' is synonymous with 'Aphrodite', as well as 'Venus'. However, if names have no meaning or content, it is not clear how speakers could sensibly make these synonymy judgments at all. Clearly, the previous common sense reactions are in tension with the idea that names are merely devices of reference and that their content consists in an individual. Call this the "meaning" problem for empty names.

The meaning problem for empty names leads us naturally to consider the subsidiary problem of the truth value of sentences containing empty names. Surely the sentence 'Vulcan does not exist' has a truth value -- that of being true. But if sentences containing empty names can have truth values, then plausibly, they must have meanings.² If empty names have no meanings, then it is not clear how they could be used to produce any meaningful sentence, let alone a true one. Once again, our common sense reaction that sentences containing empty names could have truth values is in tension with the idea that a name's semantic function is to serve as a device for referring to individuals. The meaning problem therefore is of special concern for those interested in defending a Kripkean version of the semantic nature of a proper name. But of course not just the standard theory must deal with the meaning problem, any theory of proper names must wrestle with this problem.

2.2 The Accidental Reference Problem

The second problem with empty names is now known as the problem of accidental reference, which arises in virtue of the fact that some empty names are introduced into the language purely descriptively, using only definite descriptions in order to fix their reference, if they have any intended reference at all. Consider, for instance, names introduced in the

² For those who deny this inference, see Donnellan (1974) as well as Braun (1993).

course writing a work of fiction, or consider those introduced in the course of hypothesizing about the unknown nature of the external world.

The former cases, cases of fictional names, are reasonable candidates for being introduced purely descriptively. This is because it is stipulated by authors that the names in question should not be understood as referential, and it is therefore reasonable, by a process of elimination, to understand them as being introduced by the use of some descriptions. In the latter scientific case, though it may turn out that a scientist has the correct hypothesis about the external world, about some object(s) or other, this will not be because she was able to identify those objects by being acquainted with them. It is also plausible to suppose, then, that some scientific expressions will also be introduced descriptively, since many of the objects about which scientists hypothesize are known, at least at first, only by description.

To see how allowing for names to be introduced descriptively leads to the problem of accidental reference, let us consider the fictional name Kripke himself considers, the name 'Sherlock Holmes'. Let us suppose that the name 'Sherlock Holmes' was introduced into the language in virtue of Doyle's using a particular set of definite descriptions in his act of story telling. Now suppose that it turns out that, by coincidence, everything that Doyle wrote described events that actually occurred. As Kripke notes, surely this should not entail that the name 'Sherlock Holmes' refers to the man who fits the descriptions contained in Doyle's stories, that the story is about this individual. Likewise, in the case of scientific names, for instance, consider the famous case in which LeVerrier introduced a name for the planet between Mercury and the Sun, a planet LeVerrier calls by the name "Vulcan." In this case, it would not be appropriate to say that LeVerrier had been correct all along if it later turned out

that there came to be a planet between Mercury and the Sun. For Kripke, the simple satisfaction of a definite description cannot make a name refer. Names do not refer to whatever object, by happenstance, satisfies some definite description or other. Our names do not refer by accident. Any theory that has as a consequence that names do refer by accident must be rejected.

2.3 The Contingency Problem

To understand this problem, let us take an example from Salmon. Salmon considers the possibility that at least some empty names could have referred. For example, a name introduced for a baby that could have been born had a certain sperm and egg come together in the right way, the name 'Noman'. Admitting that some names can be contingently non-referring causes a problem because we must explain the difference between those empty names that fail to refer out of necessity and those that fail to refer only contingently that does not run afoul of the accidental reference problem, not an easy task.

If we allow some names to refer contingently, it becomes unclear why we should not think similarly about fictional names and those names originating from failed scientific hypotheses. That is, if we can find no principled distinction between names like 'Noman' and names like 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Vulcan' then it seems that we must admit that the latter names, like the former, might pick out by coincidence those objects that satisfy certain descriptions. This would offer no solution to the problem of accidental reference, and therefore, any theory of names, must find some difference between those names that contingently fail to refer and those that fail to refer necessarily.

2.4 The Reason Problem

Let us now examine certain other features of empty names that entail another problem

relating to the different reasons empty names fail to refer. Consider fictional names like 'Sherlock Holmes'. As we saw before, fictional names fail to refer in virtue of a stipulation that they are non-referential. Because of this fact, fictional names are plausibly empty for semantic reasons. In contrast with the fictional case, however, other names fail to refer for different reasons, for metaphysical reasons, because of the unsuccessful referential intentions of speakers. These names will include those considered before, names originating from failed scientific hypotheses, names like 'Vulcan'. However, names that fail to refer for metaphysical reasons will also include names for logically or metaphysically impossible objects. For example, we might introduce the name 'Bertie' for the logically impossible set of all sets that does not include itself, and the name 'Lexi' for the metaphysically impossible round square. Also included among those names that fail to refer for metaphysical reasons are names like 'Noman', names that are contingently non-referring.

Like the contingency problem, the reason problem too is not easily solved. This is illustrated by considering the arguments typically used to explain empty names, arguments that cannot distinguish the different reasons for an empty name's failure to refer. One of these arguments is due to Kripke, and while it does solve the accidental reference problem, it fails to offer to offer for our other three problems.

3. Kripke's Treatment of The Problem of Accidental Reference

Kripke's main concern in his treatment of empty names is to give an account of them that resolves the accidental reference problem, which he does successfully. However, the very arguments he offers to solve the accidental reference problem raise the further problems previously discussed for which he lacks an adequate treatment. This is because, Kripke's

treatment of the accidental reference problem entails that, no matter what circumstances, all empty names are necessarily non-referring. Obviously, this accounts for the accidental reference problem, but as is already apparent, a position like this will not be able to accommodate the differences between necessarily and contingently non-referring names. As will become apparent, however, neither can it accommodate the different reasons for the non-reference of different empty names, specifically it cannot accommodate the intuition that fictional names fail to refer for semantic reasons, while others fail to refer for metaphysical reasons.

The first of Kripke's arguments that names do not accidentally refer, I call the "metaphysical" argument that, as its moniker indicates, offers metaphysical reasons for the necessary non-reference of at least certain empty names. The second argument gleaned from Kripke's work relies on a semantic premise, and will unsurprisingly be referred to as the "semantic" argument.³

Returning to our previous example of Sherlock Holmes, the idea behind the metaphysical argument is simply this: given that there is no Sherlock Holmes in the actual world, that the name is empty, and given how names function, there is no counterfactual circumstance that could count as the one and only circumstance in which Holmes exists. The reason is because there are many possible worlds in which a fiction, as told by us, is accurate, and therefore there are many worlds in which a person meeting all of the descriptions associated with the name 'Sherlock Holmes' exists. But if it is possible that Holmes exists and if 'Sherlock Holmes' is a rigid designator, there must be a way of identifying which possible world is the world that would make it true that our name 'Sherlock

³ Kripke himself also offers what he calls an "epistemological" argument, but we need not understand that argument to see the two problems of interest for our purposes.

Holmes' refers. However, since all of the possible worlds in which the descriptions associated with the name are satisfied would have an equal claim to being the circumstance in which Sherlock Holmes exists, there is no particular one of them that could count as the circumstance in which our Holmes exists. Therefore, the name 'Sherlock Holmes' cannot possibly refer; it is necessarily a non-designator, an expression Kripke calls a "rigid non-designator" (1980).⁴

The semantic argument, in contrast with the metaphysical argument that relies on problems with the determinacy of fixing referents, relies instead on the premise that the referent of a name is determined by tracing a name's actual history back to a single one-off event of dubbing an object with that name. While Kripke makes this point when discussing the potential extension of the mythical predicate 'unicorn', he is also careful to stress that his arguments equally apply to proper names. Regarding the possible extension of the predicate 'unicorn', a species described in certain myths, Kripke argues that even if there were a species with all of the characteristics commonly attributed to the mythical species, this would not suffice to prove the existence of unicorns, since "we must also establish a historical connection that shows that the myth is about these animals. I hold similar views regarding fictional proper names. The mere discovery that there was indeed a detective with exploits like those of Sherlock Holmes would not show that Conan Doyle was writing *about* this man" (1980, pp. 157). Empty names, then, since they were never used in an act of dubbing an object are one and all necessarily non-referring.

⁴ While Kripke makes these arguments relying only on our intuitions about fictional names, again, the argument could equally well be applied to the name 'Vulcan'. Suppose, as is the case, that the name 'Vulcan' does not refer. Which set of possible circumstances in which there is a planet between Mercury and the Sun is the circumstance in which Vulcan exists? The metaphysical argument applies, then, to all cases of empty names introduced with descriptions satisfiable by more than one possible world.

In sum, the metaphysical argument solves the accidental reference problem by pointing out that a definite description cannot be used to uniquely identify any particular individual possible or otherwise as the one and only referent for a proper name. The semantic argument solves the problem by making it part of the semantics of proper names that if they have a referent or meaning, they have it only in virtue of an actual act of dubbing an object with the name in question.

4. Against Kripke

While Kripke's semantic argument makes all empty names necessarily empty, thereby ensuring that no empty name will accidentally refer, at the same time, it makes the meaning problem even more difficult, since the introduction of any name that fails to terminate in the dubbing of an object will be semantically defective in some way or other. However, this is not the only problem arising from the semantic argument.

If Kripke is right that all names must have their referents fixed by being linked historically to the dubbing of some object or other, then it would simply be a priori that all empty names are necessarily empty. The problem is that it does not seem to be a priori that all empty names, as a matter of necessity, fail to refer.

At least initially, we might think that despite Kripke's conclusion, there are resources within his treatment of empty names that allow for an explanation of contingently empty names. For instance, in the Noman case considered earlier, we saw that the conditions used to introduce that name are specific enough to determine only one possible referent -- the metaphysical indeterminacy that afflicts establishing the reference of other names do not apply in this case. The name 'Noman' then is not subject to Kripke's metaphysical argument. Considering only the metaphysical argument, the natural conclusion to draw is

that there are some contingently non-referring names -- a name is contingently non-referring just in case its conditions for reference are specific enough to determine one and only one possible object as its potential referent. Kripke's metaphysical argument, then, does not actually rule out the possibility of the existence of at least some contingently non-referring names.

However, by the lights of Kripke's semantic argument, the name 'Noman' must be essentially empty since it was never used to dub an object.⁵ But the name 'Noman' is plausibly a legitimate name, and it is intuitively an instance of a contingently non-referring name. We must conclude, then, that Kripke's semantic argument is too strong.⁶

But now a second problem arises: if we disallow Kripke's semantic argument as an explanation for the necessary non-reference of some empty names, and rely only on the metaphysical argument in order to make room for names like 'Noman', we no longer have a plausible account of the nature of fictional names. Even though we have the intuition that the name 'Noman' ought to be a contingently non-referring name, it is an equally basic

⁵ This depends on what one requires for a dubbing. We may be able to dub possibilia. For now, however, we will assume the natural reading of a dubbing as requiring the actual existence of the object dubbed.

⁶ The details here also depend on how one understands the rigid designator thesis. For instance, if we understand it in its strong form, that is, as the thesis that a term is a rigid designator for a particular referent whether that referent exists in a particular world or not, then, sans some kind of acquaintance requirement for a name's applying to an individual, it seems that 'Noman' would refer to the possibilium described. Indeed, this is the tack taken by Salmon. However, if one understands the rigid designator thesis weakly, that is, as the thesis that a term is a rigid designator for a referent just in case that referent exists in the relevant world, then all that follows from the Noman case is that the name 'Noman' fails to refer to a particular possibilium -- seemingly the intuitive result, but at the cost of giving up the strong rigid designator thesis. I will not settle which thesis one should choose except to say that if one wishes to maintain the strong rigid designator thesis and wishes to maintain that there are genuinely empty, but potentially referring names, then one should combine the strong rigid designator thesis with an acquaintance premise of some kind or other. Alternatively, one might simply accept the weak version of the rigid designator thesis.

intuition that fictional names necessarily cannot refer -- that they are rigid non-designators.

The reason that rejecting the semantic argument in favor of relying the metaphysical argument is a problem is that it allows for the possibility that some fictional names might fail to be rigid non-designators, since as Salmon's example shows, we can find ways to fix a reference by description that do pick out a particular possibilium. If an author, then, happened to pen a fiction with descriptions determinate enough to pick out one and only one possibilium, she would have penned a work containing contingently non-referring fictional names. This follows because, according to the metaphysical argument, a fictional name's failure to refer is purely a matter of the specificity of the descriptions with which that name is introduced.

Therefore, If we accept the basic intuition that fictional names are rigid non-designators, then we cannot rely on the metaphysical argument as the sole explanation for a name's failure to refer.

The possibility of contingently non-referring names, then, shows both that Kripke's semantic argument is too strong, and that his metaphysical argument is too weak. The semantic argument is too strong in virtue of ruling out the possibility of contingently non-referring names altogether, while the metaphysical argument is too weak because it allows that fictional names might be contingently non-referring. Neither of these consequences is acceptable.

In addition to the problems already discussed, a further problem with Kripke's metaphysical argument is that, intuitively, it offers the wrong kind of reason for the necessary non-reference of a fictional name. Surely a fictional name such as 'Sherlock Holmes' does not fail to refer just because not enough information is provided in the Holmes

stories to distinguish potential referents from one another. The reason for the name's necessary non-reference has to do with the fact that it is part of its nature that it is a fictional name, not with any metaphysical indeterminacy. In contrast, consider the name 'Vulcan' once more. The name 'Vulcan', like the fictional name 'Sherlock Holmes', cannot come to refer no matter what the circumstances, and like 'Sherlock Holmes', it too is a rigid non-designator. However, unlike the name 'Sherlock Holmes', in the case of the name 'Vulcan', the reason for the name's failure to refer is metaphysical, not semantic. It has to do with the fact that the world failed to cooperate with the referential intentions of the name's introducer LeVerrier.

Of course, if we decided to accept Kripke's semantic premise, this would make fictional names empty as a matter of semantics, but relying on it would ultimately be self-defeating since if the underlying semantic presupposition is true -- that a name's semantic *raison d'être* is to refer -- we cannot account even for the existence of fictional names, of names successfully introduced with the intention that they fail to refer.

5. Empty Names: Problems for the Standard Theory

By examining the four problems with empty names, we saw that different kinds of empty names vary along different dimensions: their modal profiles and their reasons for their failures to refer. We are drawn then to distinguish different kinds of empty names on two different grounds: first of all, there is the explanation or reason for their non-reference, whether the reason is semantic or metaphysical; secondly, we can distinguish empty names on the basis of whether they necessarily, or only contingently, fail to refer. Let us simply summarize our examples along these dimensions with the following table:

Modal Profile

	Necessary	Contingent
Reasons	Semantic	Sherlock Holmes
	Metaphysical	Vulcan, Bertie, Alex
		Noman

A third dimension along which to distinguish between empty names clarifies their nature even further. Consider the empty name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ once again. As we have seen, this is an empty name that necessarily fails to refer for semantic reasons. While this does not conflict with the name’s maintaining its rigidity -- it rigidly refers to nothing, let us say -- as I mentioned before, it does conflict with the assumption that names are fundamentally devices of reference, since the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is an empty name introduced in such a way that its semantic configuration must reflect its nature as a non-referential expression. Because the semantics of a fictional name must reflect the fact that it is not a device of reference, the assumption that names are fundamentally devices of reference must be false.

In contrast, our other names, those that fall under the metaphysical category, are all devices of reference. They are devices that have failed at this task, of course, but nevertheless, these names are still referential in nature. What is not clear about these names is whether they are one and all rigid designators. Those that fall under the necessarily non-referential category might be said to be rigid, again, because they rigidly have no content. But the name ‘Noman’ does not appear to be rigid in this sense, since its content is nothing at all at this world, but is the individual born from a certain sperm and egg

existing in another world. Relative to that other world, 'Noman' is not empty, but relative to this world it is empty. So it would seem that the name 'Noman' does not have a fixed reference across all possible worlds, and, therefore, it is not a rigid designator.

6. The Standard Theory: Three Responses

Both tenets of the standard theory are jeopardized by the previous reasoning. However, there are several possible responses open to the standard theorist that I will now consider, but ultimately reject.

With respect to fictional names, the standard theorist might deny that there are any genuine names that are not devices of reference, thereby maintaining that all names are devices of reference -- so-called fictional names are not really names at all. She might also argue that, contrary to appearances, contingently empty names are necessarily empty just as the other examples of certain empty names we have seen, thereby securing that all names are instances of rigid designators. Last, as Salmon does, a standard theorist might deny that the names that we initially assume are empty are really instances of empty names at all. Instead, there are referents for each of these so-called empty names. This move would have the effect of addressing both counterexamples at once.

Regarding the first option, the standard theorist might argue that the modifier 'fictional' that the expression 'fake' might have on the expression 'diamond'. A fictional name, then, while it may have the same appearance properties as a genuine name, it need not to be referential in the same way as other proper names do. That is, just as a fake diamond reveals nothing about the nature of diamonds, neither should facts about fictional names reveal anything about the nature of proper names.

Fake diamonds, while not genuine diamonds in the sense of being made of the

same “stuff,” can easily fulfill the role of a diamond in many ways. They can be worn as jewelry, for instance. Likewise, one might think that while a fictional name might be able to function in the same way as a proper name in many ways, it is nevertheless a fake name with its own true nature not to be confused with the true nature of a real name. However, simply making the previous assertion does not negate the burden of the name theorist to explain a fake name’s nature, or at least to understand its nature well enough to be able to distinguish it from a real name, just as a jeweler must be able to distinguish a fake diamond from a real diamond. This proposal without such adornments, then, is incomplete as it stands.

Turning now to the second response, that even apparently contingently referring names are essentially empty, the standard theorist might argue that names that do not end in the dubbing of an actual object in the actual world could never have a referent, in which case, neither could the name ‘Noman’.⁷ This response, of course, requires relying on Kripke's semantic argument. But intuitively, 'Noman' is a contingently referring name, and relying on Kripke's semantic argument dismisses this intuition without any independent motivation for doing so except. However, relying solely on the semantic argument rules out, from the beginning, the existence of certain names, those that contingently fail to refer, those that seemingly any ordinary speaker would agree are perfectly legitimate names, and we are trying to explain, not ignore, such intuitions.

The final approach, due to Salmon, is to deny that empty names like fictional names,

⁷ We can also imagine the standard theorist bolstering this line of defense with Kripke’s admonition to refrain from confusing our own language with the languages used by those in other possible worlds. The generic name ‘Noman’ may very well have a referent in another possible world, but we should not confuse the use of a homophonous name in another possible world with the use of our own expressions.

names from failed scientific hypotheses and names like 'Noman', ever lack a referent. In the first case, a fictional character is dubbed, in the second place, a mythical planet, and in the last case, a possibilium. The first two referents are abstract objects, the third a concrete though non-actual object. On Salmon's view, most names, at least those that concern us here, are not empty and therefore they do have a meaning, they do function as devices of reference, and they do rigidly refer to the objects dubbed at the time the names were introduced. While this approach does, in fact, address the meaning problem while maintaining the standard theory of names, it ignores the three other problems identified: the accidental reference problem, the contingency problem, and the reason problem.

Turning to the problem of accidental reference, it is not clear how Salmon's view would deal with this problem, since it is not clear whether there would be anything wrong with accidental reference, supposing the success of a speaker's arrow of reference has to do only with whether there is an object, actual or possible, fitting the description used to introduce a particular name, for the arrow of reference to pierce. But this ignores the role of the speaker's intentions in determining the reference of a name. Suppose Doyle used a description that uniquely identified some possibilium or other, or suppose he did not and instead we posit an abstract object as his referential target. Surely we should not conclude that Doyle referred to either a possibilium or an abstract object if we assume that referring requires a conscious intention to refer. What are we to make of Doyle's denials that he intended to be referring to anything? Did Doyle intend to be referring to anything in penning his famous novels? The answer to this question is plausibly "no," which rules out Salmon's approach to these issues, since on Salmon's view, if Doyle's descriptions did pick out one and only one possibilium, we would be committed to the view that Doyle was referring to

that entity, contrary to his non-referential intentions. Likewise, if Doyle's descriptions did not pick out anything concrete, the name would be referring to an abstract object, once again, contrary to our intuitions that Doyle did not intend to be referring to anything.

Perhaps even stranger still, on Salmon's view, some fictional names might turn out to refer to concrete objects, while others would refer to abstracta, depending on the specificity of the descriptions contained in different novels. But our natural expectation is that expressions like "fictional name" will pick out names that form a kind. This expectation, of course, may be wrong-headed, but its violation requires at least some justification, and Salmon's account, as it stands, offers none.

Salmon's view deals with the contingency problem not by claiming that names like 'Noman' are necessarily non-referring, but rather by claiming that these names really do refer to the possible objects identified with the associated descriptions. Clearly Salmon's view deals with the contingency problem, but it does so only because, given Salmon's theory of the referents of these names, there are no contingently empty names. Salmon's view eliminates the contingency problem simply by denying the intuition that some names have only potential referents -- that some names do not have referents now, but could have.

Last but not least, Salmon's view makes no distinction between kinds of empty names, since for him, of course, these names, qua empty names, by and large do not exist. Still, however, different names, names normally treated as empty, will have different kinds of referents, some referring to abstracta, others to possibilia. But this does not affect the fundamental semantic analysis of names underlying his theory -- that all names are devices of reference and that they are one and all rigid designators. However, our intuitions about names indicate that both of these claims are wrong either because we believe that there are

names whose job need not include referring, or because we think that some names with respect to some worlds refer to one thing, but fail to do so with respect to other worlds.

In short, Salmon's elegant way of maintaining the standard theory of proper names, while perfectly coherent and consistent, does so at the cost of ignoring some fundamental intuitions about empty names. Perhaps most importantly, he denies the basic intuition that empty names are, in fact, just that: empty.

7. Standard Theory and Contexts of Introduction: A Donnellian Picture

Thus far, we have seen that empty names and their properties challenge both the ideas that names are purely devices of reference and that names are always rigid designators. This might be thought to require rejecting standard theory, and instead positing that the semantic explanation of the behavior of proper names must be something entirely different from the standard explanation. To do this, however, would leave us with no explanation of the fact that many names, those ordinary referring names, do behave as the standard theory predicts they should. What's needed, then, is a more general thesis about the functioning of proper names that incorporates the standard theory as a part.

Recall that the standard theory is often accompanied by another thesis, namely, the historical thesis regarding how to determine a name's reference, made popular by both Donnellan and Kripke's work. Donnellan argued that to understand the meaning of a proper name, one must take a god's eye view and trace the name back in history to its origins in order to determine the way the name was introduced into discourse and the use for which it was originally intended.⁸

Notice that this more abstract historical thesis is not committed to names being

⁸ See Donnellan (1974).

merely devices of reference, or to them being rigid designators. Indeed, the historical thesis is in fact quite general, and this is one of its advantages, since it allows us to understand the rigid designator thesis as a hypothetical or conditional fact about names, rather than as a categorical imperative binding on all proper names. Indeed, the rigid designator thesis itself as classically stated by Kripke is, of course, conditional: a term *t* is a rigid designator for an object *o*, just in case if *t* refers to *o*, then *t* refers to *o* across all possible worlds. The applicability of the rigid designator thesis to a term *t* is contingent upon whether *t* does indeed refer, and of course, as we have seen, not all names do refer. The rigid designator thesis, then, is silent regarding the functioning of names that do not refer. It is only if we accept that the semantic function of a name is to refer that it follows that all names must be or should be rigid designators.

Nevertheless, the historical thesis can accommodate the standard theory. Names introduced with referential intent that were initially associated with an individual referent will function as rigid designators and will function as devices of reference. Therefore, despite the fact that some of Kripke's arguments seem to mis-characterize the nature of empty names, the historical premise, embraced by both Donnellan and Kripke, the premise that tracing a name's history is important for understanding it, does seem to tap into a universal feature of names -- namely, that a name's event of introduction matters for determining its appropriate usage.

Because the historical thesis is flexible in that it can accommodate those names that are referential names as rigid designators, that these names do indeed have referents in the standard sense, it can also at the same time do so without making these ideas exhaust the semantic nature of a proper name. The historical thesis can also be used to explain our

additional intuitions we have about empty names and their properties.

For instance, we have the intuition that fictional names necessarily fail to refer because of the way they were introduced into discourse, namely as devices that could not refer to anything at any place or at any time. On the historical model, this would be explained by the fact that the name was historically introduced non-referentially. Likewise, the fact that names do not simply refer willy-nilly to whatever satisfies a particular description, that they do not refer in ways completely independent of our referential intentions, will also be explained by the way in which they were introduced into discourse: names cannot willy-nilly refer to anything for which they were not originally intended by the name's introducer.⁹

But if referential intentions are to play such a role in determining a name's semantic content, it would seem to require an account of a name's semantics different from the idea that their semantic value is exhausted by their referential content. Let us conjecture then that a name's semantic architecture includes not only information about its content, either an individual or nil, but also information about its referential status and the intentions with which it is introduced.¹⁰ Call this the "context of introduction" thesis.¹¹ The thesis can be understood as an extended or generalized version of the historical thesis that a name's

⁹ Braun also emphasizes our intentional control over the reference of proper names in the language (1993).

¹⁰ The idea that names also carry information about their referential status in addition to having content has also been suggested by Recanati (1993) and Taylor (2000).

¹¹ Of course, I have not provided a detailed semantic analysis of the idea, but merely an outline. A full theory would explain the compositional nature of a name's semantic value and would define in more detail the nature of the complexity of a name's semantic value. However, my aim here is simply want to show how a general historical approach to the semantics of names gives the standard theorist much more room to maneuver in explaining the character of proper names. For a full development of the thesis offered here, see my (2011).

reference is determined by the object with which it was originally associated. On this extended version of the historical thesis, the history of a name certainly determines the name's appropriate use, but that use needn't be a referential use, nor need it fix, once and for all, a particular individual to serve as that name's referent across all possible worlds. These properties would be had only if the name was introduced for such purposes by the introducer of that name.

The previous idea, that referential names, in order to function as the standard theory would predict, requires that certain referential intentions are present at the time it is introduced, suggests at least one natural requirement on a name's referring: that it be accompanied by a referentially directed intention -- a speaker must have been engaged in an appropriate act of reference-fixing in introducing or using that name.¹² Putting such a requirement on a name's referring nicely captures Kripke's intuition that names are distinctive in that they are what he calls "de jure" rigid designators -- designators that refer to their objects in virtue of an act of stipulation on the part of a speaker. A theory on which a speaker's intentions in introducing a name inform the meaning of that name can make such a constraint one of the requirements for introducing a referential name into the language.

To return to our examples, referential names include all of those names we have considered excepting fictional names. Supposing that a name's semantic content is determined by its context of introduction, and that that semantic content is itself complex, being composed partly by information about the referential intentions of the name's

¹² These acts might very well include placing certain descriptive conditions on the name's having a referent. But, the satisfaction of such conditions cannot be sufficient for a referential name to refer, since this would entail that the name 'Noman' refers and we have already rejected that hypothesis. For more on the nature of descriptive reference fixing, see my (2012).

introducer, we can now say that the non-fictional names we have considered would encode the fact that they are referential in virtue of encoding information about the introducer's referential intentions. Fictional names, by contrast, are introduced non-referentially, and the names will accordingly have as part of their semantic value that they are not to be treated as devices of reference at all.

Exactly how this information gets encoded into a name's semantics will be left open, since we need not understand the exact semantic architecture of a name's semantic content in the current context to see how the picture being suggested can begin resolve our four problems with empty names. It is enough to say that a name's semantic content will not be simple and will not carry only information about the contribution a name makes to a proposition, but also about its origins and the intentions with which the name was introduced.¹³

8. Four Problems with Empty Names Redux

Having suggested the general idea or picture that not only do names have as part of their semantic value some content, but also carry information about their referential status and properties, let us now re-examine the four problems discussed previously, this time taking them in reverse order.

8.1 The Reason Problem

Supposing names carry information about their referential properties, as either that of a referential or non-referential name, the reasons problem -- the problem of having the correct explanation for an empty name's failure to refer -- is easily resolved. Because on the view suggested, names carry information about their referential status, whether they are

¹³ For an exact characterization of a name's semantic value given the picture offered, see my (2011).

referential or non-referential will be part of their semantic value. Fictional names, then, because they are introduced with the intention that they are indeed anti-referential, will encode this fact -- they will fail to refer because it is part of their semantics that they do so. In contrast, other empty names, those introduced with failed attempts to refer, will encode the information that they are referential names. These names, therefore, if they fail to refer, will do so because of the failure of the external world to cooperate with the original introducer's intentions. They would fail to refer for metaphysical reasons. The reasons problem, then, on this view, is solved.

8.2 The Contingency Problem

Resolving the contingency problem requires a bit more explanation of just what is involved in complicating a name's semantic value in the way I am suggesting we do. At this point, it is useful to rely on Sainsbury's view that the semantic value of a name does not consist in the name's having a referent, but rather consists in the name's having associated with it, its conditions for reference.¹⁴ Of course, only referential names will have conditions for reference associated with them per se, but supposing we incorporate Sainsbury's observation as part of a name's semantic value, we now have the tools to distinguish not only between referential and non-referential names, but also between contingently and necessarily empty names.

¹⁴ Sainsbury (2005) astutely notes that if we are truly following a truth-conditional program for semantic analyses, then names should not be understood as simply having individuals as their semantic content, but rather as being associated with conditions for the assignment of an individual. I am indeed suggesting something similar, but unlike Sainsbury, I don't reject the idea that names still have a semantic slot, so to speak, for an assignment of content, whether that is an individual referent or not. The relevance of this is explained in the next paragraph of the main text, below.

Contingently empty names, names like 'Noman' that very well might be rather exceptional, will turn out to have reference conditions specific enough to pick out one and only one possibilium. In these cases, we can say that referential names associated with reference conditions like those associated with 'Noman' have potential referents, since we can identify a single possibilium as that which satisfies the name's reference condition. One might be tempted, as Salmon is, to conclude that since there is something that satisfies the name's reference condition, the individual satisfying it is therefore the name's referent. The name 'Noman', then, would not be empty. I resist this, however, for unlike Sainsbury, I do not think that a name's having a reference condition exhausts its semantic content; I do not believe that a name's reference condition can alone determine its content. It is, therefore, slightly misleading to call the descriptive content associated with the name 'Noman' its reference condition. It is at best a partial reference condition. On the view being developed, that which Sainsbury calls a name's "reference condition" is only one aspect of its semantic value. It will tell speakers when it is permitted to assign a referent to a name, but the satisfaction of that condition by some object, a possibilium in the case of the name 'Noman', does not entail that the name has a referent.

Again, taking Kripke's stipulation that a proper name's referent is a matter for stipulation, whether an object counts as a name's referent will also depend on whether speakers can or will refer to this object, whether there are any other conditions that speakers require to be satisfied before an object can count as a name's referent. In Salmon's case of the possible resultant of a certain sperm and ovum, the question is whether speakers can or will refer to this object using the name 'Noman'. Can or will speakers actually refer to Noman? I think the answer to this question is controversial,

controversial enough to justify being rather suspicious of any answer that stems purely from theoretical semantic commitments.

Let us return to some basic intuitions then. My intuition, and I suspect other speakers' intuitions, would be to say that while the descriptive conditions associated with 'Noman' do indeed identify a specific possibilium, that, in and of itself, is not sufficient to make 'Noman' refer to the object so identified. Noman is merely the potential referent of the name 'Noman'. In order for this name to refer, it would have to refer to some actual object. Based on these intuitions, then, we can suggest that in addition to satisfying what Sainsbury would call a "reference condition", an object, in order to count as a name's referent, must satisfy some other condition, there is some extra ingredient, so to speak, that allows speakers to refer to it or that speakers require is present in order to be willing to refer to the object identified. Perhaps that extra ingredient is acquaintance, though I suspect that this is too strong. Perhaps it is present existence, though given that we refer to no longer existing past objects such as Socrates without blinking, this requirement too is probably overly restrictive. We might also conjecture that the extra ingredient is simply actual present, past or future existence.

At any rate, it is not my aim to conclusively refute the idea that the referent of the name 'Noman' is indeed Noman. Nor is it my aim to offer a fully developed countervailing theory of the opposing intuition. My goal is merely to note that the intuition that the name 'Noman' is not empty is somewhat odd. It may be easier to offer a semantic theory of names assuming that the intuition is true, but I do not want to regiment intuitions. I would first like to attempt to accommodate them as far as possible. And I believe, though I may be

wrong, that speakers would agree that 'Noman' is empty, but might have referred. A theory that can accommodate this intuition then is preferable to one that does not.

As a reminder, it is useful to recall that one of the main reasons for rejecting descriptivist analyses of proper names was to avoid the consequence that names pick out that which only happens to satisfy a particular definite description. A theory that entails that the name 'Noman' refers simply because some object satisfies the descriptive condition associated with that name would, by my lights, be guilty of forgetting the previous lesson.

There are various explanations for why names do not have their reference determined by descriptions, but plausibly, part of the explanation has to do with the fact that many names are not only devices of reference, but are devices that are subject to our referential control, as Kripke's distinction between de facto and de jure rigid designators indicates.

As I said, to allow the name 'Noman' to have a referent simply on the basis of the satisfaction of its descriptive reference condition would be to ignore this rather intuitive part of Kripke's theory. A name must be more than a mere rigid designator. As my own view suggests, marking Kripke's distinction between de jure and de facto rigid designators, requires that referential names are not only associated with a referent, but also with a stipulative act of reference on the part of the speaker, which is likely constrained in some ways having to do with the potential referent having the appropriate relation to the actual world, as having either present, past or future existence. The thesis that names have a complex semantic value can accommodate this intuition, because on the picture being offered, names encode information about those very facts concerning the referential intentions and actions of the introducer of a name.

Let me suggest, then, that while a name may have a reference condition associated with it, or better yet, a partial condition for reference subject to some other satisfaction criterion, this will constitute only part of its semantic value -- that part that gives speakers information about how to use a name, about how it was intended to be used by the original introducer of the name. As indicated previously, on my view, a name's semantic value is complex, encoding not only information about the referential properties it inherits from the referential intentions with which it was introduced, but also encoding information about the name's content, its referent or lack thereof.

A name, then, has two aspects to its semantic value: that part that carries information about the referential intentions of the introducer of the name or the conditions specified for the name's reference; and that part constituted by an individual when a speaker appropriately fixes a referent for that name relying, in the case of those names associated with some descriptive condition, on facts concerning whether some actual present, past or future individual satisfies that condition. This framework makes it true that while Noman satisfies the partial reference conditions associated with the name 'Noman', this fact alone will not suffice to make Noman the name's content. In order for 'Noman' to refer, it must also be associated with a legitimate act of reference on the part of a speaker.

Complicating a name's semantic value in this way allows for names to be contingently empty. This does not entail, of course, that non-empty names cannot be rigid designators, since on the view being offered, the rigid designator thesis is understood as fully in effect when a name's content is bound.

8.3 The Accidental Reference Problem

Let us return now to the accidental reference problem -- the problem that appears to arise if we assume that a name's content can be given by a definite description, since if this is correct, a name will refer seemingly to whatever satisfies a particular definite description. As Kripke points out, names just don't work like that. The reference of a name is not determined by whether something, by happenstance, satisfies a particular definite description. Rather, a name refers to just that for which it was intended to be the name.

It is somewhat misleading to focus on the accidental reference problem only in the context of discussing descriptivism, since the fact that definite descriptions cannot determine a name's reference is simply a consequence of a further and deeper underlying intuition about names that I have pointed out repeatedly -- that their content is determined in virtue of an act of intentional stipulative reference on the part of a speaker. However, not just any old speaker will do. The reference of a name must be determined by an act of stipulative reference on the part of that speaker who is the introducer of that name into discourse, or by another speaker licensed by the nature of that name's context of introduction.¹⁵

¹⁵ I say this because there are some exceptions to the rule that the introducer's intentions are the only intentions relevant for fixing a name's reference. For instance, in the case of a contingently empty name, it must be possible for that name to have a referent, otherwise, it would not be contingently empty, and if the original introducer of the name did not refer to anything in introducing it, it must be possible for another speaker to fix the reference of that name should certain possibilities come to fruition. In such cases, a speaker who was not the original introducer of the name could fix a reference for that name, but this would be highly constrained by the original introducer's intentions and by the historical facts about the name's context of introduction. The main point I am trying to make is simply that not just anyone in any circumstances can simply use a name to refer to that which they choose. This would make names behave like demonstratives, and they do not function that way even though they are devices that are subject to our referential control. The nature of descriptive names, since they can plausibly shift their referents if speakers mistakenly fix its

Making a name's semantic value complex and yet historical can eliminate the problem of accidental reference, if we assume that a name encodes information not only about a referent, but also about the referential intentions with which that name is introduced. If a speaker introduces a name with the intention that it refer to something satisfying a particular description, this is part of the referential intentions with which the name was introduced, and therefore, given my general historical thesis -- that a name's semantic value is determined by its context of introduction -- this will always be part of what determines that name's reference. This would allow for the name 'Noman' to possibly refer without thereby entailing that other names, names like 'Vulcan', which are also introduced with definite descriptions, to refer willy-nilly. The name 'Vulcan' will necessarily fail to refer because it will be part of the referential intentions with which it was introduced that LeVerrier intended to be referring to a then present object. Since the past is fixed, so too is it fixed that the name 'Vulcan' fails to refer. Likewise, fictional names like 'Sherlock Holmes' will necessarily fail to refer because they are not introduced with any referential intentions at all. Indeed, a name like 'Sherlock Holmes' was introduced in what we might call an "anti-referential" way. It was stipulated by Doyle that 'Sherlock Holmes' is by its very nature non-referential, and this fact is encoded in that name's semantic value.

8.4 The Meaning Problem

The meaning problem for empty names introduced with referential intentions will not be fully resolved here. I will address only the potential truth value of some sentences containing empty names that might be used to attempt to express propositions. However, though failed

referent to something that does not satisfy their descriptive reference conditions, make these facts even more obvious. For more details about the nature of descriptive names, and about when a name's reference might be fixed by a speaker other than the introducer of that name, see my (2012).

referential names will still be defective on my view -- defective for lacking content, for lacking a referent -- there are some advantages of adopting my view over the standard theory. For instance, even though failed referential names will lack content, they will not entirely lack meaning, since they will still carry information about their reference conditions and the referential intentions associated with them, and this can be used to explain why we might assert sentences containing those names, which cannot be used to express any propositions, to assert other propositions pragmatically associated with those sentences.

To take a case, let us consider what we might be able to assert using the name 'Vulcan'. Because the name 'Vulcan' has no content, we cannot literally assert anything using that name.¹⁶ For instance, to assert that 'Vulcan is a planet' is not to literally assert anything with any truth evaluable content, since the name 'Vulcan' does not refer. Likewise for the sentence 'Vulcan is not a grapefruit.' However, we might, given the known history of the introduction of the name, pragmatically associate these sentences with some truth evaluable proposition. We might, for instance, associate the second sentence with another sentence that is in fact true: perhaps the sentence 'According to LeVerrier, the planet between Mercury and the Sun is not a grapefruit.'¹⁷ The previous sentence is indeed true and our pragmatic association of the previous sentence with 'Vulcan is not a grapefruit' is perfectly reasonable and explicable given that the definite description 'the planet between Mercury and the Sun' is part of the meaning of the name 'Vulcan'. Unlike other pragmatic

¹⁶ In this way, I too have some of the same problems as the standard theorist does with respect to the meaning problem. I do not have an account of the truth conditions for negative existentials using empty names and I also do not have an account of the mistake the Greeks made in worshipping certain gods. I am, however, sympathetic to Donnellan's (1974) solution to the problem of negative existentials.

¹⁷ Of course, this sentence will be true only if we adopt Russell's (1919) semantic account for definite descriptions.

accounts of what gets asserted using the kinds of sentences we are discussing, accounts that have little in the way of explanation for why we might pragmatically associate certain propositions with those sentences, my account can at least explain the phenomenon in virtue of the meanings that the expressions in question have, partial though they may be.¹⁸

In contrast with names introduced with an intention to refer, there are names, like those fictional names we have seen, which are not introduced with any intention to refer. It seems that these names could not be defective, since they are not failed devices of reference at all. We should expect, then, that these names should have content, even if they lack referents and for this reason are called “empty” names, even more strongly, “necessarily” empty names. But this fact should be understood as expressing the fact that fictional names could not possibly refer, not that they necessarily lack content.

Though I will not go into much detail about the nature of the content a fictional name might have, nevertheless, I think it is plausible to say that fictional names, by and large, are associated with certain qualities.¹⁹ For instance, the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is associated with the qualities of pipe-smoking, being a detective, intelligence, and tallness. This leads me to suppose that a fictional name is associated with sets of properties, but not as that name’s referent. This would be due, of course, to the fact that speakers stipulate that the relevant sets of properties are not to be understood as referentially associated with a fictional name. In contrast with referential empty names, because fictional names do have

¹⁸ Ideally, I would say more about the pragmatic link between the sentence uttered and the content conveyed, but addressing this issue would take me far beyond this discussion. As I have claimed, however, I believe that my view is better positioned to answer this question than others given what I take to be the meaning of a proper name that has no reference.

¹⁹ For details on the fictional case, see my (2011).

content, we should therefore expect them to contribute that content to the propositions expressed by the sentences containing them.

On my view, because fictional names have content, we can assert sentences like 'Sherlock Holmes smokes' and say something literally true. Sentences like these will be made true in the way that Montague (1974) suggests simple predications are made true. They are true if the set associated with the name 'Sherlock Holmes' contains the property associated with the predicate embedded in the relevant sentence and they are otherwise false. In this case, the set associated with 'Sherlock Holmes' does contain the property -- smokes -- that is associated with the predicate in the sentence 'Sherlock Holmes smokes'. Therefore, the sentence asserted is true.

The meaning problem, then, gets a mixed treatment on the context of introduction thesis. I employ a divide and conquer strategy for the meaning problem. Because some empty names are intended to be referential, they will not have content and therefore will contribute nothing to propositions containing them. Our intuitions to the contrary are intuitions about sentences that might be pragmatically associated with these names based on the referential intentions and conditions with which the names are also associated as part of their semantic value. In contrast, fictional names are fully meaningful and do have content, since they are not failed devices of reference at all, but also for this reason, the content they do have should not be understood as playing the role of referent.

9. Conclusion

As we have seen, empty names have many features that confound the standard treatment. However, if we turn to the intuitions underlying the standard theory, such as the historical thesis and that names not only have content but are expressions subject to our referential

control, we find that we can explain the problematic features of empty names while still maintaining the standard theory for names that do fit that theory.²⁰

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²⁰ Thanks to Duncan MacIntosh for reading and commenting on several drafts.

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