Russellians can solve the problem of empty names with nonsingular propositions*

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Abstract

Views that treat the contents of sentences as structured, Russellian propositions face a problem with empty names. It seems that those sorts of things cannot be the contents of sentences containing such names. I motivate and defend a solution to the problem according to which a sentence may have a singular proposition as its content at one time, and a nonsingular one at another. When the name is empty the content is a nonsingular Russellian structured proposition; when the name is not empty the content is a singular Russellian structured proposition.

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1 Introduction

A familiar philosophical view identifies the contents of sentences, in context, with structured, Russellian propositions. When a sentence has the appropriate form, a standard additional view is that the content is a *singular proposition*. This is developed as part of a metaphysical theory according to which these singular propositions have the referents of the names in the sentence as constituents. I will label the view *Russellianism*. I will not try to motivate or defend Russellianism against its rivals; I take it that the view is significant enough in contemporary philosophy of language and metaphysics to require little introduction.[1]

One problem for Russellianism is the occurrence of *empty names*: names which do not have referents.[2] I will use 'Vulcan', as in the standard story about Le Verrier, as my example.[3]

In a sentence such as (1) there is nothing that is the referent of 'Vulcan' (if you think that there is, substitute another example).

  (1) Vulcan is a planet.

So, no singular proposition containing the referent of 'Vulcan' can be assigned as the content of (1). If Russellianism claims that every well-formed declarative sentence has a content, or indeed if Russellianism invokes content in any way when discussing (1), then the emptiness of 'Vulcan' causes a problem given the ontology of contents just described.[4]

In section 2 I will present three types of solution to the problem of empty names. The first two, invoking gappy propositions as contents (subsection 2.1) and denying that sentences containing empty names have contents (subsection 2.2),

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[1]King (2017, sec. 3.1) references some key works.

[2]Empty names also cause problems of one sort or another for views that are not Russellian. This is outside the scope of this paper.

[3]Briefly, the story is that the 19th century astronomer Urbain Le Verrier posited a planet he referred to as 'Vulcan' between Mercury and the Sun. But there is no such planet. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbain_Le_Verrier. Of course, it doesn't matter if the story is true or not.

[4]See Braun (1993); Braun (2005); Salmon (1998); Reimer (2001); Caplan (2006) for discussion of this problem.

have been quite widely discussed. I will introduce a third solution which has been largely overlooked (subsection 2.3). I will then develop and defend this solution. When properly developed, the view compares favourably to the other two solutions.

According to the view I will defend, the proposition assigned as the content of (1) is not singular but general, i.e., nonsingular. If the name had not been empty, then the content would have been a singular proposition. The difference is determined by the interaction of some combination of the words in the sentence, the mental states of speakers, and the wider world in a way that matches standard accounts of how content is fixed. I label this thesis *Variation* because it entails that the structure of the proposition that is the content of a sentence can vary depending on circumstances. The idea is not that there are propositions that vary their structure; the claim is that different propositions with different structure might be assigned as contents in different contexts. *Context* here is broad enough to include facts about whether or not a name has a referent. I will describe the semantic proposal in more detail in subsection 3.7.

I have presented the problem as it is usually described by philosophers of language. Examples like (1) are standard there; examples of fictional names are popular too, e.g., 'Sherlock Holmes'. The problem is also discussed by metaphysicians, often in connection with debates about the nature of time (R. M. Adams 1981, 1986; Plantinga 1983; Fitch 1994; Markosian 2004; Ingram 2016, 2018). A different sort of example is popular there, e.g., (2).

(2) Socrates is wise.

This example is different because it seems that there was a time when there was a good candidate for being the constituent of a singular proposition to be assigned to (2). Of course one might think that there is now a referent of 'Socrates', or that something which does not exist now can still exist and be a referent.[5] So whether or not 'Socrates' is an empty name depends on views about existence. *Presentists*, who think that only what exists now exists, and who also accept that only what exists (now) can be a referent (now) will have a problem of empty names.[6] I will assume that the name is empty, because that is the case that is troublesome for Russellianism. Names of the more recently dead can also be used as examples as in (3).

(3) G. E. M. Anscombe is wise.

If nothing now exists which can be the referent of the name in (3), then there is the same problem for Russellian treatments of (3) as there are for (1) and (2). This is a useful example for sharpening the problem because people die all

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[5]Discussion of the latter point refers to the key idea as the *(temporal) being constraint*; see Williamson (2013, chap. 4) and the influential Plantinga (1983).

[6]One might also think that there is no existing proposition to be assigned to sentences containing empty names, but that this is not a problem because nonexistent propositions can play that role (Salmon 1998, 286–87). I will assume, *pace* Salmon, that if a proposition is (now) the actual semantic content of some sentence then that proposition exists (now). I am unsure whether Salmon intends his view to simply be the denial of presentism, and therefore to be read as the claim that the relevant proposition does not exist now but nevertheless exists, or as something more radical that applies only to propositions. If the latter, I see no reason to accept it. If the former, I am trying to solve the problem for presentists so the suggestion is irrelevant.

the time, and many other people carry on using names that referred to them afterwards; they do this both knowingly and unknowingly. So, if there is a problem here, it is a problem that arises frequently and for quite ordinary cases.

I mentioned debates about presentism when I introduced (3). This suggests an obvious solution for Russellians: they should deny presentism. Perhaps they should also think that everything exists necessarily; see Williamson (2002); Williamson (2013) for a defence of this view. I will not discuss solutions like this because they do not help with the project of understanding the Russellian's options. If it turns out that some class of allegedly empty names are not empty, then the Russellian has no problem with that class of names, but is no closer to understanding what they should say about empty names. The limit case is a view which entails that there could not be an empty name. Bertrand Russell wanted this result (Russell 1911; Jeshion 2014). In that case there is no problem to be addressed for the Russellian. However, I do think that there are empty names.

In the same spirit, I will have nothing to say about any view which takes some alleged example of an empty name and claims that it is not empty. For example, certain views about fictional characters take them to be existing objects (Van Inwagen 1977; Kripke 2013). This thought might be extended to 'Vulcan' and other *mythical* names (Salmon 1998; Caplan 2004). Similarly, one might think of the dead as 'bare particulars' to which one can refer and which can be constituents of propositions (Connolly 2010). These are interesting views, but I am interested in solving a problem directly which they avoid.

A legitimate question to ask about Variation is how much of the core ideas of Russellianism are preserved. For example, the view defended by Variation denies that all names contribute an object to the semantic content of the sentence they appear in. If that means that the view is an alternative to Russellianism rather than a development of it, then I am happy to accept that consequence; other views discussed in section 2 will have this consequence too. However, from the standpoint of classifying views, I am inclined to refer to views that take structured Russellian propositions as the semantic contents of sentences, and that take the semantic contents of all those names that have referents to be those names' referents, to be Russellian in some good sense. Ultimately, I think that Variation is worth considering even if it is not orthodoxly Russellian.

2 Three solutions

2.1 Gappy proposition

One solution for the Russellian is to say that (1), (2), (3) etc. do have contents which are *gappy propositions*. This view, sometimes using other terminology, is defended in various forms by several philosophers.[7] The notation used by Braun

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[7]See Kaplan (1989, 496, footnote 23); Braun (1993); Braun (2005); F. Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1993); F. Adams and Stecker (1994); F. Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1997); F. Adams and Dietrich (2004); F. Adams and Fuller (2007); Salmon (1998); Taylor (2000); Reimer (2001); Wyatt (2007); Rickless (2012); Spencer (2013). The view has been criticised in Everett (2003); Mousavian (2011). I am sympathetic to these criticisms and I will not repeat them.

(1993, 463), following Kaplan (1989), represents the gappy proposition assigned as the content of (1) as $\langle\{\}, \text{being-a-planet}\rangle$; a better fit with the notation in this paper would be the variant $\langle\textbf{planet}, \_\rangle$.

An important motivation for the gappy proposition view is the thought that every sentence ought to have a content. This might be rejected for a variety of reasons, but, if it is a compelling consideration, then Variation accommodates it too. Another consideration that might be offered in favour of gappy propositions is that the contents of sentences such as (1) must be singular. One argument for this conclusion would start with the premise that it is part of the function of names, *qua* devices of direct reference, to contribute objects to propositions, and that this somehow causes the propositions expressed by sentences containing them to be singular.[8]

This makes a question pressing: are gappy propositions singular? If they are, gappy propositions fail at least one standard test for singularity: this would be a proposition that is singular but there is nothing that it is about, at least in the case of an atomic proposition with a one-place relation such as the one proposed by David Braun as the content of (1). Matters are more complex for proposed gappy propositions such as $\langle\textbf{bigger}, \langle\text{Mercury}, \_\rangle\rangle$. However, the proposed requirement being violated by some cases is enough to raise the problem for the view, so I will not discuss the cases with two or more place relations.

This suggests a general problem for someone who wants to hold that there are gappy propositions and claim that they are singular. These propositions do not have the standard property associated with singularity, i.e., being about something.[9] So, what basis is there for holding that gappy propositions are singular? One might say that this is part of the intended definition of gappy propositions, but this looks like a mere stipulation. If it is indeed a requirement on any theory of the content of sentences such as (1) that the content is a singular proposition, then there is a sense in which this version of the gappy proposition view meets it. However, the view meets the requirement by stipulating that it does so.

The defender of gappy propositions might simply accept that such propositions are not singular. In that case their view has the same consequences as the one I will defend: sentences containing empty names will not have singular contents. If the main claim in favour of Gappy proposition is that it assigns a content to sentences such as (1) then this consideration should count equally in favour of Variation which also assigns a content to (1). Of course, this is not a point in favour of Variation either: the result is that both views entail that sentences containing empty names have nonsingular propositions as contents, and thus that the issue is dialectically inert.

One way to defend the gappy proposition view would be to accept that gappy propositions are not singular, but that they can still be used to capture an alleged

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[8]Kenneth Taylor has defended a related view about the semantic properties of names which attributes to them a primitive 'REF' feature, drawing on a proposal made by François Recanati (Recanati 1993; Taylor 1997, 2000, 2015).

[9]Note that two other ways of thinking about what makes a proposition singular, containing an object or being expressed by a sentence containing a directly referential expression will not work for gappy propositions either. Glick (2017) is a useful discussion of singular propositions, and proposes an aboutness based criterion for singularity.

fact about a sentence such as (1) namely that it has a proposition as its content that is not general. On this view, gappy propositions occupy a third category of propositions in addition to the previously exhaustive distinction between singular and general. This is already a kind of variation from the singular to this new, third category. The only reason to adopt such a view rather than Variation would be some reason to think that the content of sentence such as (1) just cannot be general; I will address several such arguments in the rest of this paper and reject them all.

2.2   No proposition

Another solution to the problem is just to accept its consequences: if there is no proposition that can be the content of S then S does not have a content (in the sense at issue).[10] Braun, who defends the gappy proposition view, suggests that the no proposition view is the simplest option, but fails because it has the unacceptable consequence of taking sentences such as (1) to be meaningless, and Marga Reimer also presents the issue in these terms (Braun 2005; Reimer 2001).[11] The idea is that the intuitive sense in which sentences are meaningful while mere strings of nonsense are not is to be explained in terms of the former having, and the latter lacking, propositional contents. This argument would not count against Variation because, on that view, the sentences containing empty names have propositions as contents. So, by Braun and Reimer's own lights the sentences would be meaningful.[12]

A question to ask about the no proposition view is what it says about the truth values of sentences containing empty names. If it is accepted that propositions are the bearers of truth values, then it must say that these sentences lack them. Braun argues that this is a problem for the view: he claims that the right result is that atomic sentences containing empty names are false and their negations, including negative existentials, are true (Braun 1993). In subsection 3.5 I will explain what Variation says about these questions: the view will be that atomic sentences containing empty names are indeed false. This is the result that Braun wants.

The line of thought motivating No proposition has much in common with that which motivates Gappy proposition, but does not have the cost of positing a novel type of proposition, nor does it require a new theory of what counts as a singular proposition. Russellians already believe in singular and general propositions. Because Variation does assign semantic contents to sentences such as (1), the view can explain how such sentences can feature in attitude reports. At least, it can do so just as well as Gappy proposition can.

In comparing Variation, No proposition, and Gappy proposition, it is important

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[10]Braun uses the label 'No proposition view' (Braun 1993); the view is similar to one defended by Keith Donnellan (Donnellan 1974).

[11]In (1993) Braun argued that the No proposition view could deal with the problem of meaningfulness, but in (2005) he argued that it cannot. Kaplan suggests the same worry when he attributes to Russell the worry that a sentence containing an empty name would be 'meaningless' (Kaplan 1989, 496, footnote 23).

[12]Hodgson (2018) argues that meaningfulness is not a compelling reason to reject the no proposition view.

to bear in mind that no view makes completely intuitive predictions about truth values. For example, some people think that the most natural thing to say about (3) is that it is true. None of the views have that result: the Gappy proposition verdict is that (3) is false (or perhaps without truth value on some versions of the view), and the No proposition verdict is that (3) is without truth value.[13] According to the version of Variation I will defend, (1), (3) etc. are false. So, the comparison is between views which take (3) to lack a truth value (No proposition) and those which take it to have a false one (the rest). The importance of this point for the present paper is that the defender of Gappy proposition cannot appeal to judgements about truth value to motivate their view against Variation because the views make the same claims.

2.3   Variation

My proposal, Variation, is that when the relevant name is empty a sentence such as (1), (2), or (3) has a nonsingular (or general) proposition as its content. Focusing on (2), the proposition is *a referent of 'Socrates' is wise* where this is understood as involving existential quantification. In Russellian terms, this proposition might be represented as follows for some name N and property F.[14]

$$\langle \mathbf{exists}, \langle \lambda x \langle \wedge, \langle \langle \mathbf{R_N}, x \rangle, \langle \mathbf{F}, x \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle$$

$\ulcorner \lambda x \langle \ldots x \ldots \rangle \urcorner$ denotes a function from objects to singular propositions containing those objects; '$\mathbf{exists}$' denotes a property of propositional functions that holds of them if and only if something is mapped by the function to a true proposition; '$\mathbf{R_N}$' denotes the property of being a referent of N.

The proposition would therefore be true if something is both a referent of 'Socrates' and wise even though there are many referents of 'Socrates'. This could only happen if it were possible for 'Socrates' to have many referents; as I will discuss in subsection 3.1 I doubt that this is possible. Because I doubt that this is possible, I won't replace this proposition with a more complicated one without this feature.[15]

Standard Russellian views will appeal to propositional functions and properties of them, including $\mathbf{exists}$, in giving the contents of sentences of the form $\ulcorner$Some F is $G\urcorner$, see, e.g., Soames (2010, 49–55). This proposition will be false

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[13]Braun's view is that gappy propositions are false; Salmon has argued that they lack truth value (Salmon 1998; Braun 2005).

[14]This style of notation is borrowed from Pickel (2017).

[15]The alternative version of Variation would build in uniqueness to the content and make the proposition equivalent to *the referent of 'Socrates' is wise*. In order for this to work the treatment of the definite description must be Russellian in the sense that its constituents are all general; however, the proposition would include elements that require that the referent of 'Socrates' is unique. This proposition entails the one I propose, but not *vice versa*. The second proposal is more complicated to write, but does perhaps capture the intuition that the content of the sentence is in some way definite in the way that the former is not. If someone is otherwise attracted to Variation, has this intuition, and feels that the second proposal satisfies it, then they are free to adopt the second version. However, given that the second proposal also assigns a nonsingular proposition as the content of the sentence it is at least arguable that the sense in which an intuition of definiteness is being respected is illusory. I am not convinced that the intuition should be respected in any case.

when it is assigned as the content to a sentence like (2) because this happens only when there is no referent for the name. There is no problem about ontology for the Russellian, if there is a problem then it is about semantics.

Variation solves the problem of empty names for Russellians because it provides an account of which proposition is the content of the problematic sentences. It can be generalised to any empty name, and involves no additional ontology. It does not require an amendment to standard accounts of singularity. These virtues make the view worth exploring and defending.

Variation should be distinguished from the view that names behave, semantically or syntactically, as predicates. This view has recently been defended by Delia Graff Fara and has a long history as a minority position concerning the nature of names (Fara 2015).[16] Variation is not committed to any version of this view. This is because Variation is not in fact a view about the syntax and semantics of names at all: it is a view about the contents of sentences. The only commitment of Variation is that the syntax of the relevant sentences does not change when a name is empty, and that when a name is not empty the content is singular and when a name is empty the content is nonsingular.[17] All these views are independent of the claim that names function semantically and syntactically as predicates.[18]

3   Which proposition?

3.1   Name properties

There is a property of being a referent of 'Vulcan', 'Socrates', 'G. E. M. Anscombe', 'Martha Nussbaum', . . . and so on for every name. I have the following picture in mind, which is a kind of causal theory. Names are introduced by *baptisms* where a speaker is attempting to dub some object with the name. This view is inspired by the *causal theory of names* following Saul Kripke and Donnellan.[19] This name can be passed on to others. There will be a history of these transmissions going back to the original baptism; at each stage the new user of the name is guided by the intention to use the name in the way that the person they are acquiring it from used it. This allows for changes in the way the name is pronounced or written. The name property is the property of being at the beginning of the chain.

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[16]See Sloat (1969); Burge (1973); Boër (1975); Hornsby (1976); Bach (1981); Geurts (1997); Matushansky (2008) for discussions of the semantic and syntactic theories; see also Ludlow (2003) for a view which allows the syntactic structure of sentences containing names to differ; this is distinct from Variation which holds the syntactic structure fixed and allows content to vary.

[17]A relevant question here is whether it is possible for the structure of semantic content to vary independently of the structure of a sentence, and whether such a difference is detectable to speakers; Hodgson (2017) argues that it is possible.

[18]Note that treating names as predicates does not require that sentences containing them have nonsingular contents; this view is defended in Predelli (2015), cf. Braun (2008).

[19]See Donnellan (1970); Donnellan (1974); Evans (1973); Evans (1982); Putnam (1975); Kripke (1980); Sainsbury (2014) for the causal theory, and Kaplan (1990); Kaplan (2011); Cappelen (1999); Alward (2005); Hawthorne and Lepore (2011); Bromberger (2011) for some discussion of the metaphysics of words in the context of causal theories of reference.

The property of being a referent of a name should be distinguished from the property of being called a particular name. This property is appealed to in some versions of metalinguistic descriptivism. The distinction can be illustrated by noting the difference between being a referent of a particular name 'Aristotle$_1$', a name originating with a particular Greek philosopher, and *called 'Aristotle'*, a property that many people have had.[20] The shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis was also a referent of a name which sounds like the one that goes back to the ancient Greek philosopher. On this view, there are distinct names that we can distinguish with subscripts as 'Aristotle$_1$' and 'Aristotle$_2$'. A true reading of (4) will be that there are many people called 'Aristotle' in the room who will presumably typically be referents of some names 'Aristotle$_i$', ... 'Aristotle$_j$'.

(4) There are many Aristotles in the room.

Another important distinction is that being called something seems to require being referred to by a particular sound. Arguably, the ancient Greek philosopher was not called 'Aristotle' in this sense. But, being at the beginning of the causal chain associated with 'Aristotle$_1$' does not require this.

It is of course controversial how to individuate histories of transmission and therefore how to individuate names. For example, one might ask whether a name can change its referent as in Gareth Evans' classic 'Madagascar' case (Evans 1973, 196); if this is possible, then perhaps the view will have to be reformulated in terms of uses of names. Fortunately, Variation can be defended without answering these questions. This is because only a very minimal set of conditions is imposed on the full theory of names by the requirements of Variation. Suppose that we are thinking of a particular name on a particular occasion. On any causal theory there is a history of transmission going back to a baptism. So, there is a property of being the object associated with that baptism. All that this proposal requires is that each name is associated with a causal history. This is something that all causal theories will entail.

Variation also requires that the property exists even if the name is empty; this might be denied on the basis that properties do not exist unless they are instantiated. Dealing fully with this objection would be beyond the scope of this paper. I will however make two brief points. Firstly, the practice of using the name certainly does exist even when the name is empty, and, if there had been something at the beginning of the chain, then that would be the object that we are interested in. The uninstantiated property is therefore not like a necessarily uninstantiated property such as *even prime greater than two*. Secondly, a Russellian might be convinced by an argument such as the following. Suppose property F is uninstantiated. Then the sentence 'F is uninstantiated' is true. So, there is a true proposition with F as a constituent. So, F exists (uninstantiated). This argument is a minor modification of one in Williamson (2002). Timothy Williamson uses this argument to conclude that everything that exists exists necessarily. Accepting this conclusion reduces the number of empty names, but it need not reduce it to zero. So, it is possible to accept Williamson's argument and think that there are empty names. So there is some reason for Russellians to accept uninstantiated properties, which is what Variation requires.[21]

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[20]For discussion of this property in the context of the predicate theory of proper names see Gray (2013).

[21]For a survey of the debate over this issue see Orilia and Swoyer (2016, sec. 5). Debates

Name properties, as I understand them, are already involved in causal theories. The transmission of a name requires an intention to refer to whatever the existing users of the name refer to. This is an intention to refer to whatever is at the beginning of the causal chain. The intention is therefore specified in terms of the name property.

3.2   Why name properties?

Could Variation use another sort of property? Yes, in principle. However, I think that there are reasons to reject the two most likely options.

The first option is to use descriptive properties such as *most famous philosopher of antiquity*. This would make Variation the view that some form of descriptivism is right when a name is empty. The difficulty with this view is deciding which property it is. In particular, what is needed is an account of why the metasemantic facts entail that F, rather than some other property, is a constituent of the proposition assigned as semantic content. Furthermore, some of Kripke's arguments against descriptivism as a theory of reference fixing would apply to views of this sort (Kripke 1980). A metalinguistic version of this proposal, involving the property of being called 'N', would avoid some of these objections, but faces questions about the individuation of names.

The second option would be to use a *thisness* property. The idea would be that for every object there is a property of being identical with it; this property can exist even if the object does not (although perhaps only if the object has existed). Such properties have been suggested as possible constituents of singular propositions about past objects in a presentist framework (Ingram 2016, 2018); the ontology is from R. M. Adams (1979). That view amounts to denying that the names are empty, and is limited to objects that have a thisness. The proposal that thisnesses can be used in a version of Variation inherits the second feature: it will limit Variation to dealing with only those objects for which there is such a property. In particular, David Ingram's version of the view posits thisness properties only for things that did or do exist; the fictional and mythical are left untreated by this view. For this reason I prefer to formulate Variation in terms of name properties.

3.3   Scope

In this section I will make use of the notion of *scope*, following the standard usage in the literature on names and definite descriptions.[22] Some clarifications will be useful. Scope, as I understand it, is essentially a syntactic notion relating to the interaction of quantifiers. It can be usefully illustrated with formulae of predicate logic, which I will do in what follows. Scope ambiguity is a property of

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over empty kind terms might also be relevant. For example, a defender of Variation might propose a similar view for empty kinds such as 'phlogiston'. See Besson (2011) for discussion of this issue. Note that uninstantiated properties are different from putative kinds without exemplars. One might think that the latter are problematic in a way the former are not, and propose a view like Variation only for kind terms.

[22]In particular see the literature on *logical form* introduced in Jackson (2006).

sentences, which can be disambiguated at some syntactic level. In a Russellian framework, different propositions correspond to different scopal disambiguations: for example, two distinct structured propositions correspond to the two readings of 'Everybody loves somebody'. When I talk about wide and narrow scope propositions, I mean this to be shorthand for a claim about the propositions corresponding to the respective readings.

It is natural to compare Variation to descriptivist treatments of empty names. These are views which respond to the modal argument in Kripke (1980) by claiming that names are equivalent to descriptions which always take the widest possible scope without leaving an attitude context.[23] The point of such a proposal is to provide at least a simulation of rigidity to account for the intuitions that drive Kripke's arguments that names are rigid designators, an observation that can be brought out by considering modal contexts. Kripke's arguments are also used to motivate Russellianism (Kaplan 1989, sec. IV). The important difference can be illustrated with these simple formulae:

$$\Diamond \exists x \mathrm{F} x$$

$$\exists x \Diamond \mathrm{F} x$$

The former is true just in case in there is a world in which there is something which is F; the second just in these there is a something that is F in some world. Different propositions can be associated with these formulae reflecting the relative scopes of the operators.

This creates a choice for the defender of Variation. One option would be to say that when a name is empty the proposition assigned to the sentence corresponds to a wide scope for the description relative to any operators. The wide scope proposal would allow for a response to the following objection based on examples like (5).

(5) Socrates might not be a referent of 'Socrates'.

The objection would be that Variation predicts that this sentence expresses the proposition that possibly a referent of 'Socrates' is not a referent of 'Socrates', i.e., that it is possible that there be something which both is and is not a referent of 'Socrates'.

There is an easy response to this objection. I will use a familiar formalism to make explicit the relative scope of operators:

$$\Diamond \exists x (\mathrm{F} x \wedge \neg \mathrm{F} x)$$

$$\exists x (\mathrm{F} x \wedge \Diamond \neg \mathrm{F} x)$$

The quantifier in the second formula takes wide scope relative to the possibility operator. And this formula expresses a proposition that is not a contradiction. So, if the defender of Variation can claim that the proposition assigned as the

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[23]Stanley (1997); Soames (1998); Nelson (2002); Caplan (2005); Everett (2005); Hunter (2005); see also Kripke's comments on Michael Dummett's response in Dummett (1973) to Kripke's view in Kripke (1980, 11, footnote 13).

content corresponds to the wide scope reading, there is no need to worry that (5) has a contradiction as its content. And, the claim about which proposition is the content is a theoretical claim, not beholden to an independent syntactic theory. So, the defender of Variation can make this claim if they like the idea of adopting the response just described.

Despite this natural line of thought, there is an argument against the wide scope view based on premises the defender of Variation will accept. Consider the following scenario. Ann was fond of dogs. Ann died, so 'Ann' is empty, but in nearby possible worlds she did not, and in some of those she is also fond of dogs. Consider these sentences:

(6) Ann is fond of dogs.

(7) Possibly, Ann is fond of dogs.

The Variation proposal is that the content of (6) is a nonsingular proposition which is false at the actual world, because there is no referent of 'Ann', but true at the worlds where Ann is still alive and fond of dogs. The wide and narrow scope proposals differ about the content of (7). The narrow scope proposal is that its content is:

$$\langle \Diamond, \langle \textbf{exists}, \langle \lambda x \langle \wedge, \langle \langle \textbf{R}_{\text{‘Ann’}}, x \rangle, \langle \textbf{fond of dogs}, x \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle$$

This is true in the scenario described. The wide scope proposal is that its content is:

$$\langle \textbf{exists}, \langle \lambda x \langle \Diamond, \langle \wedge, \langle \langle \textbf{R}_{\text{‘Ann’}}, x \rangle, \langle \textbf{fond of dogs}, x \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle$$

This is false in the scenario described. It is false for a general reason: no sentence consisting of a modal operator and a sentence containing an empty name will have a content that is true; see Cullison and Caplan (2010) for discussion. It seems that some such sentences are true, which is some reason to think that they have true propositions as their contents. Granted that this a genuine judgement and worth preserving, the narrow scope version of Variation is superior to the wide scope version.

Adopting the narrow scope version of Variation has an additional advantage. This version of the view is more clearly distinguished from (metalinguistic) descriptivism. The descriptivist feels the need to capture rigidity by appealing to a wide scope reading of a syntactically realised definite description in order to respond to modal arguments against their view. But, they cannot do this to respond to the problem of empty names, as I have just noted. Variation provides an alternative treatment of empty names, and rejects the idea that any name is syntactically a definite description, or at least that it makes the contribution to semantic content that descriptions do. There is no need to explain why constructions which ought to generate scope ambiguities, i.e., those which contain multiple quantifiers, can only have a wide scope reading, which is a key problem for descriptivists.

So, there is a tension between the natural response on behalf of Variation to the worry about contradictions, which is to say that the existential quantifiers

take the widest possible scope as metalinguistic descriptivists also claim, and the point that the resulting propositions will not be true. The defender of Variation should reject the claim about automatic wide scope taking; this will also allow the view to be clearly differentiated from the wide scope version of metalinguistic descriptivism.

The correct response to the problem raised by (5) is to carefully distinguish the proposition expressed by such a sentence when it contains an empty name, and the proposition that is expressed when the name is not empty. When the name is not empty, a singular proposition is expressed containing the referent of that name. This singular proposition will presumably be true, because it is not necessary that anything bears any particular name. Judging that such a proposition is true is what drives the judgement that the sentence (5) is true. The proposition that there is something which both is and is not a referent of 'Socrates' can be regarded as false by everybody.

This line of response illustrates a key claim that the defender of Variation will be required to make: judgements about the truth of sentences containing empty names often track judgements about the propositions that would be expressed by those sentences if the names were not empty. Those who take (5) to be true, and therefore not a contradiction, are considering it to be expressing a singular proposition containing the referent of 'Socrates'. If the name is empty, a different, false, contradictory proposition is expressed. But that is not what those considering (5) pay attention to.

Finally, I would like to discuss another version of the modal argument against descriptivism which might be taken to be a problem for Variation. Consider (8) as an arbitrary example of sentences of the form ⌜N is a referent of 'N'⌝.

(8) Socrates is a referent of 'Socrates'.

The objection would be that (8) ought to have a contingent proposition as its semantic content, which I accept, and that Variation does not have that result. But, that does not follow from Variation. If 'Socrates' is not an empty name then a singular proposition is the content of (8); presumably that proposition is contingent. If 'Socrates' is empty, then the semantic content of (8) is a contingent proposition. It is necessary that in any world where the sentence expresses that particular proposition that proposition is false at that world. This is because the nonsingular proposition is expressed only when the name is empty which is sufficient for the proposition then expressed to be false. But it does not follow from that that the proposition is necessarily false; it might well be possible that there is a referent of 'Socrates' and it is wise. If, the semantic content of (8) is false, then the semantic content of (8) is not necessary. So, the objection fails. One might still worry that if 'Socrates' is empty then the content of (8) is only contingently false. This illustrates a surprising consequence of Variation, but I do not think it is a *reductio* of the view. A related, potentially problematic case is (9).

(9) If Socrates exists, then Socrates is a referent of 'Socrates'.

If 'Socrates' is an empty name, then Variation predicts that the content of (9) is *if there is a referent of 'Socrates' and it exists then there is a referent of 'Socrates' and it is a referent of 'Socrates'*. That proposition is true. At least it is

true if something like the following account of conditional propositions holds: a conditional proposition is true if and only if every world at which its antecedent is true is a world at which its consequent is true. And, that proposition is necessary in the following sense: every world is a world at which it is true. But, the objection goes, (9) ought not to have a necessary truth as its content. Nor should (9) have a proposition as its content that can be known *a priori*, which the content assigned by Variation can be.

Taking the second worry first, Variation does entail that the content of (9) is a proposition that can be known *a priori*. But it cannot be known *a priori* that (9) has that content, unless it can be known *a priori* that 'Socrates' is an empty name.

Regarding the first worry, the defender of Variation does not need to accept that this constitutes a problem for Variation. It might well be that speakers have intuitions about the modal profile of the content of (9), similar to those that they seem to have about the rigidity of names. But, according to Variation, the sentences express propositions with different modal profiles on different occasions. Speakers' judgements are to be explained by the fact that they are targeting one sort of proposition, namely the singular. In other words, speakers assume that the antecedent clause of the sentence expresses a singular proposition and reason about the modal profile of the content accordingly. They do so accurately, but starting from a false premise. This is what drives any judgement that the content of (9) is not necessary. The judgement is accurate when the name is not empty, and inaccurate when it is. Because the defender of Variation is able to offer an explanation of how this judgement comes to be made, the defender of Variation is able to claim that this judgement does not refute Variation because the other advantages of the view outweigh the cost. Furthermore, someone who takes this to be a *reductio* of Variation owes an account of what the content of (9) is, and why it vindicates the judgements appealed to as a refutation of Variation.

3.4   Existence

I will now discuss another sort of example raised as a possible objection by an anonymous referee. Firstly, the referee makes an observation about a commitment of Variation regarding a sentence such as (10).

 (10) Necessarily, if 'Vulcan' refers, then Vulcan exists.

Assume that 'Vulcan' is empty, and that 'exists' picks out a property *existence* which everything has, and that 'refers' picks out the name property I have appealed to in specifying my view in subsection 3.1, and that it is existence entailing. I have assumed all these things apart from the claim that existence is a property of individuals in this paper, and I am happy to grant the assumption about existence for the sake of argument.[24] Alternatively, one might take a sentence such as (11) to be equivalent to (12), in the sense that they express the same proposition.

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[24]Among the neo-Russellians I am interested in engaging with Braun (1993, 464) takes this view; see also Salmon (1987); Salmon (1998); Salmon (2014); Nelson (2016).

(11) Vulcan exists.

(12) 'Vulcan' refers.

This is a view associated with a metalinguistic approach to empty names (Braun 1993, 454–55).[25] On such a view, (10) is true. On my preferred version of Variation, granting the assumptions I have granted including that existence is a property of individuals, (10) is also true. If the antecedent is true at a world then in that world something is the referent of 'Vulcan' (or, more precisely, 'Vulcan$_1$' in the terminology I adopted earlier). Only things that exist are referents, so that thing exists. So, there is a referent of 'Vulcan$_1$' and it exists. One worry is that it is just implausible that (10) is true, i.e., that it expresses a true proposition. However, this does not seem particularly implausible to me from the perspective of Variation; as a merely intuitive objection I see no reason for the defender of Variation to be concerned. It is, of course, important not to confuse the proposition expressed by (10) with one about the being called relation. That would be the proposition that necessarily, if something is called 'Vulcan' then Vulcan exists. The antecedent would be true if I had called a pet cat 'Vulcan' (this name would be e.g. 'Vulcan$_2$'). But that would not be a referent of the name 'Vulcan$_1$' that Le Verrier tried to introduce. That proposition would be false, as Variation correctly predicts.

That being said, the example just discussed can be turned into an argument against Variation. An equivalent of (10) can be given for any empty name. The anonymous referee uses the example of 'Squound' which is an (empty) name introduced by description as follows: 'let "Squound" refer to the round square, if there is such a thing, or nothing'. Consider (13), (14), and (15).

(13) Necessarily, if 'Squound' refers, then Squound exists.

(14) It is metaphysically possible that 'Squound' refers.

(15) It is metaphysically possible that Squound exists.

The objection is as follows. The defender of Variation accepts (13). And, (13) and (14) entail (15). But, (15) is false. My response on behalf of Variation is to deny (14). Suppose that (14) were true. That would mean that it is metaphysically possible for an attempted fixing of reference by description such as the one suggested by the referee to succeed. Such a baptism could succeed only if there is a round square. That is not possible. So, it is not possible for the baptism to succeed. So, (14) is false for the same reason that (15) is. It is of course perfectly possible for something to be *called* 'Squound'. But that is not what is at issue in the objection.

3.5 Truth

Variation, as I have presented it, entails that when a name is empty the sentence containing it has a false proposition as its content. That is because these

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[25]As Braun notes, this view treats sentences about existence, positive or negative, as exceptions to the standard semantics of names. Variation, combined with the view that existence is a property does not. Braun refers to Donnellan (1974) for a view which assigns truth conditions to existential claims involving the reference of names, but does not assign propositions true in those circumstances as semantic contents of the relevant sentences.

propositions entail that there is a referent of the name, which is false because the name is empty. So, the sentences that have these propositions as contents are false. This is the same prediction as at least one version of the gappy proposition view, i.e., the version that treats gappy propositions as false (Braun 1993, 2005). The version that treats gappy propositions as neither true nor false, and the No proposition view, make the slightly different prediction that sentences containing empty names lack truth values (Salmon 1998). This result follows from the standard Russellian claim that sentences are true if and only if their contents are true.

Some people think that, intuitively, some sentences containing empty names are true; (2) and (3) are likely candidates. Can Variation account for these judgements? My view is that these judgements are mistaken, but I think that the defender of Variation can say some plausible things to defend the view that they can be vindicated if that is they way their intuitions about truth lead them.

One solution would be to appeal to the presence of past tense properties in the proposition expressed. For example, it might be that the proposition assigned to (2) is equivalent to *that it was the case that there was a referent of 'Socrates' and when there was it was wise.* That proposition is true, and plausibly it is the content of (16).

 (16) Socrates was wise.

The distinction between being a referent and being called is important here because the proposition above can be true even if the wise individual was not referred to then with something that sounds like the English word. The point is that the name exists now, there is a property associated with it, and at some point in the past there was something that was then at the beginning of the chain that defines the property. The proposition that exists now was true then, if that individual was (then) wise. So, the proposition that that proposition was true then is true now.

Developing this view would require telling a complete story about why a present tensed sentence has a content that is true if and only if things are a certain way in the past. It is not obvious why this would ever be the case, and the Russellian would need a principled account. One point in favour of the proposal is that it does seem to capture what drives the judgement that the sentence is true. Nobody thinks that it is true because Socrates is wise now, unless they think that Socrates continued to exist (and be wise) after his death. On that view the name isn't empty. So, anybody who thinks that it is how Socrates was in the past that makes (2) true has some reason to consider a view on which the content of (2) is about the past. Alternatively, it can always be said that speakers sometimes use (2) knowingly to convey the content of (16).

The view just suggested assigns a proposition to the sentence as its content which is the equivalent of the wide scope reading of a sentence containing a temporal operator. This seems to give the right truth conditions, compared to the proposition equivalent to a narrow scope reading, so I claim that it is the natural proposal to make.

Views involving operators as a response to the problem of empty names are discussed in Markosian (2004, sec. 3.8). Ned Markosian's final view is that

the sentences under discussion have either singular propositions as contents, or nothing. But they also have an associated 'linguistic meaning' which treats the name as a description and in which a past tense operator takes narrow scope relative to that description. Intuitions about the linguistic meaning can drive judgements about the truth of the sentence. Markosian makes the further claim that ordinary speakers will sometimes be confused and interpret the sentence with a wide scope tense operator. While the linguistic meaning is false, the wide scope expression nearby might be true.

Markosian's view is that the ordinary way in which sentences are true is that they have true propositions as contents. However, (2) has no content. It does have truth conditions, which are not met, but which might easily be confused for truth conditions which are. This solves the problem, but it requires positing that speakers are confused: they take sentences to be true which in fact have no content, and they are wrong about the linguistic meaning of these sentences because they take the past tense operator to have wide rather than narrow scope. This sort of speaker error is linguistic: speakers are confused about the linguistic meanings of sentences. Markosian is therefore committed to widespread linguistic error among otherwise competent speakers. I take this to be reason to prefer some other view, such as the one which simply assigns a true past tensed proposition as the content of (2), or the view on which (2) has no content and the speakers' error is in not realising that this is so.

The proposal above, by employing the past tense, allows for (2) to be true. This has the cost of making the proposition expressed by (2) about the past, but this would be a price worth paying if (2) is true. So, part of the debate here turns on the status of the judgements about the truth of the sentences. If these judgements are to be respected, then Variation should be developed along the lines just suggested. However, I think that the best Russellian view is to deny that (2) is true if 'Socrates' is empty.

That 'Socrates' is an empty name entails that no simple sentence in which it is used is true because such sentences are true if and only if the referents of the names in the sentence have the property picked out by its predicate. In other words, because 'Socrates' has no referent, no simple sentence in which it is used will be true. Someone who responds to this argument by saying that 'Socrates' does have a referent is denying that the name is empty. Someone who responds by saying that 'Socrates' did have a referent is appealing to something that can be captured with the use of a past tense operator, but is confusing the truth of the resulting proposition for the truth of the sentence's content. This argument does not rely on claims about singular Russellian propositions, which means it can be used in a non question begging way to defend a Russellian view against critics.

In summary, Variation entails that (2) is false. I have claimed that this is the right result, if 'Socrates' is an empty name. However, it would be possible to explain why someone might think that it is true: they take its content to be a past tensed proposition. This might be because in some circumstances speakers will use a sentence such as (2) to convey such a proposition. This explains the facts when speakers are enlightened about the status of Socrates: they know that the name is empty, but they use a sentence that therefore has a false content to express something true about the past. This does not require such speakers

to have false beliefs about semantics, or metaphysics. Another kind of case is one where the speaker does not realise that 'Socrates' is empty. In that case the speaker does have false beliefs about what exists, and about the contents of sentences, and about the truth values of certain sentences. However, these false beliefs do not threaten these speakers' status as competent language users. Such speakers might, for example, be able to assign the correct propositions to the sentences when they know what exists.

3.6 Belief

The defender of Variation need not have any particular view about belief or belief reports. I will not try to give an account of either here. I will give a response to an objection that might be raised to Variation. Following Markosian's discussion, I will use a story about Glaucon's beliefs as my example. Let t1 be just before Socrates' death and t2 just after. Let P be the singular proposition we represent as $\langle \textbf{wise}, \text{Socrates} \rangle$. It is natural to say that Glaucon at t1 believes P. Markosian argues, and I agree, that at t2 there is not such proposition and so Glaucon does not believe it. If Glaucon believes anything, he believes some other proposition. The defender of Variation might well claim that the proposition that Glaucon believes at t2 is the nonsingular semantic content of (2) at t2; call this proposition Q.

This view is certainly not obligatory for the defender of Variation: they are only committed to a claim about the semantic content of (2), which does not immediately entail anything about what anybody believes.

A defender of Variation who is also a *naïve Russellian* about the metaphysics of belief and the semantics of attitude reports will end up with some commitments about what people believe.[26] Take the belief report made in (17).

 (17) Glaucon believes that Socrates is wise.

The naïve Russellian will hold that (17) expresses the proposition that Glaucon stands in the belief relation to the semantic content of the embedded clause of the complement of (17). So, combined with Variation, they would hold that the content of (17) at t1 is $\langle \textbf{belief}, \langle \text{Glaucon}, \text{P} \rangle \rangle$. And at t2 the content will be $\langle \textbf{belief}, \langle \text{Glaucon}, \text{Q} \rangle \rangle$.

The objection that could be raised to Variation here is that the second consequence described above is just implausible. This might be pressed by presenting a variant of the case where Glaucon does not even associate the name 'Socrates' with Socrates. The worry would be that Glaucon just cannot be attributed a belief including the property of being a referent of 'Socrates' in that case.

There are various ways for the defender of Variation to respond. One way would be to reject the naïve Russellian view, as many Russellians do. This would then require an alternative account of attitude reports which provides the right results. Variation does not require any particular account.

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[26]I have in mind the kind of view discussed and defended by Braun (1998) and in a vast literature before and since.

A second line of response would be to say that (17) isn't in fact true after Socrates has died. This would fit with the idea that belief is a direct relation between believers and the things they have beliefs about, as well as presentist intuitions.[27]

I do not claim that this discussion resolves the question of beliefs and belief reports in a Russellian framework. However, it does show that there is no obvious incoherence in Variation as applied to attitude reports. So, there are prospects for developing an account of belief and belief reports with which Variation fits.

3.7 Stacks

I will now present a view about sentence content which I recommend as the best implementation of Variation. The content of a sentence in context should be thought of as a sequence of propositions rather than a proposition. This view is inspired by various *multiple proposition views* as discussed in Neale (1999); Bach (1999); Perry (2012); Sullivan (2012). I will refer to the sequence of propositions assigned to a sentence as its content as its *stack*. This is supposed to suggest a metaphor according to which propositions are added to the stack in a particular order, and the last one to be added is the top of the stack and therefore the first to be accessed. This metaphor is inessential: the view is committed only to propositions and ordered sequences of them.

The semantic proposal is that a series of operations are used to populate the stack associated with a sentence. The first operation generates a nonsingular proposition where each name is associated with its name property and a quantifier with widest scope is incorporated into the proposition. This is the proposition described in the initial presentation of Variation. This rule is applied whether or not the name is empty. Then a second operation builds a singular proposition. If this operation fails, because no singular proposition can be assigned, then nothing is added to the stack. This second operation will be just what the standard Russellian view about semantic content takes it to be.

So, when a sentence contains an empty name, its stack contains only a nonsingular proposition because the second operation crashed and added nothing. When there are no empty names a singular proposition is added and is at the top of the stack (because the rule is applied second). Figure 1 is the stack for (18), and Figure 2 is the stack for (2).

(18) Martha Nussbaum is wise.

$$\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \langle\textbf{wise}, \text{Martha Nussbaum}\rangle \\ \langle\textbf{exists}, \langle\lambda x\langle\wedge, \langle\langle\textbf{R}_{\textbf{‘Martha Nussbaum’}}, x\rangle, \langle\textbf{wise}, x\rangle\rangle\rangle\rangle \end{array} \right\rangle$$

Figure 1: Stack for 'Martha Nussbaum is wise'

$$\langle\langle\textbf{exists}, \langle\lambda x, \langle\wedge, \langle\langle\textbf{R}_{\textbf{‘Socrates’}}, x\rangle, \langle\textbf{wise}, x\rangle\rangle\rangle\rangle\rangle\rangle$$

Figure 2: Stack for 'Socrates is wise'

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[27]The former of these views is defended in Berg (2012).

All the standard roles for contents in traditional Russellian theories will be played by the top of the stack. For example, a sentence is true if and only if the proposition at the top of its stack is. If a proposition is needed to be what the speaker says, a role that only some sorts of view require, then the top of the stack will play that role. And so on.

Once stacks are in play, the semantic contents of sentences can be compared in various ways.[28] One way is to compare the whole sequence. Because I have identified the semantic content of a sentence with a stack, this means that two sentences, in context, have the same semantic content if and only if they have the same stack. Because name properties are in the stack, sentences such (19) and (20) may well have different semantic contents even though they will have the same singular proposition at the top of their respective stacks.[29]

(19) London is pretty.

(20) Londres est jolie.

The way I have presented the view, speakers who utter (19) and (20) say the same thing. This is because what a speaker says is the proposition at the top of the stack which in both cases will be $\langle \mathbf{pretty}, \mathrm{London} \rangle$. If a belief report attributes belief in the proposition at the top of its that-clause's stack, then belief reports using (19) and (20) report the same belief. The difference in semantic content is available for theorists who wish to account for the differences between (19) and (20). If, however, the difference in semantic content is thought to be objectionable, I would be happy to identify semantic content with what is at the top of a sentence's stack, and call the stack something other than 'semantic content'. If the rest of the stack plays no role at all, then, alternatively, I would be happy to say that later operations overwrite earlier ones so that all sentences have a single proposition as their semantic content.

This sketch of a theory provides a unified account of the semantic content of sentences containing empty names which takes these contents to be sequences of Russellian structured propositions. This is a way of implementing Variation. The ways in which it is sketchy, primarily, the nature of structured propositions, and the relationship between them and sentences in context, are also issues for the standard Russellian view.

The reason to have this kind of view as part of the theory is that it blocks a line of objection to Variation. The objection is that Variation requires rejecting the idea that words with the grammatical properties of names make a unified contribution. On the view that I have just sketched, there is a single rule which applies to all sentences and gives as an output their contents. And, names always contribute their referents to these contents, if they have referents. This is as unified a contribution to content as anybody could want. It is also worth bearing in mind that names are syntactically perfectly uniform on this view; Variation is not a view about changes in the syntax of any expression.

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[28] I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to discuss this point. The example is theirs, based on Kripke (1979).

[29] This will of course depend upon how causal chains are individuated: if the production of 'London' and 'Londres' have the same chain, then the sentences have the same semantic content.

4 Conclusion

I have presented an account of the content, in the sense of semantic content, of sentences containing empty names which is compatible with classical Russellianism. I have argued that this view is no worse than its competitors and that in some ways it is better. I therefore recommend Variation to those who are interested in defending Russellianism.

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